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## REVIEW OF RESEARCH

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# PARENTING IN ETHNIC MINORITY FAMILIES

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The American population is becoming increasingly heterogeneous with respect to its racial and ethnic composition. In fact, increases in the proportion of ethnic and racial minorities occurring over the past decade have been the most dramatic of the 20th century (McLoyd, 1998). Moreover, this trend is expected to continue, with projections indicating that "...between 2000 and 2010, the Latino, African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Native American populations will increase by 30%, 12.4%, 42%, and 13.7%, respectively, in contrast to an increase of only 2.8% in the non-Latino White population" (McLoyd, 1998, p. 4). These demographic trends are nowhere more evident than in Catholic schools in the United States. The proportion of ethnic minority students served by Catholic schools nearly doubled between 1970 (10.8%) and 1980 (19.4%). Currently, minority student enrollment in Catholic schools is 656,007, almost 25% of total enrollment (Guerra, 1998; MacDonald, 1999). The changing demography of America issues an imperative to all societal institutions, and to Catholic schools in particular: to understand and support the unique developmental processes in minority families. Toward achieving that goal, an increasing knowledge base in child and family studies has begun to articulate the challenges and complexities inherent in ethnic minority family processes. This review of research delineates some of the multiple influences upon minority parenting and should serve as an informational resource for Catholic educators and administrators who are committed to serving ethnic minority families.

Parenting in ethnic minority families shares some overlap with, but is also quite distinct from, parenting in the dominant, mainstream U.S. culture (Garcia Coll, Meyer, & Brillon, 1995). Parenting in minority families involves a complex interplay of several factors that impinge upon the nature and quality of parenting. This review addresses several of the critical areas

that are germane to the issue of parenting in minority families, namely, the roles of poverty, social support, racism and prejudice, and acculturation. Several of these issues are mentioned by Garcia Coll et al. as preeminent factors that must be included in research purporting to shed light upon the developmental competencies and processes of ethnic minority families in America today. While these factors operate synergistically, for the sake of organization, they will be addressed here individually. In addition, a current empirical article (Brody & Flor, 1998) that addresses distal and proximal (parenting) influences on children's psychosocial development is presented and discussed.

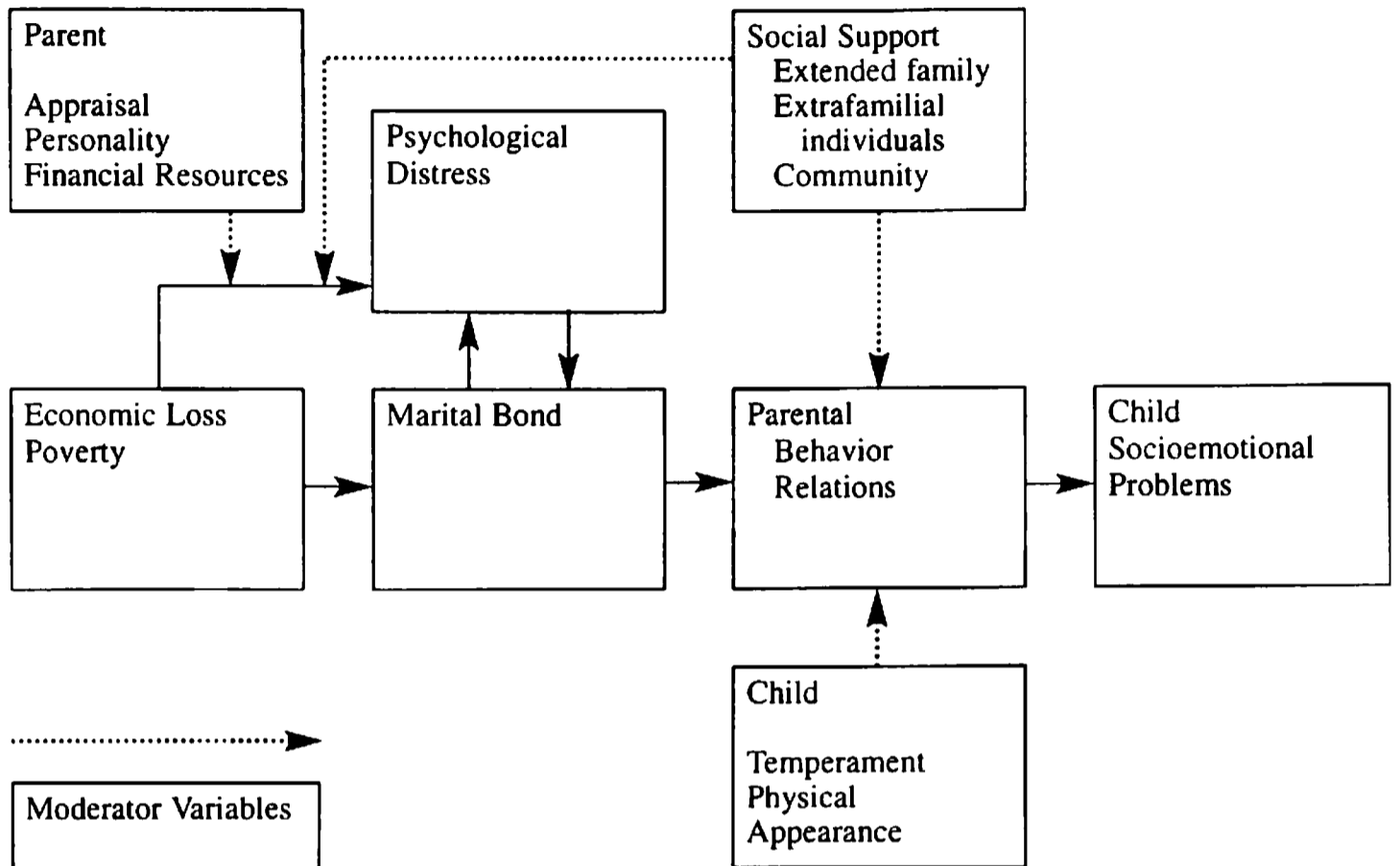
## POVERTY

As Garcia Coll et al. (1995) noted, minority families are overrepresented among the lower socioeconomic strata when compared to the U.S. population at large. Unemployment, underemployment, and lower educational attainment rates are greater among Hispanic American, Native American, and African American populations. Accordingly, the resource environments that minority families occupy often lead to differential rates of access to safe neighborhoods, quality medical care, and educational opportunities. Crawley (1988) has described how even macro-structural factors such as the dominant political conservatism of the 1980s exert negative ramifications disproportionately on minority families. As a result of the higher rates of chronic and persistent poverty that exist among minority families, researchers addressing minority parenting have underscored the need to consider fully the impact of poverty and socioeconomic status on parenting processes and child and adolescent outcomes. In fact, in critiquing current theoretical approaches to the study of ethnic minority parenting, Garcia Coll et al. stressed that considerations of economic context must be at the core, rather than the periphery, of conceptualizations of minority family functioning.

One researcher responsive to this research imperative is McLoyd (1990), who developed an analytic model that examines the impact of poverty and economic loss on African American children's socioemotional functioning (see Figure 1). The model proposes that higher levels of economic loss and poverty reduce the likelihood of consistent, supportive, and involved parenting. Further, McLoyd (1990) proposed that the primary mediating mechanism linking economic context to parenting behavior is psychological distress. The psychological distress that mothers experience may be due to negative life events, unsafe neighborhood conditions, and chronic stressors (one of the stressors mentioned is an unsupportive or nonexistent marital bond). McLoyd (1990) also discussed potential moderator variables that could temper the linkages between the constructs in the model. For example, social support (inclusive of extended family and community support) may buffer

(i.e., moderate) the linkage between economic loss and the level of psychological distress. The presence or absence of social support may also directly moderate parental behavior and parent-child relations.

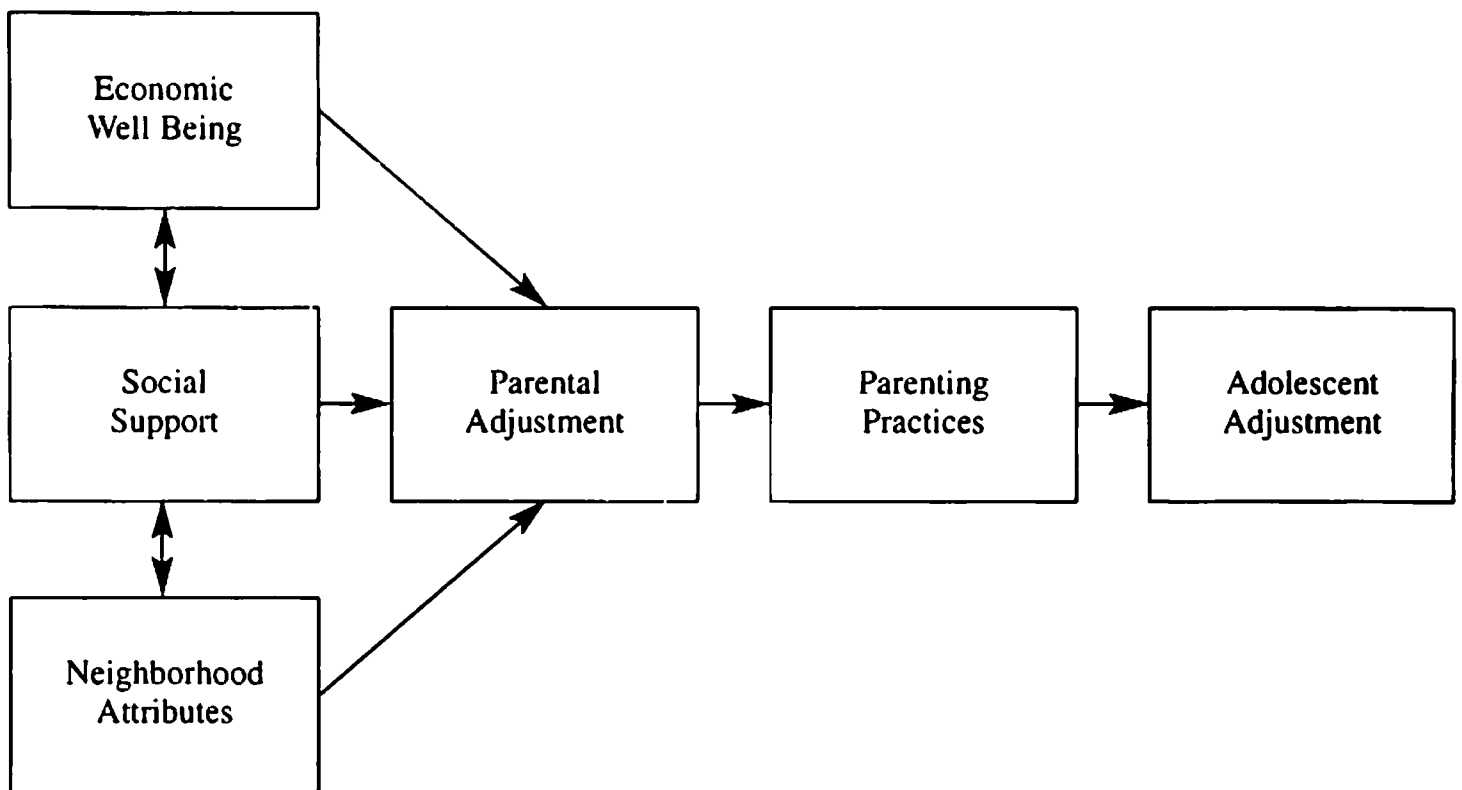
**Figure 1**



Similarly, Taylor (1997) developed a conceptual model depicting the mechanism through which social and economic stressors exert an impact on adolescent adjustment (see Figure 2). In Taylor's (1997) model, economic well-being, social support, and neighborhood attributes are directly related to parental adjustment. Parental adjustment is directly related to parenting practices, which in turn, are related to adolescent adjustment. Neighborhood attributes, social support, and economic context are obviously inextricably linked. Support for this portion of Taylor's (1997) model is provided by the work of Furstenberg (1993), which examines two types of neighborhoods: cohesive and anomic. Cohesive neighborhoods are characterized by high levels of economic and social resources, shared values, and a common trust among community members. In these communities, parents feel confident that other community members will provide supervision for children and serve as resources for their development. Parents in these communities report higher levels of well-being, which conceptually at least, should lead to better adolescent adjustment. In contrast, anomic communities are those that have lower levels of social and financial resources and may be characterized by lack of safety and available resources. Parents in these communities tend to limit their adolescents' exposure to the outside community, often confining them to the home. Parental well-being in these communities is notably lower

than in cohesive communities, and consequently adolescent adjustment will be deleteriously affected. In sum, the research of Furstenberg illustrates the interplay of poverty and socioeconomic status with neighborhood attributes and the subsequent effects on parental adjustment.

**Figure 2**



## **SOCIAL SUPPORT**

Extended family social support is a salient characteristic of minority parenting for African American, Native American, and Hispanic American families. Both of the models mentioned above (McLoyd, 1990; Taylor, 1997), although discussed in the context of poverty, include the critical presence of social support constructs in their conceptual formulations. Specifically, McLoyd (1990) highlighted the role of social support as a buffer acting upon parental behavior and the parent's level of psychological distress. Taylor (1997) included social support as a direct influence on parental adjustment and as a correlate of economic well-being and neighborhood attributes. Beyond these models, Garcia Coll et al. (1995) stressed the lack of utility that a nuclear family model holds for the study of minority parenting.

The role of kin networks and extended family social support has long been described as a culturally distinctive aspect of African American family functioning (Aschenbrenner, 1973; Billingsley, 1968). A program of research conducted by Taylor and his colleagues (Taylor, 1996; Taylor, Casten, & Flickenger, 1993; Taylor & Roberts, 1995) has examined the role of kinship social support upon African American family functioning and adolescent adjustment. Specifically, families with higher levels of kinship support were more likely to employ consistent and fair parenting and to report higher levels of family management (e.g., consistent rules around the house, meal-

times). Also, single-parent African American mothers, in the context of higher levels of social support, were more likely to exhibit authoritative parenting. McAdoo (1992) conducted an investigation of 305 middle class African American families to examine how extended family support systems operated within the context of parenting and upward mobility in these families. McAdoo contended that the extended family network, inclusive of both kin and fictive kin, facilitates upward mobility, a hypothesis that was supported. In fact, 66% of the middle class families reported substantial extended family support, with only 10% reporting none. Families that were upwardly mobile were not forced to cut themselves off from the wider community and did not lose their emotional connection to the wider Black community. McAdoo (1992) found that when families “move up” or “make it” to middle class status, they continue to maintain their extended support networks.

## **RACISM, PREJUDICE, AND DISCRIMINATION**

According to Garcia Coll et al. (1995), racism, prejudice, and discrimination are factors that must be considered in any discussion of research on minority parenting. An area of empirical inquiry that addresses these issues, both indirectly and directly, is racial socialization. Racial socialization includes both verbalized messages and modeled behaviors that minority parents convey to their children about their own ethnic and racial group, the mainstream culture, and the reality of their existence as a minority in a dominant culture (Boykin & Toms, 1985). The echoes of DuBois' (1953) classic articulation of “two warring ideals within one dark body” are still evident in current racial socialization research: Minority children have the challenging task of acquiring a sense of respect for their own culture while often living in a dominant culture that may malign, discredit, or outwardly discriminate against it.

In elucidating the nature and process of parental racial socialization messages to their children, Thornton, Chatters, Taylor, and Allen (1990) used data from the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA). The NSBA is a national, multistage, area probability sample of 2,107 African Americans 18 years of age or older living in the U.S. When the data were collected in 1979 and 1980, the NSBA represented a significant milestone in survey research on African American families, since no nationally representative data on African American families yet existed. Analyses of the data showed that age, marital status, education, region of the U.S., and racial composition of neighborhood were all significant predictors of the likelihood that parents would racially socialize their children. Specifically, older respondents, women, those from the Northeast (as compared to the South), and those living in racially mixed neighborhoods were most likely to provide racial socialization messages to their children. Highly educated mothers were also more likely to provide racial socialization messages. The messages that parents gave to their

children were qualitatively coded into several categories that reflected acknowledgment of discrimination, ethnic pride, and information about cultural heritage and history.

Phinney and Chavira (1995) also examined ethnic and racial socialization in a sample of White, African American, Mexican American, and Japanese American 16- to 18-year-olds and their parents. Their results suggested that about two thirds of parents provided some type of racial socialization message to their children. In terms of group differences, African American parents provided the most racial socialization messages, Japanese American parents provided the least, and Mexican American parents provided an intermediate amount. Phinney and Chavira also coded the content of parents' socialization messages into six thematic areas. Socialization themes included achievement ("You've got to do well to succeed"), pride ("Once you're proud of who you are, all else falls into place"), adaptation ("You've got to learn to work with all types of people"), culture ("I tell him about our history"), prejudice as a problem ("There will be people who just don't like you for your color"), and prejudice coping messages ("You've just got to deal with it"). In sum, both the work of Thornton et al. (1990) and Phinney and Chavira illustrate another unique challenge facing ethnic minority parents: to instill a sense of ethnic identity and group knowledge and to prepare children to function competently in a society in which they will likely face prejudice, racism, and discrimination.

## ACCULTURATION

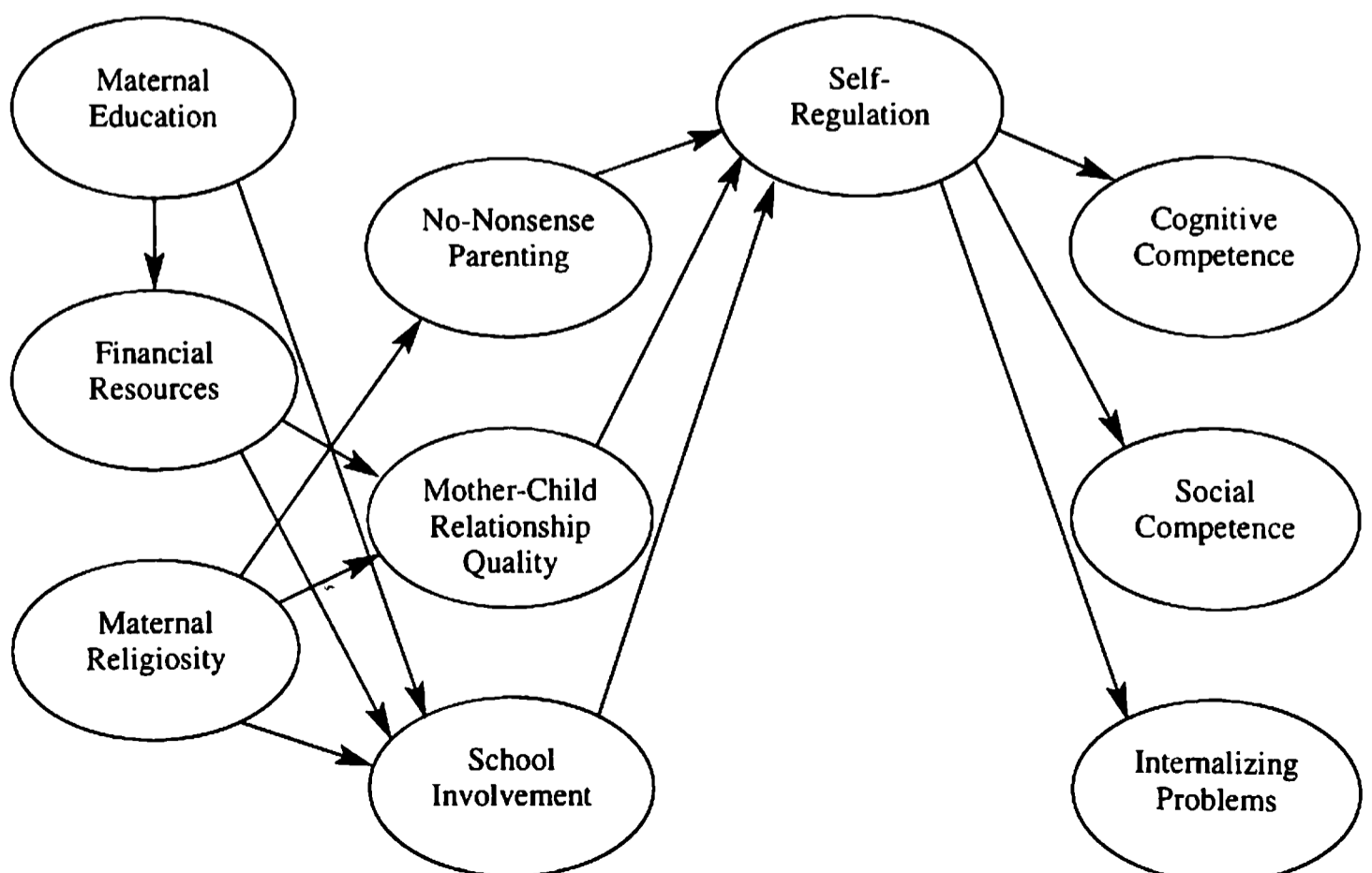
Garcia Coll et al. (1995) stressed that acculturation is another factor that exerts an influence on minority parenting in the U.S. In contrast to immigration, which reflects physical mobility and movement, acculturation is a psychosocial phenomenon that captures the degree to which an individual identifies with the majority or minority culture. Acculturation is affected by such things as generational status, length of time in the host country, and potential for returning to the home country. In their book *Immigrant America*, Portes and Rumbaut (1996) outlined several different types of acculturation that can occur in ethnic minority families. In consonant acculturation, both parents and children attempt to integrate themselves into mainstream society, and to adapt to, or even adopt, dominant cultural values. In consonant resistance to acculturation, both parents and children maintain their own ethnic and cultural beliefs, values, attitudes, and language, and steadfastly refute those of mainstream U.S. society. In dissonant acculturation, there is a mismatch between child and parental orientation to acculturation; that is, the children may be exposed to dominant culture through school and peers and may begin to identify with mainstream norms, while parents remain entrenched in a resistance to acculturation influences. Finally, in selective acculturation, both

minority parents and their children adopt the values of the dominant culture that might serve them well (e.g., emphasis on education), while maintaining their own ethnic beliefs, attitudes, and customs in other areas. As this typology indicates, much variation can exist within a particular minority group with respect to acculturation status. Therefore, the acculturation level of minority families is another critical factor that exerts an influence upon the nature and quality of parenting in ethnic minority families.

## CURRENT EMPIRICAL WORK

Brody and Flor (1998) addressed the mechanisms linking both proximal and distal influences on parenting and its subsequent linkage with children's (ages 6-9) psychosocial competence in single-parent, rural, African American families. Brody and Flor based their investigation on the anthropological analyses of Young (1970, 1974), which examined the child socialization practices of rural, African American families in Georgia. Young's ethnographic work highlighted the importance of the church as a source of cohesion and support in those African American families. Further, Young described the presence of a functional and adaptive form of parenting in which African American mothers used high levels of control, including physical restraint, combined with warm and affectively positive interactions. Based on these ethnographic observations, Brody and Flor developed a model to account for African American children's psychosocial competence in single-parent, mother-headed families (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3**





Brody and Flor (1998) included the construct of no-nonsense parenting in their model. As noted above, this adaptive type of parenting employs high levels of firm control, which may include physical restraint, but also the presence of warm, positive affect exchanges. No-nonsense parenting would differ markedly from harsh parenting in that harsh parenting, while employing levels of control that may be excessively harsh or punitive, is not tempered by warm, responsive interactions. Brody and Flor (1998) indicated that no-nonsense parenting could be classified somewhat between authoritative (high "demandingness," high responsiveness) and authoritarian (high "demandingness," low responsiveness) parenting styles. In terms of the social forces that might lead to such types of parenting, Brody and Flor mentioned that no-nonsense parenting was particularly functional in these communities because of the context these children were in. The benefits of this parenting style in a low-resource, high-risk environment were that the firm control and supervision allowed the children to develop better self-regulation and subsequently contributed to more optimal child outcomes. As discussed in the section on poverty (McLoyd, 1990), harsh parenting (firm control without warmth and responsiveness) may be attributable to social forces such as chronic unemployment, economic loss, negative life events, a stressful or nonexistent marital relationship, and the lack of buffers such as extended family and community support. Since they utilized multiple indicators for several of their constructs, Brody and Flor used Latent Variable Path Analysis with Partial Least Squares (LVPLS) regression to evaluate the proposed structural model. Results indicated that maternal education was directly related to mothers' involvement in school, such that higher levels of education predicted more school involvement. Interestingly, higher levels of maternal religiosity were related to an increased usage of no-nonsense parenting, a more harmonious mother-child relationship, and to increased school involvement. The proximal variables of no-nonsense parenting, mother-child relationship quality, and school involvement were all positively related to the child's self-regulation. Self-regulation, in turn, predicted cognitive competence, social competence, and internalizing problems. Direct effects were not found from the proximal variables to the child outcome variables, suggesting that the effects were indirect, as mediated by the child's level of self-regulation.

## CONCLUSION

This essay has reviewed some of the primary factors that synergistically affect ethnic and minority parenting. Poverty, social support, racism and prejudice, and acculturation were each presented along with conceptual models and empirical articles depicting the complexity of the interrelationships between these factors as contributors to ethnic and minority parenting.

The factors discussed here, while critical, are by no means exhaustive. This review should serve, however, to give some indication of the unique challenges that ethnic minority parents face and to provide an informative starting point for Catholic educators as they strive to be responsive to the developmental tasks of minority children and families.

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