

The Lakou System: A Cultural, Ecological Analysis of Mothering in Rural Haiti

by

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Abstract

This descriptive exploratory study uses a cultural-ecological framework to examine mothering and the role of family support within the *lakou* (group living) system in the rural province of Leogane, Haiti. Historically, the *lakou* refers to clusters of homes in which Haitian families reside, as well as to the extended and multiple-generation family form that is prominent in Haitian culture. Initially, the members of a *lakou* worked cooperatively and provided for each other with financial and other forms of support.

However, the original lakou system has changed due to the pressures of increased poverty and landholding fragmentation brought about by the globalization of capitalism. One of the detrimental impacts of these changes in the lakou system is the disruption of parenting. This difficult shift has fallen largely on the shoulders of Haitian mothers. The move from multiple mothering, wherein several women in the lakou shared in the caring and supervision of young children, to individual mothering, wherein single mothers are now the sole caretakers, constitutes a major social change that needs to be understood within the cultural context of the Haitian framework.

Introduction

“*Fam se poto mitan*” (women are the center post) is a well-known Haitian proverb that highlights the central role women play not only in Haitian commerce, but also within Haitian families. In Haiti, 70% of rural households are headed by women, despite a history of embedded male dominance. Against the backdrop of ongoing poverty, sociopolitical crisis, and gender discrimination and oppression, Haitian women have been the stabilizing centers to uphold unique African traditions of womanhood and multiple mothering within a distinctive African space known as the *lakou*. Since the 19th century (1804), the lakou, referring to family members and the cluster of houses in which Haitian families reside, has been the principal family form. Initially, the members of a lakou worked cooperatively and provided for each other through financial and other forms of support (LaRose 482). Moreover, the original lakou was based on the African reality that raising children was too great a responsibility for only one or two people to bear, and that it was healthier for children—and mothers—to have contact with a wide circle of people and share parenting responsibilities (Ambert 530). Therefore, within this location or bounded space, where children have multiple caregivers, Haitian mothers were able to carry out their traditional functions according to the healthy, successful parenting models of Haitian communities.

Although the new lakou system continues to provide a range of support that sometimes serves to reduce family hardship and buffer daily stressors for poor parents, some research has noted that in high-poverty communities, the support received may be compromised by highly stressed network members (LaRose 488). Given the central role of women in families and that women in general are more bound to the parenting role, such high stress may, in turn, adversely affect the mental health of mothers. Since this early work, Haiti’s social conditions have worsened due to economic instability, political unrest, and destructive hurricanes. Yet little information is available on the sources of parenting stress, or the role of family support in the lives of Haitian mothers within their country of origin. Research on Haitian mothers and the lakou system is needed to assess contemporary patterns of support in this socio-cultural context. Therefore, this pilot study explores parenting stress within the lakou in a sample of parents living in rural Haiti.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a cultural-ecological model, which posits that child and family well-being are influenced by the differential and interactive effects of individual, family, community, and larger societal systems, as well as the context of the values, attitudes, and skills of particular cultural groups (Bronfenbrenner 725; Ogbu 413). When factors within each of these levels are stressful, families are at risk; when factors are supportive and protective, families are able to respond positively in adverse situations. On the individual level, demographic variables, such as age, gender, marital status, number of children, and income, influence the risk of stress related to the daily role of mothering (Jackson 1409). At the community level, the risk of parental stress is increased in areas marked by high poverty and low maternal support (Martsoff 294). At the societal level, factors such as social norms, public policy, and economic opportunity may influence the level of resources available to parents (Farmer 1483). Using Ogbu's cultural-ecological perspective, it is also recognized that in Haitian culture, both mothering behavior and larger kinship networks and communities, such as the *lakou*, may influence child and maternal well-being.

Review of Related Research: Poverty and Parenting Stress in Haiti

Today, Haiti ranks 153 out of the 177 countries in the Human Development ranking. The most recent Haitian census indicates that 65 percent of the population lives in rural regions, 20 percent in the metropolitan area of Port-au-Prince, and 15 percent in other urban areas (Institut Haitien de Statistique et d'Informatique: Division d'Analyse et de Recherche Demographique 60). In addition, more than 67 percent of the total population lives below the poverty line, 80 percent of rural Haitians live in poverty, 32 percent of households have more than seven members, and 46 percent of families have only one room in which to sleep. According to the Pan American Health Organization's *Haiti Profile*, inflation was estimated at 15 percent and food prices increased to 10.4 percent from 1999 to 2000. Moreover, Haiti's per capita income is less than \$400 (in U.S. dollars) per year, the average life expectancy is 57, and half of the children under the age of five are malnourished (World Bank 8). Hence, Haitian mothers and children are more likely to experience chronic poverty.

A number of researchers have shown that living in chronic poverty has a harmful effect on maternal behavior. Specifically, poor parents experience more chronic stress over family economic pressures, such as difficulty paying bills, substandard housing, and poor-quality medical care, as well as the stress associated with the daily tasks of childrearing (Hashima and Amato 394; World Health Organization 10). Because parenting can influence children's social, emotional, and cognitive adjustment, efforts have been made to determine the variables that affect parenting behavior, and one such variable is parenting stress. Parenting stress has been conceptualized as a condition in which the different aspects of parenthood result in a perceived discrepancy between situational demands and personal resources (Abidin 407).

In other words, parents experience excess anxiety and tension specifically related to the parenting role and parent-child interactions (Abidin 409). Parents' perceptions of the availability of resources to assist them in parenting and their feelings of competence regarding their parenting are all-important elements of this definition (Deater-Deckard 317).

In Haiti, mothers must negotiate parenting responsibilities in desperate economic and worsening social conditions (Farmer 1485). Difficulty functioning and stressful family circumstances can lead to distress in the mothering role, which can have long-term consequences for mothers and children. According to Abidin, many variables contribute to parenting stress and parenting behavior (409). These variables include the problems mothers encounter daily, the characteristics of the marital relationship, the characteristics of the environments in which people live and work, and the occurrence of major life events. Moreover, mothers' appraisals of themselves as parents are essential in determining the level of parenting stress they experience. A key reason for the importance of studying parenting stress is that stress adversely affects a mother's ability to respond constructively to her children's needs. High parenting stress has been found to be associated with a number of negative consequences for both mothers and children, such as adult depression and child maltreatment.

Mothering in the Lakou

A key factor in the negative outcomes associated with parental stress among Haitian mothers is the availability of support from other mothers or the tradition of multiple mothering. In Haiti, extended family and fictive kin are usually the primary sources of support. Haitians view home (*lakay*) and family as both biological and relational. Households consist of multiple generations as well as extended and fictive kin. Home is geared toward the needs and strengths of the extended family. Haitian communities often consist of a dozen or more *lakay* grouped together to form a *lakou*.

Even though husbands, fathers, brothers, sons, and other male kin live in the *lakou*, the *lakou* system of support is mainly a female creation based on the connections and interactions between adult females in that location. For example, when the male of one household experiences some difficulty providing food, the mother asks her *lakou* system to provide for her family and it will. The mother thereby protects the pride of her partner who, when faced with financial challenges, might abandon the family until he is able to respond to their needs. Therefore, we see how this system—created by the women— works not only as a strong social network that protects children, but also as a marital or conjugal tool that keeps partners together, decreases stress, and provides stability for the entire family.

Within the lakou, mothers work together to complete their daily tasks, such as farming, building new houses, and caring for the children. This collective sharing focuses not only on work but also on the social and emotional aspects of family life (Dash 45). Extended family and friends from the lakou are always there to provide guidance and perspectives until issues are resolved, and these relationships supply the final safety net during hard times (Desrosiers and St. Fleurose 515).

Several studies have explored the role of social support as a buffer to stressful experiences. The results of most of these studies indicate that social support has a positive relation to optimal parenting and familial well-being (Glazier, Elgar, Goel, and Holzapfel 247). Regarding parenting stress, Ostberg and Hagekull found that parents ranking high in social support experienced lower levels of parenting stress (620). Social support also seems to provide specific benefits for low-income parents; parents reporting higher levels of social support may experience less psychological distress in conjunction with financial strain (McLoyd 311). Other research indicates that the presence of social support may explain why some individuals experience higher life stresses and strains without showing a high level of distress (Bonds, Gondoli, Sturge-Apple, and Salem 410). Dash notes that social support from extended kin and the Haitian church facilitates maternal competence in new mothers in urban communities (153). Clearly, protective factors that buffer the impact of stress on mothering need to be identified. Yet the nature and role of these risk and protective factors have been only minimally examined in families living in rural Haiti.

Method

Participants

The target population for this exploratory pilot study was made up of parents and primary caregivers with children between the ages of three and 18 who reside in the province of Leogane, Haiti. Leogane is a small rural community of approximately 10,000 inhabitants, located 30 kilometers west of Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti. A convenience sample of 31 mothers, grandmothers, and fathers was recruited for this study through the parent associations of the AGAPE-Leogane Christian Mission Program, which serves 3,000 poor families in the Ca-Ira, Guerin, Masson, and Mellier sections of Leogane. The mothers and grandmothers ranged in age from 24 to 61 years, with Mean equaling 40.33 and Standard Deviation (SD) equaling 9.99. Of the respondents, 11 were unmarried but living with a partner (35.5%), eight were separated/divorced from their spouse (25.8%), eight were married (25.9%), and four were widowed or single/never married (12.9%).

Measures

Self-report measures were chosen based on their use in previous cross-cultural research and their designation as the least intrusive means for gathering information from this population (Reitman, Currier, and Stickle 384). Two bilingual and bicultural consultants were used to translate the questionnaire and measures to French and Kreyol, the two official languages of Haiti. Although only educated Haitians speak French, all Haitians speak Kreyol. The first consultant translated all measures and demographic questionnaires from English to French and Kreyol. The second bilingual and bicultural consultant translated these measures from Kreyol and French to English. The first author then compared the Kreyol-to-English translation with the original English. Translators were fluent in both written and spoken English and Kreyol, and Kreyol was the first language of all of the translators. In addition, the 10 local interviewers reviewed each item in the proposed questionnaire and the measures, focusing on cultural appropriateness and ease of translation. They were asked to indicate any terms that were difficult to understand, grammatically incorrect, or culturally insensitive. Some aspects of the measures and the questionnaire were altered, and phrases that presented some degree of discrepancy were modified accordingly.

Parenting Stress

The Parenting Distress Subscale of the Parenting Stress Index-Short Form (PSI-SF) was used to determine the level of stress parents felt in association with parenting (Abidin 19). This subscale is a direct derivative of the Parenting Stress Index (PSI), and items for the short form, which contains three subscales, were identified by factor analysis of the original PSI. Parents rated 12 items on a five-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The Parenting Distress Subscale has previously been shown to measure distress experienced by parents as a function of personal factors that are directly related to parenting. Items measure a parent's perception of childrearing competence, stresses associated with restrictions on activities due to parenting, and social support (e.g., "I feel limited by my responsibilities as a parent"). The Parenting Distress Subscale scores range from 12 to 60. Higher scores on the subscale indicate a greater level of stress. According to Reitman, Currier, and Stickle, the PSI-SF Parenting Distress Subscale has good internal consistency with low-income African American families, with a Cronbach alpha coefficient reported of .88 (392). In the current study, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was .83 for the translated subscale.

Lakou Support

The Family Support Scale was used to measure lakou parenting support and parents' satisfaction with the support they receive in raising a child (Dunst, Jenkins, and Trivette 47). The scale consists of 18 items, covering sources of support such as the immediate family, relatives, friends, and others in the family's social network, social organizations, and specialized and generic professional services.

The measure consists of 18 items that are rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (not at all helpful) to 4 (extremely helpful). Parents were instructed to indicate the response that best described how helpful the source was to the family in the last three to six months. If the source was not applicable, they could indicate “does not apply” (“NA”). Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for this study was .82 for the translated scale.

Demographic and Background Variables

The first and last sections of the questionnaire included items measuring the respondent’s gender, age, marital status, age of children, number of children, number of household members, years of residence within a lakou, number of families within the lakou, employment, and family income history.

Procedure

In keeping with the culturally suitable mode of associative communication in Haiti, regional community coordinators conducted face-to-face home visits to solicit participation and to explain the goals and purpose of the study (Glenn and Glenn 20; Devieux et al. 112). In addition, several days before initiating the fieldwork, the first author trained 10 regional community coordinators from various sections of the province in how to complete the interview protocol, protect participant confidentiality and rights, ask questions respectfully, and show sensitivity to respondent distress. The first author and local interviewers also conducted group sessions to orally explain the content of the forms in both French and Kreyol, with the content consisting of the purpose, procedures, confidentiality, risks, and benefits of the study. They also explained the respondents’ freedom to withdraw and their right to ask questions. Informed written consent was obtained from each parent participant, and signed copies were provided for their records.

According to the most recent report from PAHO, the illiteracy rate in Haiti is approximately 75 percent (3). Therefore, due to the sensitive nature of the questions, interviewers took parents to a private area, where they read the instruments and recorded their responses. Interviewers did not interview parents with whom they had personal relationships—for example, friends, kin, or speaking acquaintances.

Results

Description of Lakou Parents

Sociodemographic data were summarized using descriptive statistics as appropriate (range, frequency distribution, mean, and percentage). The mean number of children in each household was 4.19, and the SD was 2.24 (range: 1–11 children). Fifty-two percent of the children were boys, and the mean age of the children was six years, with SD equaling 4.05. More than three-fourths of the parents (77%) indicated that they were not currently working. The mean family income was \$4.39 (in U.S. dollars) per year. The majority of mothers (81%) had resided for more than 10 years in their lakou, and nearly two-thirds (65%) had both kin and blood relatives who resided in the same lakou. On average, mothers had a total of 14 families within their lakou.

Descriptive Analysis

In this study, raw PSI-SF Parental Distress Subscale scores were converted into percentiles. Based on clinically validated cutoff values established by the author of the PSI, parents are considered to be at high levels of stress if their total parenting stress score is above the 85th percentile (Radloff 385). In this sample, 52% of parents indicated moderate levels of parenting stress (33rd percentile range), while responses of more than one-fourth of the parents (29%) indicated high levels of parenting stress (\geq 85th percentile). Overall, the results indicated that 81% of parents scored in the moderate and high levels of stress based on the values established by the author of the PSI. In addition, parents indicated less availability of parenting support (“not at all helpful” to “sometimes helpful”).

Statistical analyses were also conducted to evaluate whether demographic variables were associated with stress. The demographic variables of age, marital status, child age, number of children, income, and number of people in the lakou were correlated with family support and parenting stress. The prevalence of parenting stress and parenting support for the total sample is shown in Table 1. As expected, scores indicate a significant positive correlation between number of children and parenting stress ($r = .37, p < .05$). Age was significantly correlated with the number of people in the lakou ($r = .40, p < .05$). Family support was negatively and significantly correlated with marital status ($r = .44, p < .05$) and positively correlated with the age of children ($r = .37, p < .05$) and family income ($r = .46, p < .01$).

Discussion

Parenting Stress in the Leogane Lakou

Haitian mothers reported higher levels of stress in their parenting role than generally found in the U.S. sample, which would be expected given the political and economic situations in Haiti (Abidin 150). Furthermore, mothers reported feeling less competent as parents and more restricted in pursuing their own activities and interests. However, family income does not show a strong relation to parents' reports of parenting stress. One explanation for the lack of a significant relationship between family income and parenting stress is that all of the mothers in this sample were living in poverty; therefore, small variations in family income may not significantly affect parenting stress levels.

In contrast to income, the number of children in the family was a strong predictor of parenting stress. Use of the cultural-ecological model helps explain the relationship between number of children and parenting stress within the Haitian context (Ogbu 425). According to the model, social norms vary among cultural groups and influence the role of parents and child well-being in a given society. In Haiti, large families are the norm. In the city, families may have three to four children. In rural provinces, the average is seven children (PAHO 2). Traditionally, the responsibility for rearing children has been shared with extended kin within the lakou network. This network enabled mothers to work while adult female friends, family, and kin provided oversight and care of the children. This mutual interdependence allowed mothers to meet the demands of caring for large families. However, current rural mothers are not only expected to fulfill the daily tasks of caring for all their children, but they must also do so within an overall trend of deteriorating child health and education services and with decreasing support from the network (Coreil, Augustin, Halsey, and Holt 236). Specifically, the availability of resources and characteristics of the community, such as the lack of access to clean water sources, vaccination, electricity, and schools in the Leogane province, are environmental and external variables that can lead to a decreased sense of parenting competence and anxiety for these rural Haitian mothers. The results also reveal that within this lakou network, mothers with younger children receive lower levels of family support. These findings add to the sparse literature on stress, which reports higher levels of parenting stress among mothers of younger children and among families in which more siblings are present (Mash and Johnston 335).

Conversely, Haitian mothers also are aware of the shame and risk related to not being good providers for their children. According to Devieux, Haitian culture is "other" focused (20). It is a collective culture in which the emphasis is on what a person can do for his or her family or community. For example, parents may have had several of their children die from malnutrition and diarrhoeal diseases or may have had to send one or two of their older children to a nearby city as a *restavek* (child domestic). In addition, some mothers may not have the resources to reciprocate in caring for other children in their lakou. This situation may cause them to be labeled as incompetent or selfish mothers.

These shameful experiences and their inability to reciprocate with support can lead to negative feelings and tensions directly attributable to the demands of parenthood (Deater-Deckard 330). Therefore, future research should attempt to expand knowledge of the potential interaction between poverty and other psychological and cultural factors that relate to parenting stress with this population.

Summary and Implications

Overall, mothering is stressful, which—combined with other ecological stressors—can lead to parental distress (Willinger, Diendorfer-Radner, Willnauer, Jorgl, and Hager 63). A number of researchers have long suggested that children increase financial pressure on the family and often create secondary problems, which then can lead to chronic role strains among certain groups of mothers. In the African Diaspora, multiple mothering and support is the cornerstone of many agrarian communities (Sault 12). Not only do many children experience and benefit from multiple caregivers, mothers also receive support in the care and supervision of children.

However, this support or tradition of support does not exist in a vacuum. It is influenced by the other political and social systems within Haitian culture and society. Sociohistorical and environmental changes, such as political coups, U.S. occupations, and lack of basic human services may influence the ability of lakou members to fulfill their responsibilities to each other in the area of parenting. Some findings in this study are consistent with research showing that parental distress can have adverse consequences for the psychological, physical, and emotional health and well-being of Haitian families (Martsolf 296). Other findings in this study support earlier research, which proposes that when exposed to stressors, mothers in positive supportive environments demonstrate lower levels of strain compared with those in less supportive environments (Bliese and Britt 434). Within the Haitian context, the lakou system appears to be a protective factor for some mothers, but a source of stress for other mothers.

In summary, this study examined the interaction between individual and family factors, the larger socioeconomic context, and parental stress to better understand the conditions likely to influence mothering in a rural Haitian province. The findings from this pilot study suggest the need for further research on mothering within collectivistic cultures. This study has implications for family programs and public health interventions aimed at addressing the health and psychological consequences of poverty and violence in Haiti. Poor rural Haitian mothers and children would benefit from services that build on the strength of the lakou system.

Limitations

This exploratory pilot study has several limitations. The first limitation is the size of the sample (n=31), which precludes generalizability beyond the sample. Restriction to one rural community in Haiti also limits generalizing to other rural and urban families or Haitian families in general. Future studies should include larger samples of parents from a wider array of localities and lakou. Finally, current levels of stress were obtained by self-report of symptoms rather than diagnosis by a mental health professional. Over- or underestimation of symptoms and their severity may have occurred. Due to the aforementioned limitations, caution should be exercised in generalizing the results of this study beyond this sample. As indicated in the ecological model, multiple factors affect the occurrence and results of stress. Longitudinal multivariate studies may better clarify how stress and lakou support interact over time.

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Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations between Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age	40.33	9.9	--							
2. Marital Status	-----	-----	-.09	--						
3. Child Age	6.13	4.0	.36	-.06	--					
4. Family Income	\$4.39	\$12.59	.03	-.22	-.90	--				
5. Number of People in Lakou	13.81	17.84	.40*	-.05	-.11	-.15	--			
6. Number of Children	4.19	2.2	.22	.09	-.29	.23	-.15	--		
7. Parenting Stress	43.80	9.5	.30	.12	.03	-.13	.03	.37*	--	
8. Family Support	6.8	7.2	.14	-.44*	.37*	.60**	.11	.03	-.23	--

Note. * $p \leq 05$, ** $p \leq 01$

