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Child Development Perspectives Journal Q&A: Universality of Executive Functions: A Focus on Latin America

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Importance of cultural context in the study of children's executive functions: Advances in Latin America research

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Executive functions (EFs) have been defined as the ability to regulate emotions, thoughts, and behaviors to achieve a goal. Although EFs have been identified as a cornerstone of cognitive development, knowledge of this fundamental ability in children is primarily based on research with North American and Western European samples from middle to high socioeconomic status.

A new article published in the journal *Child Development Perspectives* highlights the advances that have been made in developmental EFs research from Latin American (LATAM) regions, an understudied area that provides a unique context important to understanding EFs. The findings suggest the potential for both universality and cultural specificity in EFs development.

The Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) had the opportunity to discuss this important research and its implications with author Dr. Lucas G. Gago Galvagno from the Universidad Abierta Interamericana in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

SRCD: What sparked your interest in studying this subject?

Dr. Galvagno: My interest in studying this topic was sparked by a fascination with assessing emotional and cognitive regulation, particularly the capacity for early-life self-regulation. Recognizing self-regulation as a fundamental cognitive ability crucial for explaining overall human development, I became intrigued by the exploration of these skills from the earliest years of life. Understanding how individuals navigate and regulate their emotions and thoughts has profound implications for their overall well-being and success. Additionally, my curiosity extends to exploring the cross-cultural differences in these cognitive capacities, as it intrigues me to unravel how sociocultural and environmental factors shape the development of essential cognitive functions. Unraveling these intricacies promises not only a deeper understanding of individual

development but also insights into the varied pathways that shape cognition across different countries and cultures.

SRCD: Can you please provide a brief overview of the study?

Dr. Galvagno: Most studies show consistent developmental patterns in executive function (EF) during the first 12 years, demonstrating increased cohesion, longitudinal stability, age-related improvements, and positive predictions for social and educational outcomes. However, there are also culture-specific variations influenced by sociocultural factors like social vulnerability, income inequality, educational environment, parenting styles, and regional values. To comprehensively understand EF development, a sociocultural lens is crucial, especially when considering cultural influences in Latin American countries. For example, in collectivistic cultures that tend to promote self-regulation and obedience to authorities in home and school education, children control their behavior to meet adult's expectations. This contrasts with samples of children (1-12 years) from the United States and Western Europe, where children are possibly allowed to express their negative emotions more freely related to signs of assertion promoted in individualistic cultures.

SRCD: What is the primary takeaway?

Dr. Galvagno: The primary takeaway from this study is the recognition of the universality of executive function (EF), but also the intricate interplay between cultural, socioeconomic, and familial factors in shaping the early development of these abilities in children, particularly within the context of Latin America. By embracing this contextualized approach, we can foster more effective and inclusive pathways for supporting the cognitive and emotional development of children, promoting resilience and adaptability across diverse socio-cultural landscapes.

SRCD: Why are these findings important today?

Dr. Galvagno: Understanding the early development of executive functions (EFs) in Latin American contexts is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, replicating and extending findings from studies in Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) countries is essential for building a theoretical understanding of EFs that considers diverse backgrounds. Secondly, when creating programs and interventions to promote EFs, it is critical to account for the specific context of children in Latin America, considering factors such as vulnerability, lower overall levels of EFs, and a more collectivist culture. Adjusting interventions to the local

context is necessary.

SRCD: How does this research differ from what's been studied to date?

Dr. Galvagno: This research differs from previous studies in several key aspects. Firstly, it stands out for its specific focus on the development of executive functions (EFs) in the Latin American context, making a unique contribution to existing literature. Many previous studies have predominantly centered on high-income countries, and this research seeks to fill a gap by examining how sociopolitical, socioeconomic, and cultural factors specific to Latin America relate to EF development in children. Secondly, the research distinguishes itself by responding to the call from theorists advocating for a more grounded approach to EF studies in context. By doing so, it provides a more contextualized and specific perspective, recognizing the importance of understanding how the local environment influences children's cognitive development. Furthermore, the research stands out by its emphasis on exploring the relationship between universality and culture-specificity in EF development. This approach allows for discerning common patterns and cultural variations in the development of these cognitive functions, enriching our understanding of diversity in childhood cognitive development.

SRCD: Was there anything that surprised you?

Dr. Galvagno: One aspect that has consistently surprised me in these findings is the profound impact of diverse parenting styles and cultural influences on children's regulatory processes. The ongoing revelation of how different cultural backgrounds and parenting practices shape distinct forms of emotional and cognitive regulation in children continues to be astonishing. Particularly within the Latin American context, characterized by more collectivist societies and higher poverty rates compared to more central countries, children develop specific regulatory mechanisms to navigate the unique demands of their environment. It is fascinating to observe how infants in this context demonstrate adaptive forms of emotional and cognitive regulation influenced by their surroundings. For instance, in families enduring generations of poverty, there tends to be a heightened prevalence of emotional and cognitive dysregulation, also associated with lower levels of parental regulation. Unraveling these nuanced patterns sheds light not only on the resilience of children facing adversities but also on the intricate interplay between cultural and environmental factors that influence the development of essential cognitive skills.

SRCD: Who should know about these findings?

Dr. Galvagno: These findings are relevant and important for various stakeholders involved in child development, education, and policymaking. First and foremost, educators should be aware of these findings as they offer insights into the diverse ways in which children regulate their emotions and thoughts, highlighting the importance of tailoring educational approaches to individual and cultural differences. Parents can also benefit from this knowledge, gaining a deeper understanding of how their parenting styles and the cultural context may impact their child's cognitive and emotional development. Additionally, policymakers should take note, as these findings underscore the significance of considering cultural and socioeconomic factors when designing interventions and support systems for children. Finally, mental health professionals may find these insights valuable in their work, especially when working with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds or those facing socioeconomic challenges.

SRCD: What's next?

Dr. Galvagno: More work is needed with diverse groups of participants (children and families from rural areas, Indigenous populations, or populations of mixed ancestry, and in Central America), as well as studies that are larger, longitudinal, and with cross-cultural designs, to expand our understanding and be able to generalize results (Narea, 2016). As work in this area grows, we will be able to consider the interactions among multiple factors in the Latin American context that may affect our understanding of the development of EFs in novel ways.

SRCD: Dr. Galvagno, thank you so much for your time. For more information, readers can visit the full report here.

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Summarized from *Child Development Perspectives*, "Importance of cultural context in the study of children's executive functions: Advances in Latin America research," Gago-Galvagno, L. (Universidad Abierta Interamericana), Miller, S. (University of Mississippi), Mancini, M., Simaes, A., Elgier, A. and Azzollini, S. (Universidad de Buenos Aires). Copyright 2024 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.