Competition and Cooperation in Latino Children's Sibling Relationships

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<u>Abstract</u>

As part of an ongoing study, we examined Latino children's use of competition and cooperation during sibling interactions in free play, construction, and board game situations. Patterns of competition and cooperation among Latino siblings were more complex than hypothesized. Effects of task and sibling status both proved to be significant.

<u>Introduction</u>

Research conducted on Latino children's family interactions is extremely limited, despite the fact that the Latino population is the largest minority group in the United States. In previously conducted studies, Latino parents were found to encourage their children, especially the older ones, to identify with their prescribed roles in the family and community, while repressing goals for individual gain, needs, and self determination (Garcia Coll, 1995). Additionally, research on peer interactions has suggested that Mexican and Mexican-American children show higher levels of cooperation and lower levels of competition than Anglo-American children (e.g., Madsen, 1971). These ingrained values may be reflected in the behaviors of Latino children with their siblings.

Surprisingly, no previous research has directly examined sibling interactions of Latino children living in the United States. The present study seeks to examine Latino children's competitive and cooperative behaviors during interactions with siblings in semi-structured play situations. We investigated levels of competition and cooperation during free play, a construction task, and a board game, with an emphasis on the behavioral differences between older and younger siblings.

We hypothesized that the game task would yield the most competitive behaviors, the construction task would yield the most cooperative behaviors, and free play would fall in between on both. We also anticipated that sibling status would have an influence on competition and cooperation, with older siblings expected to have a higher cooperation score and younger siblings to have a higher competition score.

Method

Participants were 31 Latino middle- and lower-class families from the Rochester, NY, and New York City areas. Families were recruited via social networks, such as Latino community groups, church groups, daycares, and schools. The majority of the sibling pairs were same sex (n = 18), while the rest were mixed sex (n = 13). The sample was fairly heterogeneous in age (younger siblings M = 72.9 months, range 27-118 months; older siblings M = 102.9 months, range 60-136 months), ethnicity (Chilean, Dominican, Mexican, and Puerto Rican), and acculturation status (from recent immigrants to third generation in the United States).

Materials & Procedure:

Participants:

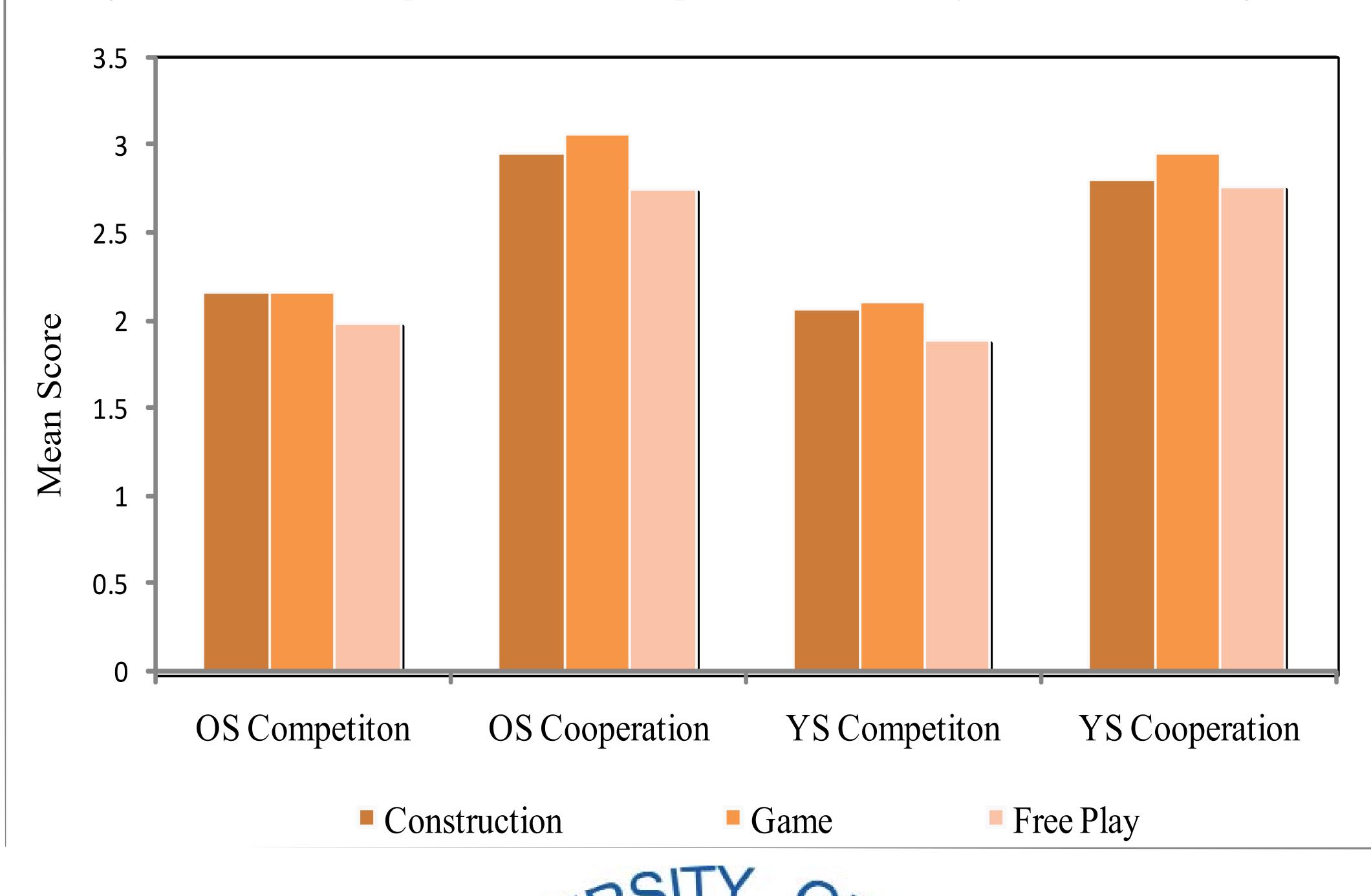
Researchers taped sibling pairs interacting in a familiar setting chosen by their caregivers. Each pair participated in 30-minute sessions that included 10 minutes of free play, a 10-minute construction task, and a 10-minute board game session. The three activities were intended to stimulate varying amounts of competition and cooperation within sibling pairs. The construction task, which consisted of assembling a turtle based on a replica model, was intended to elicit cooperative behavior. The board game ("Race to the Roof") encouraged the use of visual search and counting skills and was anticipated to induce competitive interactions. The free play segment, using a wooden train set, was an unstructured activity, which allowed for the opportunity to observe sibling interactions without direction. While sessions were being recorded, caregivers filled out forms describing the typical interaction patterns of the children, as well as the family's demographic information.

Subsequently, researchers coded each session for competition and cooperation, using a 5- point scale, based on Stocker, Dunn and Plomin (1989) and Howe (1992). *Competition* was defined as working towards an independent goal and attempting to achieve that goal prior to, or more successfully than the partner. *Cooperation* was defined as working towards a common goal and putting that goal ahead of the individual goal. A score of one represented the absence of competition or cooperation; conversely, a score of five represented high intensity competition or cooperation. Separate target child, sibling, and dyad scores for competition and cooperation were given for each 30-second interval.

Table 1. Mean Competition and Cooperation Scores by Task and Sibling Status

| | | Competition | | | Cooperation | | |
|-------------------|----|--------------|------|-----------|--------------|------|-----------|
| | | Construction | Game | Free Play | Construction | Game | Free Play |
| Sibling Status | OS | 2.15 | 2.15 | 1.97 | 2.96 | 3.05 | 2.74 |
| | YS | 2.06 | 2.10 | 1.88 | 2.79 | 2.95 | 2.75 |

Figure 1. Mean Competition and Cooperation Scores by Task and Sibling Status





Results

To examine the extent to which the sibling pairs' cooperative and competitive behaviors varied across the three tasks, we conducted a 3 (task: construction, game, free play) X 2 (sibling status: older, younger) X 2 (gender composition: same-sex, mixed-sex) repeated measures MANOVA, with competition and cooperation scores as the dependent variables.

As shown in both Table 1 and Figure 1, there were significant effects for task and sibling status:

- Across task and sibling status, cooperation scores were higher than competition scores (p < .001).
- There was a significant linear effect for task (p < .001); free play showed lower cooperation and competition levels than the construction task, which in turn showed lower cooperation and competition levels than the game.
- There was a significant sibling status X task interaction effect (p < .05); older siblings had higher competition and cooperation ratings on the construction task.
- There were no significant gender effects for any of the tasks.

Discussion

We hypothesized that the game task would yield the most competitive behaviors, the construction task would yield the most cooperative behaviors, and free play would fall in between on both. We also anticipated that sibling status would have an influence on competition and cooperation, with older siblings expected to have a higher cooperation score and younger siblings to have a higher competition score. This may be because in the Latino culture, it is common that older children take an active stance in the care giving and rearing of their younger brother or sister, while the younger sibling often engages in more competitive actions as a way of showing their maturity and independence from older siblings.

Our analyses yielded clear task effects, though not exactly the ones we had expected. As hypothesized, the game yielded the most competitive behaviors, but it also yielded the highest cooperation scores. Contrary to our expectations, free play was actually lowest in both competition and cooperation, with the construction task falling in between. This pattern makes sense, however, when the process required to complete each assignment is considered. To play a game successfully requires teamwork and cooperation, as well as the competitiveness that can arise from attempting to win. The construction task requires teamwork for the turtle to be successfully assembled, but it also affords opportunities for competition over pieces and control of the task. Free play requires minimal cooperation because it simply involves setting up the train set however the children would like, with no necessary end point; both siblings could work separately (which sometimes occurred) and still complete the task.

Our hypotheses about sibling status were partially supported: on the construction task, older siblings showed higher levels of cooperation than younger siblings did, as expected, but they also showed higher levels of competition. The need to work together to complete the construction task is probably involved here, as well as the opportunities to compete for control in completing the task. Depending on the age of the younger sibling, the older sibling may take over when necessary or engage in helpful behaviors needed to get the younger sibling to understand and continue to play. Many younger siblings in our sample were between the ages of 3 and 5, a relatively young age to fully understand instructions and/or complete complex tasks. This may explain why the older siblings took charge and showed more cooperative and competitive behaviors, while the younger siblings followed. Cultural values may also help to explain the leading role taken by the older siblings; we believe that the value placed on family unity and closeness in Latino households may lead to expectations that the older sibling will provide exceptional amounts of guidance and leadership for the younger sibling.

One limitation of the current analysis is that our sample size did not allow us to control for cultural and demographic factors that may have influenced the results, such as country of origin, acculturation status, and SES. As we continue to recruit families for the study, we intend to include these factors in future analyses. We also intend to pursue comparisons with a sample of Anglo siblings being studied by other members of our research group, as well as examining Latino children's relationships with friends as well as siblings.