

# Baby's health is tied to mother's value for family

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The value that an expectant mother places on family—regardless of the reality of her own family situation—predicts the birthweight of her baby and whether the child will develop asthma symptoms three years later, according to new research from USC.

The findings suggest that one's culture is a resource that can provide tangible physical health benefits.

"We know that social support has profound [health implications](#); yet, in this case, this is more a story of beliefs than of actual family support," said [Cleopatra](#) Abdou, assistant professor at the USC Davis School of Gerontology.

Abdou studied 4,633 socioeconomically disadvantaged white, black and [Hispanic women](#), gauging their "familism," or, more specifically, their beliefs about familial roles and responsibilities, using a [questionnaire](#). Familism was determined by responses to statements such as, "Single moms can do just as well as married parents," or "It is better for children if their parents are married."

Abdou then tracked the health of their children and found that, for every one-point increase in familism, there was a 71-gram increase in birthweight independent of a whole host of other factors—including the gender of the infant or whether the mother was married. (For context, average birthweight in the U.S. is around 7.5 pounds, or roughly 3,400 grams. Low birthweight, typically defined as under 5.5 pounds or 2,500

grams, has been linked to [health problems](#) later in life.) Higher familism also predicted lower rates of asthma in the children up to three years later.

Though one might expect to see healthier children from mothers who reported [strong family](#) support, familism is a cultural measure that exists outside of an individual's actual circumstances.

"[Cultural beliefs](#) and ideals can be distinct from one's present reality. Familism is about beliefs and ideals within families. That's why familism is referred to as a cultural resource. The cultural resource of familism appears to favorably impact both reproductive health in mothers as well as critical markers of physical health in offspring. That is, the transmission of health from one generation to another," Abdou said.

Abdou's findings were published online on Nov. 9 in the journal *Social Science & Medicine*, in an article coauthored by Tyan Parker Dominguez of USC and Hector F. Myers of UCLA.

The results may shed light on the so-called "Hispanic Paradox" or "epidemiologic paradox," first documented in 1986 by Markides and Coreil, which found that immigrant populations in the United States tend to be relatively healthy compared to their peers, despite being poorer.

In general, poorer populations tend to be less healthy than wealthier ones. The epidemiologic paradox diminishes over time, with immigrant populations becoming less and less healthy as they start assimilating into American culture.

Abdou theorizes that U.S.-born populations, in addition to immigrant populations, can benefit in terms of mental and physical health from strong cultural resources, a theory that is supported by this study. Her work continues to probe the connections between health and culture in

diverse populations in the United States and the Middle East.

Provided by University of Southern California

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