Youth thrive in secure, stable, and loving environments that are created and sustained when parents have the necessary resources, knowledge, and skills to meet their children’s needs. However, many children reside in environments that are negatively affected by issues such as poverty, addiction, and mental illness. Families are complex; however, unraveling the multifaceted factors that boost youth resilience can help youth attain positive developmental outcomes in spite of exposure to high risk family environments. Mothers and fathers are integral parts of a youth’s family system, with fathers being among the least understood. Thus, my research on parenting, which emphasizes the roles of fathers, is motivated by my overarching goal of ensuring that youth thrive. In turn, my primary research objective is to inform prevention and intervention efforts that promote youth and family resilience in order to 1) prevent child welfare entry and reentry, and 2) effectively reduce the number of youth who experience mental and behavioral health problems that affect their short- and long-term wellbeing.

Within the parenting literature, research on fatherhood is far less developed compared to motherhood research. Consequently, we have limited knowledge on the extent to which fathers, especially those from vulnerable families, are involved with their children and how their involvement influences child risk and resilience. To address these gaps, I chose to focus my research on how fathers as individuals and as co-parents, influence child wellbeing across the lifespan. It is imperative as a social work scholar to link research with practice and my experiences as a clinical social worker informed each of my research inquiries. In my eagerness to explore questions informed by previous clinical work, I chose to spearhead multiple research projects using my mentor, Dr. Esther Calzada’s, data from her ongoing project, Latinos in Context (LINCS). LINCS contains a sample of 750 Latinx immigrant families. I then analyzed the longitudinal data, assessing for the impact of father-figure presence on Latinx youth mental health and recently submitted a first-authored manuscript for publication, “Father-figure Presence and Young Latinx Child Externalizing and Internalizing Problems” (O’Gara & Calzada, Under Review). Results from this project showed the need to treat each family as a unique system; we found that the type of father-figure presence (i.e., biological father, step-father, other adult male) differentially influenced young Latinx child mental health problems by child ethnicity (i.e., Mexican vs. Dominican origin).

I came to realize that much of the literature on vulnerable youth is deficit-oriented. Thus, staying true to my desire to conduct research that will lead to thriving youth, I led another project that examined the fathers’ role in adolescent resilience. There is a robust body of literature regarding the effects of negative family environments on youth mental health problems. What remains unknown are the factors associated with youth who develop positive outcomes despite high risk environments. In collaboration with developmental psychologists in the UT Austin Steve Hicks School of Social work, Dr. Calzada, and in the UT Austin Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, Dr. Su-Yeong Kim, I employed structural equation modeling with a sample of 270 Mexican immigrant families. I examined the relations between fathering, parent-child closeness, and adolescent delinquency and resilience. As with my first project, I conducted the analysis and wrote a complete manuscript which resulted in a first-authored publication, “The Father’s Role in Risk and Resilience Among Mexican-American Adolescents” (O’Gara, Calzada, & Kim, 2019; American Journal of Orthopsychiatry), and presentation at the Society for Social Work Research (SSWR) annual conference. Results of this project underscored the importance of father-child closeness to youth wellbeing, which prompted my next study, “Father-Youth Closeness and Adolescent Self-Rated Health: The Mediating Role of Mental Health (O’Gara, Zhang, Padilla, Liu, & Wang, 2019; Children and Youth Services Review), using a large (N = 3,321) and diverse sample of vulnerable families. This paper was accepted to be presented at the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) annual program meeting in October of 2019.

Mentorship by Dr. Calzada, whose expertise is in parenting and child development among ethnic minority families, reinforced my penchant for serving vulnerable and minority populations. Along with Dr. Calzada and scholars from New York University’s Department of Population Health, Dr. Barajas-Gonzales, and UT Arlington’s department of Social Work, Dr. Catherine LaBrenz, I am leading a project using LINCS data that
examines the long-term effects of spanking on young Latinx children. For this project I utilized cross-lagged structural equation modeling and conducted multi-group analysis to examine the effects of spanking on Latino boys versus Latina girls. Our findings will be presented at the National Latinx Psychological Association (NLPA) annual conference in November of 2019. As a result of the various quantitative analyses that I conducted, I became familiar with multiple statistical software packages including R, Mplus, SAS, and SPSS.

I collaborated on other studies that further increased my knowledge of important contextual and family system factors that impact youth risk and resilience. For example, I assisted in writing and publishing the following manuscripts, “Maternal depression, acculturative stress and child functioning in Mexican-origin families: The mediating role of authoritarian parenting practices” (Calzada, Sales, O’Gara, 2019; Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology), “Skin color as a predictor of mental health in young Latino children” (Calzada, Kim, O’Gara, 2019; Social Science and Medicine), and ACEs and Mental and Physical Health Disparities: The Moderating Effect of Race (LaBrenz, O’Gara, Panische, & Larkin, Under Review).

In my pursuit to become an independent researcher, I strived to broaden my repertoire by becoming involved with diverse research experiences. One of the richest opportunities has been managing an interdisciplinary team of research assistants (RAs) in a pilot study designed to prevent suicidality in Mexican-origin students. As project manager, I assisted the primary investigators by creating training and field interview documents. I trained RAs to recruit and conduct field interviews. I also personally conducted qualitative and quantitative field interviews, managed data, and facilitated parenting workshops. This role provided me the opportunity to be an integral part of the design and implementation of community-engaged research with Mexican-American families. We embarked on this project due to Latinx youth having heightened risk of suicide. This experience revealed that youth were quite resilient, and that family relationships were crucial to the wellbeing of the children interviewed. Recognizing the value of qualitative work in capturing the essence of relationships, I am currently leading a dyadic analysis on the topic of Latina adolescent suicide in collaboration with cultural anthropologist, Dr. Lauren Gulbus. In this study we examine father-daughter relationships and father responses to their Latina daughters’ suicide attempts. These findings will be presented at the NLPA national conference in November 2019.

The accumulated findings from my research projects demonstrated that youth do best when they receive warmth and support from fathers and mothers, which in turn fosters close parent-child relationships. These findings, supplemented by my clinical experiences in intervening with socioeconomically disadvantaged families, drove my dissertation topic of parenting within the context of economic hardship. Using the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS) data, I examine how fathers’ experiences of economic hardship when the focal child is five years old predicts adolescent mental health problems and resilience as mediated by non-residential father involvement and co-parenting. My dissertation addresses important research gaps by 1) developing a theoretically and data driven conceptualization of non-residential father involvement among a sample of vulnerable fathers, and 2) examining how both economic hardship and parenting (i.e., father involvement and co-parenting) impacts children across multiple developmental periods.

With the findings from my dissertation in hand, within my first few years of post-doctoral work I will establish strong working relationships with community social service agencies, hospitals, and schools that serve vulnerable families, such as families in poverty, immigrant families, and families with a history of child welfare involvement. Once relationships are established, I will collaborate with colleagues and student research assistants to implement studies designed to assess the unique needs of the families within my direct community. Within the first year of my academic appointment I will seek funding for my independent research through sources such as the NIH K-series grants and the Administration for Children and Families, which allocates funds for child development and fatherhood research. I am committed to disseminating my research findings in ways that directly benefit the community my research is designed to serve. My long-term goal is to lead a team of researchers and practitioners who work collaboratively to implement preventative parenting interventions that are accessible to socioeconomically disadvantaged families and families who are at risk of entering or
reentering the child welfare system. To achieve this goal, I will continuously seek funding for the development and implementation of preventative parenting programs that target the unique needs of vulnerable families.