



Special Issues to be Considered in Marriage Education Curricula Adaptation





Special Issues to be Considered in Marriage Education Curricula Adaptation: Parenting and Family, Immigration and Acculturation, Poverty, and Discrimination

This memo will address the issues of parenting and family, immigration and acculturation, poverty, and discrimination. These issues were selected because they were raised by Hispanic researchers and practitioners in a national forum convened by the Administration for Children and Families. The findings and recommendations in this memo are drawn from discussions at the Supporting Healthy Marriage and Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiative Joint Research Meeting held on September 12-13, 2005, in Washington, D.C., and a research meeting held in conjunction with the Hispanic Healthy Marriage National Conference, May 11, 2006, in San Antonio, Texas.

This memo is not intended to be a complete discussion of these issues, but rather to summarize the advice received from researchers and practitioners in the Hispanic community at the research meeting for discussion purposes only.

Introduction

The rapid growth of the Latino population in the United States is due to immigration and high birth rates among Hispanics (The Pew Hispanic Center, 2005). This is a young population that is diverse in country of origin and tradition. Despite the heterogeneity of Latinos in the United States, there are common trends among Hispanics such as the gender roles and the importance of family (Skogrand et al, 2005). This report considers some of the special issues related to Hispanic couples in the United States as they may have an impact on the development and adaptation of marriage education curricula targeted to serve this population.

Researchers recently have begun to collect both qualitative and quantitative information about Hispanic families and marriage. Although there are limits to the information available, some research can inform program developers about aspects of issues that are unique to the United States' fastest growing minority population. This information helps establish a starting point for identifying areas for further research and implications based on current research findings.

What Do We Know?

Parenting and Family

Understanding the role that family plays in Latino marriages is critical in developing an appropriate marriage education program model. *Familismo*—an emphasis on the family, rather than the couple, as the central unit—influences child rearing, family formation decisions, family obligations, and how the couple functions in the context of the family. This concept, in contrast to the mainstream U.S. culture of individualism and marriage for personal fulfillment/satisfaction, has an impact on couples' roles as parents. Many Latinos view themselves as a mother or a father before they identify themselves as a wife or a husband. Research indicates that parenthood, rather than marital happiness, may be the primary





marital goal for some Latino couples. Latino parents express that children are a source of happiness; they provide support and contribute to building the love between a husband and wife; and they are the fruit of the parents' love and the unifying factor that strengthens the marriage (Skogrand).

The high value placed on the parent-child relationship often extends beyond the immediate family unit. In social settings, for example, Latinos may decline participation if their children, and sometimes members of the extended family, are not welcome to participate along with them. Children are an integral part of the Latino family structure, and marriage education programs that recognize and are respectful of this structure may attract more participants.

In addition to playing a central role in Latinos' couple relationships, parenting is the second most common source of conflict in couple relationships (Stanley and Markman, 1997). Researchers are interested in understanding how parenting in Latino families can influence marriage. Although research is somewhat limited, there are some key aspects of parenting that are believed to influence the couple relationship and family dynamics. These issues include acculturation and the role of extended and multigenerational families.

Parenting style, which is associated with gender and culture, can be strained as part of the acculturation process (Flores). For example, in traditional Hispanic families, wives are primarily responsible for child rearing. Traditionally, Hispanic mothers value respect and obedience and may be more intrusive, use more physical control in disciplining children, and be less responsive than non-Latino mothers. This is a less child-centered approach to parenting than is common in U.S. society and may challenge lessons taught in traditional parenting and family life education programs.

In the United States, a Hispanic mother may need to work outside the home or, in contrast, if she stays home with the children, her opportunity to learn the language and culture in which her children are immersed may be limited. Further, Latina mothers also traditionally have kept their children at home and not believed in the value of early childhood education, which is a more common principle among U.S.-born mothers. These cultural values are associated with parenting as well as gender roles in the couple relationship.

Hispanic mothers and fathers vary in how they communicate with one another and how their conflict management skills affect their children and their individual relationships with their children. Research indicates that when a Latina mother disagrees with her spouse, the anger and conflict expressed has a greater impact on the relationship between the children and their father than vice versa (Cabrera). As acculturation increases, Latina women may feel more comfortable expressing concerns and engaging in conflict (Flores). However, this is in direct opposition to the idea that a woman places greater importance on her role as a mother than as a wife. Marriage and parenting education programs will need to account for this situation so that the mother can express her concerns as a wife without fear of negatively affecting the relationship between the children and their father.

Many Hispanic families live in multigenerational homes with parents, grandparents, aunts, and other members of the extended family. There is a strong emphasis on interdependence within Hispanic families; therefore, when a couple needs assistance, their first response may be to rely on their extended





family. They may feel obliged to consult with them before discussing problems with people outside the family or in other settings. Further, the boundaries of what constitutes a “couple” issue versus a larger family issue may be blurred. These issues are important to curriculum developers considering how to effectively educate Hispanic couples about problem-solving and decision-making techniques.

Extended family members may influence a couple’s decision-making and child-rearing practices and, in some cases, may actively participate in these practices. One potential source of conflict between children and parents is related to children’s exposure to mainstream American culture. For example, if the grandparents are present in the home, they may blame the parents for allowing the child to behave in a manner considered unacceptable in the context of the cultural norms in their country of origin. This can be further complicated by language barriers when parents and grandparents have limited English skills and when they rely on children to serve as translators or interpreters for themselves and extended family members. These situations can challenge the traditional roles of respect and authority among nuclear and multigenerational families.

Immigration and Acculturation

The majority of Latino families living in the United States immigrated within the last two generations (Administration for Children and Families, 2005 Draft). The immigration process can cause strain on the family and couple relationship in many ways. Language barriers, immigration status/documentation, loss of extended family, and fragmented families (those who cannot all immigrate at the same time) are all stressors that affect many Latino families in the United States.

The process of immigration for Hispanics varies. Some families enter the United States one person at a time, some immigrate legally, and some enter the country illegally. The way in which immigration is accomplished impacts the family and the couple. Families that immigrate one person at a time can experience years of fragmentation. This happens because only one family member can come to the United States. He/she will start a life while sending money home and saving to bring the next family member to the United States. Many years may pass by before the family is reunited. These couples may experience significant strain on their relationship during the transition.

One of the most challenging issues that Hispanic couples may experience is obtaining legal status. Most undocumented Latinos who are in the United States are young adults from Mexico (The Pew Hispanic Center, 2005). These individuals may encounter barriers, either real or perceived, to marriage. One such barrier may be the inability to obtain a marriage license in many states. Also, young immigrants may choose to refrain from marrying another immigrant because it will decrease their chance of marrying a U.S. citizen as a way to gain legal status. Finally, research indicates the fear of detection or deportation among undocumented immigrants may decrease the likelihood that Latinos will access social services, report domestic violence, or obtain a marriage license (Administration for Children and Families, 2005 Draft). Programs need to be sensitive to these issues when talking about the decision to marry.

Even when Latino immigrant families are able to overcome some of the traditional barriers to living in the United States, they often are faced with another set of challenges related to acculturation. Many Hispanic families come to the United States in search of greater economic opportunity, yet they do not





want to leave the values and traditions of their culture. Although Latinos embrace certain aspects of American culture, many do not want to separate from their roots, and they may plan to return to their county of origin. A family member may come to the United States to work and send money home with the expectation of returning to their country of origin. Technology and travel allow greater access for people to maintain contact with their country of origin, yet this is still a strain on the family and couple relationships. Further, time spent in the United States may be viewed as temporary for couples that choose to delay marriage until they return to their country of origin. Maintaining this bi-cultural lifestyle may result in social isolation while in the United States, which can negatively impact the couple relationship.

Poverty

According to the 2000 Census, people of Hispanic origin are much more likely to live in poverty than the general population. The stress of poverty, especially when coupled with low-educational attainment, language barriers and discrimination, may significantly affect some Hispanic families. These stressors will most likely lead to harmful consequences on couples' relationships.

Issues related to poverty include lack of education, underemployment, violence, abuse, fear, abandonment, and substance abuse. These issues affect many poor couples in the United States, therefore, disentangling the issues of poverty from issues related to immigration and discrimination is difficult. One constraint specific to Hispanics may be limited access to services. Lack of documentation may prevent Hispanic couples from accessing support services available to U.S. citizens, or they may perceive these services are not available. Fear of deportation or losing their children also may prohibit Latinos from accessing government-funded programs. Another constraint may be the inability to obtain a valid driver's license, which can interfere with obtaining and sustaining employment that can help the family transition from poverty.

Finally, there is a lack of bi-lingual professionals in the social services fields who are able to provide culturally competent services to Latino families. If Spanish-speaking people reach out for services, language and literacy barriers may prevent them from accessing the necessary supports. Further, Hispanics in the United States often are undereducated, and they may not understand how to navigate the bureaucratic systems. The lack of supports or perceived barriers to support services can isolate families.

Without access to services or culturally competent professionals in the fields of health care, substance abuse, employment, and education, Hispanic families may experience greater challenges moving out of poverty. The impact of these negative forces can mitigate the cultural and traditional values of marriage and family that are so important to Latino immigrants in the second and third generations. Some evidence of this is surfacing in research that compares recent immigrants' family formation patterns with that of second- and third-generation Hispanics (Administration for Children and Families, 2005 Draft). This may further be compounded by fatalism, or the belief that one cannot change his or her destiny.

Hispanic males who face employment barriers may feel that they are unable to meet family and social expectations related to their traditional role as the provider and protector. This perception may affect the couple relationship by leading to the husband's increased feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, and





psychological withdrawal from identifying with the family unit. Marriage education programs that are able to build upon employment and financial management resources may be able to offer families a necessary form of support while strengthening the couple relationship.

Discrimination

According to some Latino practitioners, many Hispanic couples feel discriminated against in the United States. This may vary by recent immigrants versus second- and third-generation Latinos. For example, Spanish-(only)-speaking Hispanics are almost twice as likely as English-speaking Latinos to describe discrimination as a major problem (The Pew Hispanic Center, 2005). However, there also is an intergenerational effect. The experience of migrant workers and how they were treated when they first arrived in the United States can be passed down to subsequent generations (Cardona). This can create distrust of government systems and social services.

Discrimination also may be an issue for interethnic couples. Although little research is available on this topic, there are some indications that interethnic couples reported higher levels of stress related to childbearing (Administration for Children and Families, 2005 Draft), which may be related to cultural differences between parents or discrimination dealt with by their children. This topic may be more common among non-Mexican American Latinos, as Mexican-American women most frequently have children by Mexican-American men (Oropesa and Landale, 2004). Marriage education programs may want to consider how couples are coping with discrimination.

The issues of race and ethnicity are more prevalent among Hispanic immigrants than European immigrants. Discrimination and minority status stress are issues for this population. One way to counter discrimination is for programs to focus on showing respect to Latino families and not approaching a program in a prescriptive manner. Researchers suggest that Latino families will be less likely to participate and succeed if they feel they are being told what to do. They may respond better to being offered alternatives to the way they are parenting or interacting as a couple and feel validated that they are parenting or communicating in the best possible way.

What Do We Still Need to Know?

Parenting and Family

Most of the research on parenting in Latino families comes from the mothers' perspective, which is similar to research on parenting in other ethnic groups. There are some indications that fathers in Hispanic couples may be more nurturing and serve a greater care-giving role than is traditionally expected. Also, third- and fourth-generation immigrants tend to exhibit fewer characteristics of the gender roles of traditional Hispanic couples. Further exploration of gender roles as they relate to parenting may help direct programmatic development. It is especially important to gain the perspectives of Latino fathers, a group that traditionally has been overlooked.

Studies are needed to examine the attitudinal differences related to parenting and family between the generations of Hispanics living in the United States. It is assumed that recent immigrants have very different family values than second- and third-generation Hispanics, but it is unknown to what extent new values are adopted or traditional ones are retained.





Researchers frequently compare Latinos to White/European samples. It may be valuable to understand interethnic differences in parenting styles and patterns. For example, first-generation (foreign-born) Mexican children are more likely to reside with their married parents than Cuban or Puerto Rican children. In addition to conducting research that compares Latinos by country of origin, researchers may wish to consider using an anthropological research approach to look at the positive factors of parenting.

There also is a need for additional research related to parenting in Latino families. Specifically, research that addresses mother-infant interactions, father involvement, parenting teens, and co-parenting in Latino families would be useful. Understanding these dynamics within Hispanic couples can inform the development of parenting materials.

A significant need exists for rigorous studies among Latino populations. For example, very few studies have been conducted using a random sample design, and many studies have only small clinical samples. Conducting random assignment studies can improve the research community's understanding of the various subgroups within the Hispanic population to determine if further curricula adaptations are needed to reach specific (higher-risk) communities.

Finally, research related to the young age at first marriage and the impact of marriage on socio-economic standing among Hispanics is needed. It is known that Hispanics tend to marry younger and that marriage has less of an effect on socio-economic status for Latino couples than other ethnic groups in the United States. Understanding these trends and how programs can address these issues is essential to supporting healthy marriages in the Hispanic community.

Immigration and Acculturation

Couples in which one or both partners have immigrated face unique challenges, and more research is needed regarding the pressures of immigration and legal issues on the couple. It also is unknown whether this circumstance may penalize the children of those unions. Research that explains how couples deal with stress related to immigration or legal issues, how it impacts relationships with their children, and the rate of acculturation can inform marriage education programs.

More information also is needed on recent immigrants. For example, men who have immigrated to the United States may work long hours in order to support their immediate family and other family members in their country of origin. They may have different expectations related to gender roles, priorities, or motivations than second- and third-generation men, which may affect their couple relationship. Gathering information that differentiates between country of origin, degree of acculturation, or immigration status may help to inform programs dealing with diverse groups of Latinos.

Qualitative and quantitative research is needed to create a better knowledge base for understanding what influences the acculturation process. Further, acculturation scales need to be expanded to include contextual factors related to how an individual adapts to a new culture. Improvement is needed in the operationalization of acculturation indicators. It is necessary to include measures that address basic attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.





There is evidence that acculturation has an effect on the couple relationship and parent-child relationships. More research is needed to differentiate between the dynamics of acculturation among ethnic groups. Although some research distinguishes between Mexicans and other Hispanics, limited information is available to determine the variable of culture among other ethnic groups.

Poverty

A better understanding of where poverty enters into the equation of acculturation is needed. For example, U.S.-born (second-generation) Hispanics may have less family support and may have experienced growing up in a low-income or dangerous neighborhood, which put them at greater risk of ongoing poverty.

Another issue for additional research is the role of fatalism, the belief that it is not worthwhile to plan for the future because one does not have control over one's future. This belief is more prevalent among Spanish-dominant Hispanics in the United States, who also are more likely to be poor (The Pew Hispanic Center, 2005). However, there may be a difference between traditional Latinos who believe in fate or destiny and young, U.S.-born Latinos who have experienced poverty and profess that it does not matter what they do today because they may die tomorrow. Understanding the relationships between acculturation, traditional values, and poverty may help influence program development.

Growing up in a single-parent household also can increase the likelihood of experiencing poverty. Puerto Rican families have a higher rate of poverty in the United States compared to Mexican or Cuban American families. They also are not faring well in terms of outcomes like teen pregnancy and unemployment, which are indicators of poverty. Interethnic research is needed to differentiate issues of culture, ethnicity, and poverty.

Discrimination

Racism and discrimination are difficult topics to research. One broad research need is to identify strategies to address racism and discrimination against immigrants. Other research might examine minority stress on interracial couples' relationships, a topic on which there currently is limited research (Administration for Children and Families, 2005 Draft). For example, researchers may wish to consider the extended family's influence on interracial couples or how children of interracial couples are treated. Additionally, they may consider how these couples merge their individual cultural traditions and extrapolate positive family and couple values from each culture.

Existing research focuses largely on comparisons between the Hispanic population and the European-American population. It would be useful for studies to divide the Hispanic population into subgroups because there may be significant differences in findings based on the country of origin and the length of time groups have resided in the United States.

Finally, the issue of *confianza*, or perceptions of trust and expected reciprocity, could be further explored as it relates to discrimination. Increased understanding of necessary in-roads to gain *confianza* with social service providers among Hispanic families will be important to program implementation efforts.





What Should We Do With What We Know?

Parenting and Family

Given that the family, rather than the couple, is the central unit in Hispanic marriages, marriage education must be considered within this context. Understanding a couple's particular orientation within the family system and ways in which the extended family supports the couple will improve the ability of the couple to relate to the program. This implies that each family and couple is unique and that programs should consider the cultural and generational values of the couple.

Programs that focus exclusively on couples, without reference to children or extended family, may experience more difficulties recruiting Latino participants, whereas programs for parents and families are more likely to be more attractive to Hispanic families. One strategy may be to focus on the role of parent, versus the role of partner. This may help parents justify attendance and time away from children. The experience of practitioners in the field indicates that after couples trust the provider, they may be more likely to open up about couple issues. Couple recruitment also should be linked to the broader sense of community and family responsibility. Another strategy may be to speak in terms of "we," indicating the family, as opposed to using "I" statements.

Acculturation and proficiency with the English language also are important issues for couples, especially Spanish-dominant couples that rely on children to translate or interpret for parents. This reliance can blur the lines in the parent-child relationship and cause family stress. Curricula that address these issues need to be sensitive about the lack of parents' opportunities to learn the language and the lack of adult resources to support their translation needs.

Extended family members who live with the couple also may need to be included in program activities. Family members can offer the couple the cultural values of their country of origin, which can be a protective feature. In contrast, however, they may place strain on a couple that is acculturating and wants to parent differently than is acceptable in their country of origin.

Immigration and Acculturation

Undocumented immigrants may be socially isolated families, which can lead to a lack of external support systems. For couples that engage in services, providers should recognize the value of their participation. This will show respect to a population that may feel disengaged from U.S. society. Further, it may help to encourage members of younger generations who lack optimism about their future. Validation of participation may be a necessary first step in building trust between the provider and the community.

Many Hispanics in the United States are migrant workers. Program developers should consider whether the hours and duration of the program are conducive to participation among this population.

Programs and curricula should not ask families about their legal status. Rather, curricula should address stressors associated with being undocumented and unable to communicate in English, verbally or through writing. Similarly, programs need to be mindful of how to make appropriate referrals to providers who have Spanish-speaking staff and are able to serve undocumented immigrants.





Finally, the heterogeneity of the Hispanic community requires programs to be sensitive to the degree of acculturation present in the couples participating. For example, “T” statements are more assertive, which indicates a higher degree of acculturation. It is critical that programs demonstrate an understanding of the audience and use curricula that are culturally competent yet flexible enough to be effective with recent Spanish-only speaking immigrants as well as English-only speaking third generation Hispanics.

Poverty

More than one quarter of all Hispanic families with children under age 18 in the United States are impoverished. This is more than 10 percentage points higher than the national average (Administration for Children and Families 2005 Draft). Poverty may be seen as a step in the acculturation process, however, with second- and third-generation families, it may be accompanied by generational discrimination, substance abuse problems, family fragmentation, pessimistic views of the future, and lack of housing or other supports. Program developers should consider the impact of socio-economic conditions when adapting programs, especially if couples are not eligible (due to immigration status) for some services.

Research indicates that individuals in poverty do not feel entitled to consume U.S. culture. Couples may feel more empowered and buy into programs if they are able to participate in the development of the program. This may give them a sense of ownership and pride in the collaboration.

Fatalism allows an explanation for suffering but can also serve as a protective factor for families in extreme poverty. Curriculum developers may want to discuss this concept early in the program and acknowledge that couples can make a difference in their relationships and are not fated for divorce or poverty. A couple may be driven along by events such as poverty and may exist in survival mode. Young couples may need interventions that help them make clear decisions instead of just experiencing life events and assuming they cannot change their fate.

Discrimination

Socio-economic status and racism often are entangled. Participants may interpret directional teaching as discrimination and disrespect. This can be especially important when the instructors are white and/or well-educated. Programs that target Hispanic couples may be more successful if participants are invited to share their experiences, ask questions, and guide the direction of the program. One strategy for a program may be to ask couples how they define a healthy marriage. This may empower them to more openly discuss their beliefs and expectations.

Trust (or *confianza*) is a key issue for all providers working with Latino couples. Intergenerational hurt due to the experience of migrant workers in the United States and discrimination are major barriers for programs to overcome. Trust must be earned by program leadership and staff, especially when working with families that have experienced poverty and discrimination.

Conclusion

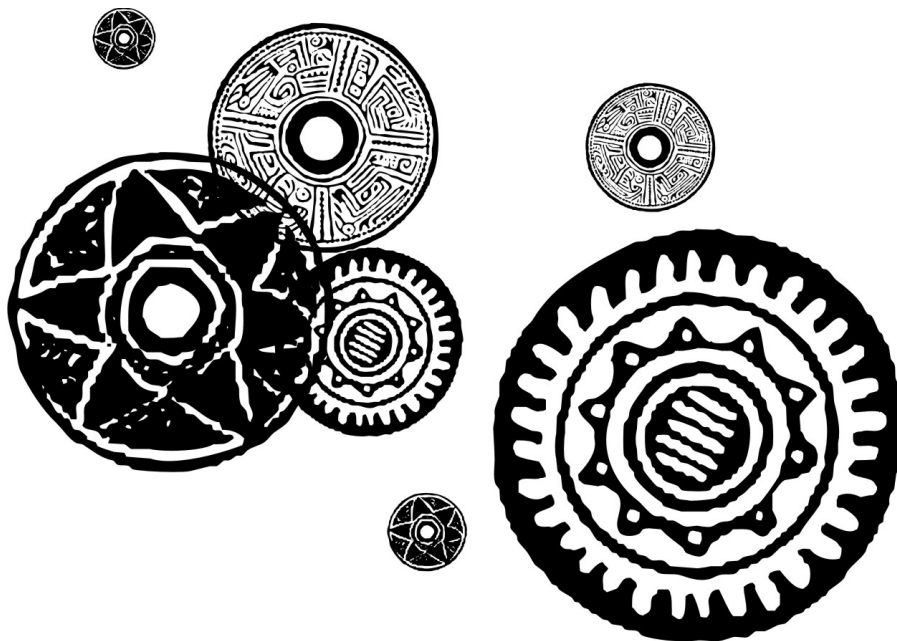
In conclusion, research has just begun to identify special issues related to the needs of Latino couples in the United States. Researchers, curriculum developers, and practitioners should be careful to avoid





translating research findings into stereotypes about a population that are not related to individual experiences. Although common concerns and issues exist, the heterogeneity of the Hispanic population requires that programs recognize each couple as unique and allow them to define their own issues.

The issues of parenting and family, immigration and acculturation, poverty, and discrimination are important topics for consideration when adapting programs for Hispanic couples. Awareness of values from the country of origin and the experiences of immigration can influence the ability of a program to be culturally relevant.





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