



Summary of Issues to Consider When Working with Recent Immigrants





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BACKGROUND STATEMENT

Immigrants residing in the United States are often motivated by an opportunity for their families to enjoy economic improvement. With this opportunity are challenges that impact a myriad of issues, including work, education, and marital relationships. Hispanic immigrants emanate from 26 nations, primarily those located in the Americas and Spain. While Spanish may be the primary language among Hispanics, each nationality maintains its own dialect and the same word may have different meanings from nation to nation. In addition to different countries of origin and dialects, economic resources, educational systems, and class structures further distinguish one group from another.

Key differences among Hispanic groups residing in the United States are often related to the circumstances of their migration. The impetus for moving from one country to another varies between ethnic groups, but once the process begins, patterns are established that are common across groups. Factors surrounding the decision to leave their country of origin and the unique challenges immigrant couples face may have implications on how couples perceive and receive marriage and relationship education services. It is important for practitioners and program developers to understand these implications.

This document highlights common factors experienced by immigrant couples that can be beneficial and strenuous to the couple relationship. It also includes specific issues program developers should consider when working with recent, Spanish-speaking immigrant couples residing in the United States. The 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, DC; a research meeting held in conjunction with the Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiative National Conference on May 11, 2006, in San Antonio, Texas; and a research meeting held in conjunction with a conference sponsored by the Center for Latino Family Research on September 15-16, 2006, in St. Louis, Missouri. This document is not intended to be a complete discussion of these issues, but rather a summary of the advice and guidance offered by researchers and practitioners from the Hispanic community.

LESSONS LEARNED

New immigrants to the United States experience a range of emotions that manifest even prior to leaving their country of origin. They often include fear and doubt about the decision to migrate; joy and enthusiasm at the thought of a new beginning; regret or loss for what was left behind; and finally, acceptance and a determination to move forward.

The experience of many Hispanics immigrating to the United States is often comprised of a lost sense of comfort, security, self-assurance, and orientation once enjoyed in their country of origin. Apprehension, insecurity, confusion and discomfort replace previous positive states of being. The process of immigration is always accompanied by some form of acculturation. The level of acculturation varies based on whether the individual wishes to preserve the culture/traditions of his/her country of origin or abandon these traditions in an attempt to become more “Americanized.”



Acculturation impacts the well-being of individuals and couples recently arriving in the United States as they must adjust to a new lifestyle and cultural expectations. These may include economic hardships, language acquisition, new social norms, and immigration concerns. While the topic of acculturation is discussed in greater detail later, it is important to understand that the process of acculturation often has an impact on social support,¹ anxiety and loss of self-esteem,² depression and suicidal tendencies,³ and alcohol and drug abuse.⁴

Sensitivity to the process and realities of acculturation will help program staff recognize, design and implement relevant marriage education programs that reach immigrant families where they are on this continuum. Determining where they are often requires identifying protective factors that may help recent immigrants as they experience the acculturation process.

Protective Factors

Mediating, or protective factors that have the potential of reducing the tension created by the immigration process are hope, family, and positive experiences with the new community.

Hope

Hope is a strong motivating factor that helps individuals endure adverse circumstances. First-generation Hispanic families demonstrate incredible resilience and resolve to adapt, survive, and thrive under difficult circumstances. Hispanic couples may view their circumstances as temporarily necessary in order to establish a brighter future for their children. Thus, a focus on better opportunities inspires them to persevere and overcome adversity. Programs designed to strengthen relationships can encourage this sense of hope by acknowledging the difficulties immigrant couples face and by providing them with skills to strengthen their relationship in spite of these challenges. Programs may even emphasize to couples that having a healthy relationship may help lessen the impact of the stressors they face from the broader society by confronting these challenges together.

Role of the Family

For Hispanics, the family is a core value. Family informs the culture and defines decisions that are made in the couple relationship. The role of family provides another potential mediating factor in the immigration experience. Family members may depend upon one another for a sense of security, predictability, and comfort that may not be experienced outside of the home. The family may also help couples maintain stability and identity while living in a new environment. Programs would do well to recognize and communicate the connection between the family and its potential impact on the couple relationship.

Community

Previous natural support systems in a couple's homeland (e.g. parents, neighbors, teachers, pastors, and grandparents) are likely to be absent in their new environment, thereby increasing a couple's sense of isolation. Additionally, if new immigrants are subjected to direct or indirect discrimination, then

¹ Cobb, S. (1976). Social support as a moderator of life stress. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 3, 300-314.; Wodarski, J.S. (1992). Social work with Hispanic Americans. In D.F. Harrison, J.S. Wodarski, & B.A. Thyer (Eds.), *Cultural Diversity and Social Work Practice*. Springfield, IL: Thomas.

² Berry, J.W. & Annis, R.C. (1974). Acculturation stress: The role of ecology, culture and differentiation. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 5, 382-406.

³ Hovey, J.D. (2000). Acculturative stress, depression, and suicidal ideation among Central American immigrants. *Suicide & Life-Threatening Behavior*, 30, 235-139.; Valentine, S. (2001). Self-esteem, cultural identity, and generation status as determinants of Hispanic acculturation. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 23, 459-468.

⁴ Markides, K., Krause N., Mendes de L.C.F. (1988). Acculturation and alcohol consumption among Mexican Americans: A three-generation study. *American Journal of Public Health*, 78, 1178-1181.





feelings of distrust, fear, and insecurity will naturally increase. Social support derived from the community may help ease tension that could result from the immigration experience. Marriage programs that are offered in trusted institutions are in a position to provide a network of support to immigrant couples that otherwise may not exist.

While hope, family, and sense of community are a few of the protective factors that may work toward preserving the well-being of first-generation Hispanic immigrant couples, other specific issues may put these couples at risk for increased marital distress. The following are some challenges that immigrant couples face that practitioners and program developers should consider when providing marriage and relationship education services.

Challenges

Immigration

The residency status of Hispanics living in the United States is wide-ranging. Whether an individual is a legal or illegal resident affects mobility, employment stability and availability, the ability to assert rights, and the capacity to plan for the future. Additionally, immigration restrictions may contribute to relationship dissatisfaction by forcing many couples to live separately. For example, one partner may choose to seek employment in the United States in order to support the family, yet immigration restrictions may make it impossible for the couple to stay united. Another common situation is that one partner, along with the children, may be forced to return to their country of origin, leaving the spouse in the United States. The hope and expectation is that the family will eventually be reunited in the United States. The physical and emotional separation, however, takes a toll on couples, creating additional stress and grief. Facilitators and program developers will need to be aware of this common circumstance and determine how to accommodate participants without their partners.

Programs should also be aware of the opposing viewpoints that many first-generation Hispanic couples have regarding the desire to eventually return to their country of origin. A partner may regard the initial move as temporary and may verbally acknowledge a desire to return to their country of origin after obtaining benefits in the United States (e.g. educational, vocational, and financial). Whereas a temporary residence may be the reality for some couples, such as migrant workers, tension may result when the other partner feels strongly about remaining in the United States, driving the couple toward dissension and conflict. Program developers and practitioners should help facilitate discussions that allow immigrant couples to express their long-term immigration goals and expectations with one another.

Acculturation

Although an immigrant couple may live together in the United States, each partner may experience the acculturation process differently, causing stress on the relationship. The process where a new immigrant holds on to specific cultural traits such as family structure, food, and music while also adopting new cultural traits is known as “selective acculturation.” In a couple relationship, one person may begin to adopt selective pieces of the dominant culture, and he/she may begin to expect, and perhaps demand, this same change to occur with his/her partner. The dilemma presented by “selective acculturation” in a relationship is illustrated using an example from research that indicates Hispanics’ tendency to be more present-oriented versus past- or future-oriented. While living in the United States, one partner may begin to adopt more future-oriented views and begin planning for the future financially and/or educationally. He/she may then encourage, or even expect, the other partner to follow suit. If his/her partner welcomes the influence, then the relationship is likely to be strengthened due to positive interactions. However, feelings of frustration and disconnection may manifest if





one imposes future-oriented expectations while the other maintains a more present-oriented stance. Programs can help couples deal with this challenge by incorporating exercises and activities related to changing partner expectations due to acculturation.

The process of acculturation also affects an individual's sense of self by challenging his/her core values in a new culture and environment. As each partner in a couple relationship confronts opposition to previously held beliefs, he/she may experience a lack of self-confidence and feelings of insecurity in how his/her partner will respond to the clash of values. Conflicts may arise when one welcomes the differing values of the new culture while the other is either not ready for or does not agree with the change in his/her partner. Programs working with immigrant Hispanic couples should consider addressing the individuals' and couples' values and how these values are expressed in their relationship.

Gender Dynamics

Traditionally, within the Hispanic culture, authority is typically afforded to males.⁵ Traditional gender roles, however, are often questioned when living within a new culture and society. For example, upon entering the work force and coming into contact with different egalitarian ideals, Hispanic, immigrant women may begin to question gender roles in their traditional form and may make demands towards increased equality. These demands can create tension in the home. Marriage education programs should address the impact this phenomenon has on the marital dyad and include gender role differences as part of a discussion on family transitions. Every couple naturally evolves, and transitions are part of the life cycle. These gender differences can be viewed as a type of transition to which the couple needs to adapt in order for growth to occur in a new culture. Providing an opportunity for couples to safely discuss these gender role changes as a normative part of transition may help to relieve some of the tension. Program staff and facilitators should take caution, however, not to endorse either traditional or more egalitarian ideals. Discussions of this nature should be impartially encouraged so that couples have the opportunity to draw their own conclusions as to what role gender plays in their own relationship dynamic.

Role of Extended Family

Recent immigrants frequently reside with extended family during the transition to the United States. While the situation may help the couple care for children, obtain employment, and achieve a deeper orientation to the community, multiple extended families living together also increases the opportunity for conflict. Decisions are often not made in the confines of the couple relationship but are rather made collaboratively with the family or, in some cases, appear to be made for the couple by the family.

Practitioners and program developers should also be aware that Hispanics' strong sense of family may add to feelings of loss, isolation, and confusion when extended family members are left behind in their country of origin. Leaving behind extended family support networks can put couples in a difficult position. Although the extended family may not be close geographically, many couples may continue to consult with family members before making decisions. Couples may experience confusion when making important decisions if the extended family makes recommendations based on their current cultural reality without taking into consideration that the couple is now maneuvering in a new culture.

⁵ Best, D. L. & Williams, J. E. (1997) *Gender Across the Life-Span and Across Cultures*. New York: Guilford Press, 215-245.





Perhaps inviting extended family members to discuss the general principals of healthy relationships, including helping couples discuss feelings related to making independent versus collaborative decisions, would be beneficial. Regardless of their location, program staff should take care to remain unbiased when working with couples and their families regarding decision making. Each couple should determine for themselves how much, and what type of, involvement the extended family will have with respect to making decisions.

Children as Cultural Brokers

In many cases, recent immigrant couples do not speak fluent English and are unfamiliar with the systems of the new culture. Consequently, children and adolescents are forced to navigate societal systems and serve as translators for their parents. Furthermore, translation provided by children may be a mixture of Spanish and English, often termed “spanglish.” This mixture of languages may result in an incomplete understanding of a given issue, threatening a couple's self-esteem. Insecurities may arise when a couple is forced to yield authority to their children because of their reliance on them as cultural brokers.⁶ Programs should strive to empower and encourage couples to learn to maneuver in an English-speaking society in order to reinforce their own leadership roles and eliminate the undo pressure placed on their children. They should also be prepared to provide marriage and relationship education services in Spanish to ensure that the program content resonates with the couple and to avoid involving children in matters related to the couple relationship.

Language/Literacy

There are a number of challenges faced by recent immigrants related to language and literacy levels. Recent immigrants may or may not speak English, and literacy levels - even skills in their native language – may vary. In an effort to avoid barriers related to language proficiency, programs may choose to offer marriage education services in Spanish. Although Spanish may be the preferred language for spoken communication, programs should be mindful of dialect differences and adapt curricula so that it resonates with the local Hispanic community. Furthermore, programs should not rely on written materials/exercises, even if they are in Spanish, due to differing literacy levels.

Another possibility that may be challenging for a couple and for program leaders is that both partners in a couple may not share the same native language or literacy capabilities. This possibility makes hiring bilingual staff even more important. Bilingual staff will be better able to connect with both partners and deliver educational material in a way that both partners understand. In addition to being bilingual, program staff should share a similar cultural background and/or be from the same country of origin as the participating couples. Staff who share the same cultural background as participants will be familiar with vernacular differences and colloquialisms as they present the marriage education curriculum

Marriage License Challenges

Many first-generation Hispanic couples living in the United States defer marriage either because of dreams to marry in their country of origin, where extended family and friends can participate in the ceremony, or due to lack of knowledge about marriage laws for immigrants. Program developers may want to invest some time learning about their state marriage laws and investigate (with the appropriate respective consulates) procedures for couples who are undocumented. Practitioners and program staff should be conscious of the fact that many couples participating in marriage education services will not be legally married due to the aforementioned reasons. Care should be taken not to invalidate a relationship that is not a legal marriage as many couples who are unable or choose not to legally marry in the United States view their union as a marriage.

⁶ Padilla, A.M. (1995) *Hispanic psychology: Critical issues in theory and research*. Thousand Oaks, CA, US : Sage Publications, Inc.





Employment and Program Design

Recent immigrants often hold more than one job in order to adequately provide for their families. Multiple jobs and different hourly shifts often leave little time for couples to spend together. Program developers will need to be creative in offering various opportunities for couples to participate in activities due to the demands of the couple's schedule. It is highly likely that couples will not always be able to participate together in program activities. Practitioners and program developers should look for opportunities to maximize a couple's time together while acknowledging their strong work ethic as a strength of the family.

Stigma and Maintaining Public Image

Seeking marriage services outside of the family unit is often viewed negatively among many Hispanic couples. Discussing issues related to the couple relationship with non-family members may be seen as tarnishing the image of the individual, the couple, and the entire family. The importance given to maintaining the family's public image warrants special attention by practitioners as to how a program is promoted to recent immigrant couples. Program developers should consider approaching marriage education services for immigrant Hispanic couples as an opportunity to strengthen the family and parent-child relationships. Should participation cease due to conflict and dissension between a couple, it is important for practitioners and program staff to assure couples that it is not a negative reflection on their relationship, and that all couples experience difficulties in their relationship.

SUMMARY

Program developers and facilitators are encouraged to understand the cultural complexities of working with immigrant Hispanic couples—the protective factors as well as the challenges. The approach to successfully providing relationship and marriage education services to this audience is unique to approaches used with other non-immigrant Hispanic groups. Although further research specific to recently immigrated Hispanic couples is needed, program developers are encouraged to heed the lessons learned and recommendations presented above when offering marriage and relationship education programs to immigrant Hispanic couples.

