

Hello and welcome to the module on Latino stepfamilies. My name is Dr. Brian Higginbotham and I am the Family Life Extension Specialist at Utah State University. I am also a marriage and family therapist and over the last 8 years, the majority of my research and applied work has focused on stepfamilies.

My objective, in this module, is twofold. First, I want those listening to have an increase in awareness and appreciation of Latino stepfamilies. To facilitate this objective, I will review some of the extant literature. Secondly, I want to help listeners be more successful – whether it is in their counseling, relationship education, or research. To this end, I'll identify challenges and supplemental resources that may be useful.

Prevalence of Latino Stepfamilies

Questions regarding the prevalence of Latino stepfamilies do not have clear and concise answers. We know that within the U.S. the Latino population is growing rapidly and is now the largest minority group (Pew Hispanic Center, 2008). It has been estimated that half (52%) of marriages including Latino females will divorce before the 20th wedding anniversary (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001). Two thirds (68%) of Latino females will remarry within 10 years of their divorce (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001). Of course, not all remarriages create stepfamilies and not all stepfamilies are formed by remarriage. Accepted definitions of stepfamilies typically include cohabitating couples with children from previous relationship (Weaver, Umana-Taylor, Hans, & Malia, 2001). While not knowing for sure if they have children, we do know that over 50% of Latino American women between the ages of 15 and 44 will enter into a postmarital cohabitation within 5 years of their first divorce (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002).

Research Related Issues

There are several challenges in researching Latino stepfamilies. Some may not trust nor wish to provide their personal information to researchers. Some cannot read English and even when they can, many instrument are not cultural sensitive or normed for Latino populations (Weaver, Umana-Taylor, Hans, & Malia, 2001). There is also tremendous heterogeneity within the diverse Latino ethnic groups, acculturation issues, and non-cultural factors that influence relationship stability (Halgunseth, 2004). For example, when the Census bureau factored in income levels while analyzing divorce data, they found the probability of divorce to be quite different for groups of Hispanics females – 38% in the low-income group had divorced within the first 10 years of marriage as compared to only 26% of high income Hispanic females (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002).

Cultural Characteristics

To fully appreciate Hispanic stepfamilies, practitioners should be aware of key cultural characteristics. The first is religiosity. Over 90% of Latinos self-identify as having a religious affiliation, with the majority self-identifying as Catholic (Espinosa, Elizaondo, & Miranda, 2003). Religious beliefs about the sanctity of marriage may influence feelings about divorce, remarriage, and stepfamilies (Coltrane, Gutierrez, & Parke, 2008; Skogrand, Barrios-Bell, & Higginbotham, 2009).

A second cultural characteristic is familism, which can be defined as a strong loyalty, attachment, or identification with family (Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, & Gallardo-Cooper, 2002). In Latino family systems, familism is multi-directional. Parents expect and will implement strategies to instill the importance of family relations in their children. In turn, parents facilitate harmonious relations by interacting in ways children will enjoy, such as individualized attention, responsiveness, and warmth (Halgunseth, 2004). Familism also encompasses

relationships with extended family members and steprelationships (see Coleman, Ganong, & Rothrauff, 2007).

Although almost universally described in a positive light, some researchers have observed familism actually presenting a “dilemma” for Latino stepfamily members. Coltrane and colleagues have written, “A certain degree of stigma may arise...from the perception that they are not unified or cooperative, which violates the value of familism. Therefore, some Latino families may be reluctant to readily specify that they are a stepfamily or to discuss the origins of their current family structure” (Coltrane, Gutierrez, & Parke, 2008; p. 107). Others may not perceive a difference between a nuclear biological family and/or may hide their stepfamily experience by using first family roles and terms (Skogrand, Barrios-Bell, & Higginbotham, 2009). For example, one Latino mother in a stepfamily interviewed by the National Stepfamily Resource Center gave this description:

“[We are] a normal family ... when we are together, we do all that a family does... We eat together, go out together, and spend time together... Family is ...uhmm... ...a father, a mother, the children, a dog, and the birds... ...and we live together.”

Relationship Characteristics

The bulk of what is empirically known about the family dynamics in Latino stepfamilies comes from a handful of studies. I’ll highlight just a few.

Biological fathers and their nonresidential children

In a study led by Dr. Scott Coltrane (2008), the researchers focused on couples of Mexican descent currently living in America. To qualify for the study, each woman had to have a child in the seventh grade and be living with a man (husband or boyfriend) who had been in the

home for at least 1 year and who was “acting in a father role” (p. 108). In their sample, fifty-eight percent of the Mexican American stepfathers were not married to the mother.

Their data suggests that adolescent children in Mexican American stepfamilies were more alienated from their birth father than adolescents in the Anglo comparison group. 12% of Mexican American adolescents did not know whether their father was still living, 7% had a father who had died; and another 20% reported the target adolescent had no contact with the nonresident biological father. Nearly two-thirds (64%) lived entirely with their mother and had no overnight visits with their biological father. Approximately one-quarter (22%) of the adolescents were described by their stepfather as getting along well with their birth father. A little more than two-thirds (68%) reported no contact at all between their birth father and their stepfather. 37% of the mothers had no contact with the birth father, and only 7.6% were described as getting along well with the birth father. From other studies, there is evidence that daughters have even less contact from nonresidential parents than sons (King, Harris, & Heard, 2004).

Stepfathers and their residential stepchildren

The effect on children’s short and long-term emotional well-being of these strained and distant relations with biological fathers remains an empirical question. However, Dr. Coltrane’s study also found the relationships between Mexican American adolescents and their stepfathers tend to be positive. 86% of the adolescents felt they “really mattered” to their stepdad and 95% of the stepfathers reported relationships with their stepchildren were “good,” “very good,” or “the best.” Three-fourths of the stepfathers rejected the idea that a stepfather does not have the full responsibility of being a parent. 70% even indicated having a stepchild was just as satisfying as having his “own” children. Indicating the acceptance of stepfathers as authority figures, 30% of

the adolescents called their stepfather "Dad." This finding was not related to marital status with the mother, but was associated with longer length of time living with the child and the child having less contact with the nonresident biological father (Coltrane, Gutierrez, & Parke, 2008).

Qualitative interviews conducted by members of the National Stepfamily Resource Center have found comparable results. Latino parents in stepfamilies give little indication that they consider their situation to be different than that of a nuclear biological family. On the other hand, Latino adolescents' interviews suggest an awareness of the stepfamily structure and mindfulness of their nonresidential parent. Yet, they seem to adapt, without much resistance, to a stepparent assuming a parental, even disciplinary, role.

Perceived intergenerational obligations to stepparents

In a different study (Coleman, Ganong, & Rothrauff, 2007), researchers assessed beliefs about intergenerational assistance with a group of 195 adult Latinas and 167 adult Latinos randomly drawn from a national sample. They found familistic thinking extending to older stepparents. In the eyes of adult Latinos, marriage endows upon a stepparent kinship status. Several respondents commented on how helping a stepparent is a sign of respect to the parent who had married the stepparent. Relationship quality, reciprocity, and scarcity of resources were rarely used as reasons not to help a stepparent. Most just felt an obligation to help.

Comparison to other groups

Compared to European American stepfamilies, Mexican American stepfamilies do not differ much on mean levels of father involvement and parenting. In fact the two groups are more similar than different (Coltrane, Gutierrez, & Parke, 2008). Consistent with the general stepfamily literature, when Latino couples have a strong romantic relationship and cooperative

parenting practices, the stepfather-stepchild relationship is better (Coltrane, Gutierrez, & Parke, 2008).

Resources

In light of my work offering family-life education for Latino stepfamilies, my colleagues and I have published a number of suggestions to help practitioners address common challenges, including recruitment and retention, and the absence of a generally-accepted Spanish translation for the word “stepfamily.” For example, to mitigate negative feelings attached to stepfamily terms, we recommend advertising and programming that uses an expanded repertoire of identifies such as *new family*, *blended family*, and *combined family*. Because of the cultural value of familism, we encourage the inclusion of children, as well as adults, in stepfamily education programs. We also suggest that co-parenting might not always be feasible or in the best interest of the child such as in situations where the biological parent has abdicated his/her parental role and the stepparent has assumed a primary parental role very quickly. A fuller discussion of these “implications for practice” can be found in the 2009 referenced article by Skogrand, Barrios-Bell, & Higginbotham. Additional resources for researchers, counselors, and educators are also referenced below. The following websites may be particularly useful: the National Stepfamily Resource Center (www.stepfamilies.info); the federal Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiative (www.aef.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/about/hispanic_hhmi.htm -link no longer works); and Utah State University’s stepfamily education site (www.stepfamily.usu.edu);

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