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Stepfamily Education for Latino Families: Implications for Practice

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The rapidly growing Latino population in the United States underscores the need for culturally appropriate Latino stepfamily education. Research to inform relationship education about positive functioning for Latino stepfamilies is virtually nonexistent. Current research relevant to this issue includes general stepfamily research, culturally appropriate education, heterogeneity in the Latino community, and Latino acculturation. Religion and familism are highly valued by many Latinos and have implications for stepfamily education. Cultural characteristics also have implications for the effective implementation of Latino stepfamily education.

KEYWORDS *marriage and relationship education, Latino, remarriage, stepfamily*

Interest in relationship and marriage education has increased in recent years with programs and initiatives being developed across the nation (Larson,

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2004). The goal of these programs is to increase marital happiness, decrease divorce, and improve child well-being. Most marriage education has been developed and implemented for European American middle-class couples with very little understanding of what makes effective relationship and marriage education for low-income and ethnically diverse couples (Adler-Baeder, Higginbotham, & Lamke, 2004; Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Almost half of the marriages in the United States are remarriages for one or both partners, which has created the need for remarriage and stepfamily education (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999). Although there is much less research available about what contributes to positive couple functioning in stepfamilies than in first marriages, the majority of research that does exist has been conducted with European American middle-class stepfamilies. Researchers conclude that “knowledge of African American, Latino, and other ethnic stepfamilies remains woefully inadequate” (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000, p. 1301), yet these populations are at high risk for divorce.

Latino families are among the many families today who are dealing with the challenges that come with living in remarriages and stepfamilies. The Latino population is now the largest minority group in the United States with the current Latino population at 14% of the total population (U.S. Census, 2006) and the percentage expected to increase to 24% by 2050 (U.S. Census, 2004). Census data on Latinos 15 years and older indicated that 11.2% of men and 14.6% of women 15 years and older were currently divorced. In addition, the duration of first marriages for Latinos was 7.9 years for men and 8 years for women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). Another estimate suggests that 52% of Latino first marriages in the United States will end in divorce within the first 20 years of marriage and 44% of Latinos will remarry 5 years after a divorce (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001). With the existing divorce and remarriage rates and with expected growth in the Latino population, the need to provide culturally appropriate education for Latino stepfamilies is eminent.

In an effort to provide culturally appropriate relationship education for Latinos, the U.S. government has launched a Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiative (HHMI). The initiative is based on Census data that indicate the Hispanic community is the largest minority group and has the highest birth rate, teen pregnancy rates, and increases in out-of-wedlock births (Health and Human Services, n.d.). Although the HHMI is not specific to couples in stepfamilies, at least two federally funded healthy marriage grants now serve Latino stepfamilies (see www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/funding/index.html). Preliminary evaluations of federally funded programs have been promising and the findings of enhanced knowledge and agreement on stepfamily issues, such as finances, parenting, and co-parenting with ex-partners, have not differed due to ethnicity (Higginbotham & Adler-Baeder, in press). However, there has yet to be any large-scale, experimentally designed studies to determine program effectiveness among diverse audiences (see Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). Until more evaluations

can be conducted and published, educators should continue to be “sensitive to cultural differences that may be counter to program assumptions” (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, p. 455). Based on existing literature about Latino cultural values and characteristics, along with emerging research addressed in this paper, it would appear that Latino stepfamilies may need stepfamily education that accounts for their strengths and differences. Teaching strategies based on cultural values and characteristics also may need to be tailored to this population. This paper identifies specific cultural considerations for family life educators and offers suggestions for providing culturally appropriate stepfamily education for Latino stepfamilies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review provides a backdrop for thinking about stepfamily education for Latino couples and families. We begin with a brief overview of stepfamily research that may have application to education for stepfamilies across cultures. The rationale for culturally appropriate stepfamily education is discussed and a description is provided of the heterogeneity of the Latino population in the United States. Finally, how acculturation affects Latino immigrants is discussed.

Stepfamilies

Research about stepfamilies indicates these families have differing challenges and needs than nuclear families and therefore stepfamily education should address additional issues beyond what is typically included in programming for couples in first marriages (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). Many of the challenges stepfamilies face may be evident across cultures. When reading the literature about stepfamilies it is clear the unique challenges begin with how stepfamilies are defined. A variety of terms have been and are currently used, including *blended*, *reconstituted*, *reorganized*, *combined families*, or *recoupled families* (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). The *stepfamily* term is the term most widely used today.

After an extensive review of the stepfamily research, Adler-Baeder and Higginbotham (2004) identified five themes that are unique to stepfamilies and suggest that these themes should be included in stepfamily education. First, stepfamilies need to feel supported since many family members feel stigmatized by society. Second, couples in stepfamilies need to have realistic expectations about stepfamily development and family dynamics. Third, the quality of the stepparent-stepchild relationships, which are different from the parent-child relationships in first marriages, should be addressed since these relationships affect the couple relationship. Fourth, building the couple relationship needs to be a priority. Fifth, the relationship with the former partners should be positive since these relationships affect the couple and

stepfamily relationships. We do not know if these themes are true for Latino stepfamilies as well (cf. Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). The cultural characteristics and values described in this paper would indicate that they may not all apply to Latino stepfamilies.

Rationale for Providing Culturally Appropriate Education for Latino Stepfamilies

Extrapolating from the growing body of literature that marriage and relationship education can enhance relationships (Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008), there is reason to believe that culturally appropriate education could also help Latino stepfamilies develop healthy relationships and strengthen their new family. However, because most family education is based on research of European American middle-class families, many programs may not be culturally relevant for Latinos (Ooms & Wilson, 2004; Santiago-Rivera, Arrendondo, & Gallardo-Cooper, 2002). For Latino families to gain information and skills from a family life education experience, programs must reflect Latino cultural values. If there is a cultural clash between the information being provided and the values of those participating, the effectiveness of the program is likely to be diminished (Maldonado-Molina, Reyes, & Espinosa-Hernández, 2006; Skogrand, Hatch, & Singh, 2008). There is also the possibility of causing harm, if participants incorporate ideas that negatively affect the workings of their own cultural heritage (Ernst, 1990).

There is evidence that relying on one's cultural heritage, the way one's people deal with struggles, is the most effective way for people to be resilient and capable of handling difficulties (Delgado, 1998). McGoldrick and Giordano (1996) also assert that those who try to completely assimilate into the dominant culture, rather than maintaining a connection to their natal cultural values, are likely to have difficulties in dealing with life's problems. In addition, there is evidence that not completely assimilating, by being bi-cultural and continuing to maintain one's original cultural values, contributes to positive mental health (Falicov, 1998; LaFramboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). Consequently, one key implication of this literature is the importance of drawing on and reinforcing the existing family values that are evident in the Latino culture while providing stepfamily education.

Heterogeneity within the Latino Population

There is great heterogeneity within the Latino population. Knowledge about the countries of origin of the populations served will increase the effectiveness of the educational program (Resnicow, Soler, Braithwaite, Ahluwalia, & Butler, 2000). Latinos in the United States come primarily from Mexico (64%), followed by 9% from Puerto Rico, 7.6% from Central America, 5.5% from South American, and 3.4% from Cuba (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). There

may be differences in how family structure is viewed depending on country of origin. For example, female-headed households are more common with Puerto Rican Americans than Mexican and Cuban Americans (Umaña-Taylor & Alfaro, 2006). Immigrants from Mexico are more supportive of marriage than those from Puerto Rico who are more open to less formal unions such as cohabitation (Oropesa, 1996).

Degrees of Acculturation

The extent to which individuals have become acculturated will also affect the degree to which Latino immigrants maintain their cultural values. A definition of acculturation usually refers to the changes that result from sustained interaction between two or more cultures where individuals adopt the values of the mainstream culture while maintaining the values of their own ethnic group (Bautista de Domanico, Crawford, & DeWolfe, 1994; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Umaña-Taylor, Diversi, & Fine, 2002). The degree to which individuals become acculturated is dependent on several factors including the skills they bring with them (Portes & Rumbaut). These skills can include one's ability to speak English, educational attainment, occupational skills, and legal status. The social and political environments of the receiving community also affect acculturation. Acculturation is also dependent on how long an individual or their ancestors have been in the United States. Research shows that the length of time in the United States influences acculturation and that recent immigrants are more likely to score higher on familism scales than people who had been in the United States for more than one generation (Negy & Woods, 1992). Finally, acculturation affects the rate of marriage in that second and third generation Latinos are less likely to be married and are likely to have married at later ages than those who are first generation (Oropesa & Landale, 2004).

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

This paper is guided from the perspective of the ecological framework, which assumes that individuals and families are biological and social in nature and that they adapt to environmental influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). There are four environmental levels that are likely to affect members of Latino stepfamilies. The microsystem involves the interaction of individuals with significant others such as family members. The next larger environmental system is the mesosystem, which involves the interaction of two or more microsystems. The mesosystem includes individual interactions with immediate family members and, in some cases, may include the extended family or close friends depending on the cultural definition of family. The third

environmental level is the exosystem constituting the extrafamilial community programs and agencies that may influence the individual and family. The macrosystem is the larger context, which affects the beliefs, values, and behavior patterns of individuals in a culture. The ecological framework also assumes that the influences between the individual or family and the various environmental systems are reciprocal, in that such systems influence the individual and family, and individuals and families influence the systems.

Members of stepfamilies, including Latino stepfamilies, have unique challenges in that they often move or are affected by relationships with more than one family. The extrafamilial connections may also be more extensive than if an individual is a member of a nuclear family. Stepfamilies that identify as Latino also rely on cultural values and perspectives that are connected to their country of origin, which is part of the macrosystem.

This paper is also written from a normative adaptive perspective (Ganong & Coleman, 2004) rather than a deficits perspective. It is assumed that all families have strengths and that stepfamily education should utilize the strengths of individuals, couples, and stepfamilies. There is also an assumption that there are cultural strengths, wherein the heritage and historical legacy of one's country of origin contributes to strengths in stepfamilies and provides meaning, direction, and an ability to deal with life's challenges (DeFrain & Asay, 2007). Therefore, the basic premise of this paper is that it is essential that Latino stepfamily education be conducted within a cultural context.

RELEVANT CULTURAL VALUES AND CHARACTERISTICS

The cultural context in which stepfamilies live affects many aspects of their new stepfamily relationships (Gonong & Coleman, 2004). It is important to remember that Latino stepfamilies are likely to have somewhat differing cultural values and characteristics depending on country of origin and on the degree to which they have become acculturated. Anyone providing stepfamily education should make efforts to understand the population being served and pay attention to individual differences. There are, however, values and characteristics that are pervasively evident in Latino culture that have implications for providing culturally appropriate education for Latino stepfamilies. Although there may be more cultural values and characteristics that are important to consider in providing education to Latino stepfamilies, a discussion of how the cultural values of religion and familism affect Latino stepfamilies is provided. It is also important to be aware of cultural characteristics related to effective teaching and facilitation of programs when providing programming for the Latino population.

Religion

Religion is an important part of the lives of many Latinos and dates back to the time of the conquest when missionaries converted many indigenous people to the Catholic religion (Santiago-Rivera et al., 2002). Religion has played an important role in the colonization of Mexico and other Central and South American countries. Today, Catholicism is still the primary religion practiced by most Latinos. One random sample of Latino immigrants in the United States found that 94% of Latinos self-identified as having a religious affiliation, with the majority self-identifying as being Catholic (Espenosa, Elizaondo, & Miranda, 2003). Catholicism is so intertwined with Latino traditions that it has become part of the culture (Santiago-Rivera et al., 2002). The influence of Catholicism on couple and family life is likely to be evident even if the family does not practice Catholicism or is active in other faiths (Skogrand, Hatch, & Singh, 2008). It has also been suggested that Catholicism affects family characteristics such as family size and beliefs about the institution of marriage (Falicov, 1998).

The religious beliefs about the sanctity of marriage can affect those who have been divorced and are now in a remarriage. Feelings of guilt and failure may be felt since divorce is discouraged and couples may not be comfortable with the idea of others knowing about their divorce and remarriage. In addition, remarried couples may be unsure of how religious leaders will view their marital status in religious organizations where divorce is doctrinally discouraged. These negative views about remarriage can affect the ability of program staff to recruit couples and families who might be embarrassed about their marital history.

It should be emphasized that although there may be religious beliefs about the sanctity of marriage, this does not mean that couples should stay together if there are domestic violence issues. Nationally, there are healthy marriage initiatives, including the Hispanic healthy marriage initiative, which describes the benefits for children of growing up in healthy two-parent families (U.S. Health and Human Services, n.d.). The federal proponents of healthy marriage initiatives, however, clearly indicate that couples should not stay in abusive and violent relationships and those relationships are not healthy for children. Religious groups, including the Catholic Church, have likewise warned of the dangers of abusive relationships and recognize that domestic violence is not healthy for couples or their families (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, n.d.).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Couples want to succeed in their stepfamilies and can greatly benefit from program staff who are knowledgeable and willing to teach skills that will help strengthen family relationships. Program staff might consider the following

suggestions in order to reach this audience and provide culturally appropriate stepfamily education:

- Know that many Latinos' religious values and practices are integrated into Latino culture and religious values are often a basis for family practices and views about family structure.
- Refer couples who are experiencing domestic violence to domestic violence services.
- Be sensitive to the feelings of family members who may be struggling with the new family structure within the context of religious values and acknowledge that couples may feel badly about being in a stepfamily. This may affect recruitment, implementation, retention, course content, and program delivery.
- Learn about the country of origin and degree of acculturation for the Latino population being served, since they may affect religious values.

Familism

Latinos tend to be interdependent people (e. g. Halgunseth, Ispa, & Rudy, 2006; Oyserman, Coon & Kimmelmeier, 2002), and for many Latinos, the family is a source of joy, support, and stability. Many also believe that the family is central to one's identity (Hofstede, 1980). This belief is part of the concept of familism, which is defined by intimate relationships that are encouraged and present among many Latino families (Santiago-Rivera et al., 2002). Research indicates that family cohesion is higher among Latino populations than European Americans regardless of national origin and degree of acculturation (Hurtado, 1995; Knight, Viridin, & Roosa, 1994; Negy & Woods, 1992). Research also shows that familism or family cohesion is highest among Latino families that are the most recent immigrants, with familism indicators diminishing as time spent in the United States increases (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). There are some differences depending on the country of origin.

Familism also includes highly valuing the relationship with extended family members and friends who might be viewed as family. Research generally indicates that Latino families are more likely than European American families to be involved with extended family members. When problems occur it is the family, both nuclear and extended, that provides much of the social and emotional support (Hurtado, 1995; Vega, 1995). These views of family, however, refer to an intact family, with divorce strongly discouraged (Santiago-Rivera et al., 2002). This view of families is held by many stepfamilies and has been theorized to contribute to the negative views about stepfamilies. To our knowledge, there is no published research which describes the role of extended family members with Latino stepfamilies.

Latino families often identify themselves by roles set forth by traditions and culture. Latino men and women often have traditional roles in their family with the primary role of a father as breadwinner and disciplinarian and a mother's role to take care of household chores and rear the children (Santiago-Rivera et al., 2002). There is a common belief that men are the source of power in Latino families, which is referred to as *machismo* (Orospeza & Gorman, 2000). Some Latino researchers, however, indicate that *machismo* refers to a man's role in the family as providing for and protecting his family (Santiago-Rivera et al.; South, 1993). It has also been found that Latino couples who had strong marriages had differing roles but shared power in decision making (Skogrand, Hatch, & Singh, 2008).

Children play an important role in family life and a primary goal of many Latino couples is to have children. Once children arrive, the marriage becomes a family and parenthood often becomes more important than partnership (Skogrand, Hatch et al., 2008; Vega, 1995). Children are described as being the glue, the joy, and the support of a marriage (Skogrand, Hatch et al., 2008). Latino parents generally do not leave their children with a caregiver other than other family members. If care is provided for children, parents want their children to be nearby.

Respect between parents and children is highly valued in Latino families. A goal for many Latino parents is for children to respect authority and to keep a hierarchical approach to relationships (Santiago-Rivera et al., 2002). In many Latino cultures respect also includes respecting the role of each member of the family (Halgunseth et al., 2006). The addition of a new parent into a family that has previously been established and headed by another person may cause great turmoil in a new family, particularly if the stepfamily tries to mimic the family structure of a nuclear family. Therefore, the status of a stepfamily may be masked or kept secret and traditional nuclear roles may be imposed on new family members. A new male partner, for example, might take on the role of breadwinner and disciplinarian, because that is what he understands his role to be as the Latino male adult.

The *stepfamily* term is rarely used in Latino culture and there is no term for *stepfamily* in Spanish. There are descriptive words like *familia ensamblada*, which is translated as "assembled family," or *familia reconstituida*, translated as "reconstituted family." Terms for *stepmother*, *stepfather*, *stepsister*, and *stepbrother* exist but are rarely used in the home because of the negative connotations. Interviews of ethnically diverse stepfamilies provide little indication that stepfamilies describe their family type as being different from a nuclear, biological family. Latino adults in stepfamilies tend to describe their family as being "normal" or like any other married family (Adler-Baeder & Schramm, 2006).

Because Latino stepfamilies often make efforts to mimic the nuclear family structure, and because emerging data indicates that some Latinos have difficulty involving the nonresidential biological parents in family life

(Higginbotham & Skogrand, 2006), when the original family is dissolved some Latino parents may cut all ties with each other. This also means that children might also cut ties or be discouraged by the custodial adults to maintain a connection with the noncustodial, biological parent. Once a parent has left the home, he or she is often no longer part of that sacred unit. If a remarriage occurred when children were very young, they may not have knowledge about their other biological parent. In addition, immigrant Latino families might have one of the biological parents still living in their native country, making the physical separation even greater. In light of these common scenarios, *co-parenting* is a term that is not commonly used in Latino culture.

Because members of the Latino community come from so many different countries, there are many Latino couples where the husband and wife have emigrated from different countries with slightly differing cultures (Hurtado, 1995). Their cultures, emigration histories, and socioeconomic backgrounds may differ, which can mean that there are slightly different cultural perspectives within the stepfamily. Therefore, familism may mean different things within an intercultural marriage.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

When working with remarried couples and stepfamilies, program staff might consider the following in order to provide culturally appropriate stepfamily education:

- Do not make light of or joke about family structure. The family typically has the highest priority in Latino culture and is viewed as sacred. Cartoons or scenarios that poke fun at the complexity of stepfamily life may be viewed as offensive.
- Perform preprogram orientations to explain the program and receive feedback on potential problems that may arise regarding program content and the use of “step” terms. In an effort to replicate a nuclear family, some couples may not have used this term with their children. Children can be confused or even emotionally harmed by having step terms introduced and/or steprelationships identified by facilitators.
- Expand vocabulary by using terms such as *new family*, *blended family*, *combined family*, and *new family member*. This can soften the negative feelings attached to stepfamily terms and might also allow families to feel more comfortable and receptive to the information presented.
- Rather than prescribing co-parenting as absolute, let parents know that it is an option and may be helpful for their children. There may be resistance to the recommendation of co-parenting because ties may have been cut with the biological parent. Also recognize that co-parenting might not always be feasible or in the best interest of the child (i.e., history of domestic violence or abuse).

- Be careful using the *machismo* term, since it has multiple meanings. The hierarchal power relationship that is sometimes part of the meaning of machismo may or may not exist with any given Latino family.
- Consider initiating a discussion about how extended family members could be part of strengthening the stepfamily since extended family members are often very interested in helping family life.
- Include children in the education program. Recruitment and retention efforts should target the whole family. Children should remain at close proximity to parents if they are separated into different classrooms.
- Be aware of the variation of backgrounds that comprise the Latino culture in the United States. Although the views of participants in educational programming may have common views of marriage and family life, there may also be differences.
- Be aware of the possibility of intercultural marriage among Latinos in the United States. This new relationship may have different cultural values, even if both people are Latino.

Teaching Strategies for Latino Families

Latinos in the United States tend to seek out people from their own culture whom they trust for support and resources (Unger, Cuevas, & Woolfolk, 2007). The issue of trust may be related to documentation issues or may have to do with concerns about cultural appropriateness of services and resources for their families. Because of the issue of trust, couple and family life education for Latino families will be most effective when there is a strong trusted relationship between the family and the program staff, especially when there are children involved in the program. Trust between staff and families can open doors to better recruitment, learning, and retaining of participants. A trusted relationship with program staff will allow participants to be more direct in conversations and share and receive more information that may enhance learning of skills (Santiago-Rivera et al., 2002).

Latino families need to feel welcome when participating in programs (Skogrand, Riggs, & Huffaker, 2008). Latino stepfamilies are not likely to participate in programming based on an advertisement in the newspaper or information on a bulletin board, particularly if the advertisement is from an organization they do not know or trust. Instead, personal contacts are one of the most effective ways to communicate information about a program (Skogrand, Henderson, Higginbotham, Adler-Baeder, & Dansie, in press). When a personal contact has been made with a trusted person or organization, Latino couples and families know they will be welcome. This trusted relationship will be necessary in both the recruitment and retention of participants. Latino family members may even need to feel that a friendship exists with program staff in order to listen to new ideas, especially if it involves their stepfamily.

Another characteristic of Latino culture is that discussion, lots of talking, is highly valued (Ernst, 1992). Discussion about issues presented in a course is important. For Latino participants, knowledge does not only come from the facilitators but also from other participants. Latino couples and family members are likely to want to hear what other participants in a stepfamily class think about an issue before they make a decision about its usefulness. Relationships with other participants are fostered through group discussion. Perhaps as much as the content itself, the social support and these relationships with other Latino stepfamilies will keep participants returning to the course (Skogrand, Higginbotham, Arrington, & Larsen, 2008).

Because of the diversity within stepfamilies and heterogeneity within the Latino culture, information should be presented as a way to think about an issue rather than as if it is the only way to do something. Therefore, information about an issue might be presented in a way designed to elicit a variety of responses from participants, leaving the final decision about actions up to the participants.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Latino couples and family members typically learn in ways that are reflective of cultural values. Program staff might consider the following in order to provide culturally appropriate stepfamily education:

- Use trusted staff members, or staff members who are affiliated with trusted organizations, to initiate and maintain relationships with participants.
- Use personal contacts such as telephone calls or home visits to communicate with families about a program.
- Promote discussion among and learning from other families in the stepfamily program. Families participating in educational programs can learn from each other if facilitators allow topics to be discussed in class. Discussion among participating families can encourage participants to get to know each other, which can help build support networks that last beyond the duration of the course.
- Present information in an indirect manner; statements such as “research has found” or “some families find.” This approach can help participants to take the information and apply it in ways that fit their cultural values and traditions.

CONCLUSION

Latino stepfamilies are increasing in numbers. Stepfamily education can help build healthy relationships and introduce new ideas without interfering with

essential cultural values and characteristics. Latino stepfamilies can gain information and support from stepfamily education if program staff keep in mind the cultural values and characteristics of those they serve. It is also important that program staff be aware of how and when to use terms that describe a stepfamily and be sensitive to the use of terms that might have negative associations. As program staff members reach out and create trusted relationships, issues affecting Latino stepfamilies can be discussed and ideas presented to help resolve problems that may arise. Latino stepfamilies can be strengthened and provided with the tools necessary to succeed with culturally appropriate education that is tailored to their needs and traditions.

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