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Understanding Latino Families, Implications for Family Education

Linda Skogrand, Extension Family Life Specialist
Daniel Hatch and *Archana Singh*, Graduate Students

The United States is rapidly becoming culturally diverse with the Latino population recently becoming the largest ethnic group in this country (El Nasser, 2003). According to the United States Census Data, the total population grew by 13% from 1990 to 2000 while the Latino population grew by 58%. As of 2003, Latinos made up 13% of the nation's population (El Nasser). The number of Latinos is likely to be under-represented throughout the United States since many Latino people did not participate in the 2000 census.

The term "Latino" is used to describe this immigrant population because it is the term preferred by those who have migrated to the United States from Central and South American countries and speak Spanish as their native language. "Latino" is the umbrella term used for this group of people who come from many countries, with the largest migration coming from Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Cuba (Falicov, 1998).

Every family is different, and there are likely to be cultural differences among families emigrating from different Spanish speaking countries. Research indicates, however, that there are some cultural themes that are evident within many Latino families. These themes can provide guidance on how to provide family education to this cultural group. Cultural themes from literature which help us understand Latino families include the importance of family, religion, and gender roles.

Importance of Family

One of the most pervasive values in the Latino culture is the importance of the family,

including the extended family. The family affiliation is so important that "parenthood" is often seen as important as "partnerhood." The primary goal of marriage is to have children and the family life that ensues (Falicov, 1998). In a study completed with Latino couples who had strong marriages, it was clear that the concepts of marriage and family were perceived to be the same. In response to researchers' questions about marriage, participants provided descriptions of their family life including their children. They went on to describe the importance of the family, while ignoring the researchers' references to marriage. The couples in this study also indicated that they typically did not want to engage in activities, including marriage education, without their children (Skogrand, Hatch, & Singh, 2004).

Members of the Latino community enjoy large extended family networks and these networks serve a variety of functions. There is extensive visiting and other exchanges among extended family members when they live in close proximity to one another (Vega, 1990). Although couples who had strong marriages valued their extended family connection, they made it clear that their spouse and children were their first priority. It is likely that, at times, the demands of extended family members also create a burden on the nuclear family. In fact, couples who had strong marriages concluded that supporting their extended family financially and emotionally was important, but at times created stress for the family. These couples also concluded that it was not helpful for the marriage or family life to have extended family members live with them (Skogrand, et al., 2004).

In Latino families, the family needs usually override individual needs. In fact, this is true to the extent that “An individual’s self-confidence, worth, security, and identity are determined by his relationship to other family members” (Ho, 1987, p. 124).

The concept of family can extend to a network of friends, neighbors, and organizations that all make up the community of which one is a part. This network is a means of support when addressing a variety of problems or crises that may occur (Delgado, 1998). In general, the concept of family, or *familism*, helps the family survive the difficulties that occur throughout life.

Religion. Religion can be defined as a cultural institution with organized belief systems, rituals, standards or codes for personal behavior aimed towards a higher power or God (Pargament, 1997). Catholicism is seen as the predominant religious belief in Latino communities in the United States. We often think of religion as centering on a church or other place of worship. Although many religious practices take place in churches, there are also altars in public places and in homes where people can practice their faith. Because beliefs are shaped by the culture of the country of origin, Latinos from different countries practice Catholicism differently.

Religion is central to marriage and family life in the Latino culture. Religious beliefs include an understanding of the Bible and other sources of religious teachings and provide guidance on how to live as an individual within the context of a family. Religious institutions such as the church are also a source of help and support for families in times of trouble (Skogrand, et al., 2004).

There is a prevailing belief among Latinos that much happens in life that is outside of a person’s control (de Rios, 2001; Falicov, 1998). Religious practices in the Latino community often include some magical thinking, a belief in miracles, and belief in the power of prayer (Falicov, 1998). There is also a belief among some Latinos that spirits that can be either positive or negative in individual or family life (Ho, 1987). There is a feeling that bad things can happen because of bad spirits, and problems in marriage or family life can result from bad spirits or bad luck (de Rios, 2001).

According to one Latino leader, religion, and more specifically Catholicism, has been so much a part of Latino culture for centuries that it no longer can be separated from the cultural values of Latino people. Even if a person does not participate in organized religion, the religious beliefs are still part

of family life. In addition, local religious institutions where Latinos are members are usually viewed as trustworthy and influential in the lives of Latino families.

Gender Roles. Traditional gender roles in the Latino culture greatly affect marriage and family dynamics. *Machismo* refers to maleness or manliness and it is expected that a man be physically strong, unafraid, and the authority figure in the family, with the obligation to protect and provide for his family (de Rios, 2001; Falicov, 1998; McGoldrick et al., 1991; Vega, 1990). The complementary role for the woman is *Marianismo*, referring to a woman who is self-sacrificing, religious, and is responsible for running the household and raising the children (Bean, Perry, & Bedell, 2001; Falicov, 1998; Penn, Hernandez, & Bermudez, 1997; Vega, 1990).

Motherhood is an important goal for women in Latino culture, and a mother is expected to sacrifice for her children and take care of elderly relatives (Gracia-Preto, 1998). Although acculturation and the need for women to be employed have affected these gender roles, they still persist and are likely to be more pervasive in low-income families (Vega, 1990).

In the study of strong marriages, it was clear that men and women shared decision-making in the family, but had different roles in their family life (Skogrand, et al., 2004). They talked through issues until they came to an agreement. According to one Latino man, “You just talk and talk until you come to a decision.” Of the participants in this study, men and women were likely to have traditional roles, with the man providing the income for the family and the woman providing for the care of the children and the home (Skogrand, et al.).

Implications for Family Education

- There will be an increasing need for family educators to provide education for Latino families as this population continues to grow.
- Education that is inclusive of the entire family will be more effective than trying to provide education for individuals or couples and children separately.
- The presence and importance of extended family members must be considered in providing family education programming.
- The effectiveness of family education programming might be increased if it is

coordinated with the local religious institutions frequented by members of the Latino community.

- Family outreach efforts should be directed towards women as caretakers of the family, but Latino men are an important part of the decision-making process for any activities involving the family.

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