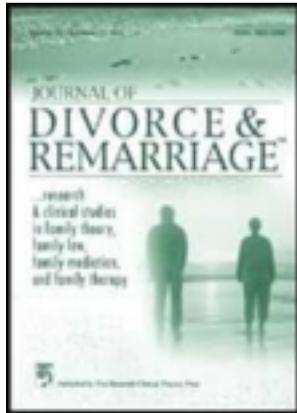


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Experiences of Latino Men in Stepfamily Education

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Relationship education evaluations have historically overlooked the experiences of ethnically diverse populations and stepfamilies. Using qualitative methods, this study examines the experiences of 16 Latino men in a stepfamily relationship education program. The four emergent themes dealt with recruitment and participation, improved family relationships, the value and importance of the family, and normalization of the participants' stepfamily situation. Subthemes of findings are presented, as well as implications for future programming.

KEYWORDS *father, Latino, relationship education, remarriage, stepfamily*

The objective of relationship education (RE) is to help couples gain the knowledge and skills necessary to maintain successful and stable relationships (Administration of Children and Families, 2009; Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003). Historically, RE programming has demonstrated positive outcomes (Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008); however, there are significant gaps in this body of literature due to the lack of evaluations on programs that serve ethnically diverse (i.e., African American, Latino) and underserved populations (i.e., stepfamilies; Administration of

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Children and Families, 2009; Hawkins et al., 2008; Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, & Willoughby, 2004). The experiences of Latino men in stepfamilies have never been examined. To address this gap in the RE literature, this study provides a qualitative examination of Latino men's experiences in an RE program targeting stepfamilies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past half-century, stepfamilies have become an increasingly common family form in the United States (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). According to U.S. Census Bureau (2008) estimates, approximately 29% of all current marriages are a remarriage for at least one spouse. Of those who divorce, 50% of men and 45% of women are expected to remarry within 5 years. Approximately half of all remarriages bring at least one child from a prior relationship (Kreider, 2006) and an estimated 23.4 million U.S. children are reported to be part of a stepfamily (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). With such a large population of stepfamilies, scholars have called for more research and a greater understanding of diversity and heterogeneity in stepfamily experiences (Sweeney, 2010).

Relationship Education for Stepfamilies

RE has grown substantially over the past decade with scholars recognizing the unique needs of stepfamilies (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). For example, many stepfamilies struggle with unclear norms, guidelines, roles, and the lack of social support. Couples in stepfamilies typically have to navigate additional and sometimes complex relationship dynamics (e.g., coparenting across households) and multiple types of children (e.g., his, hers, mutual, nonresidential, part-time residential; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Because of these complexities, scholars have argued that general RE programming might be insufficient to meet the unique needs of this population (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Halford et al., 2003; Whitton, Nicholson, & Markman, 2008).

In their review of intervention programs for stepfamilies (both clinical and educational) Whitton and colleagues (2008) found a number of positive effects associated with participation, including: demonstrated improvements in the couple relationship, improved parenting, increased understanding of stepfamily issues, improved child behavior, and reduced conflict. In addition to providing a snapshot of the potential benefits of RE to stepfamily participants, these authors discuss the current state of the field as having only "preliminary evidence" of the effects of these programs (p. 477). This limitation is in part due to the lack of evaluative information regarding stepfamily interventions targeting diverse populations.

The majority of RE evaluative studies have primarily focused on the effects of European American samples (Adler-Baeder, Robertson, & Schramm, 2010; Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Only recently, owing to federally funded demonstration projects, has RE begun to target diverse samples of stepfamilies. The preliminary results from projects that include a sizable proportion of Latino participants suggest positive effects for children (Higginbotham, Skogrand, & Torres, 2010), relationship stability (Higginbotham & Skogrand, 2010), increases in social support (Skogrand, Torres, & Higginbotham, 2010), increases in levels of commitment and agreement on stepfamily issues (e.g., finances, dealing with ex-partners, and step-parenting), and improvements in healthy relationship skills (Higginbotham & Adler-Baeder, 2008). Although these studies provide evidence that stepfamily RE might provide multiple benefits to participants, there is still the need for further exploration of the experience of diverse participants (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Hawkins et al., 2008; Whitton et al., 2008). For example, there remain questions as to whether RE strategies based on research with middle-class, European American couples is generalizable to other populations (e.g., Latino populations; Ooms & Wilson, 2004).

Relationship Education for Latino Stepfamilies

The field's interest in Latino stepfamilies and their participation in RE is fairly new, but interest is increasing owing to the growing Latino population, funding from the Federal Healthy Marriage Initiative (see <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/funding/index.html#current>), and the Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiative (see http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/about/hispanic_hhmi.htm). When serving Latinos Skogrand, Barrios-Bell, and Higginbotham (2009) recommended culturally sensitive implementation strategies such as incorporating cultural and religious values, being aware of country of origin and degree of acculturation, involving children in program participation, and incorporating culturally appropriate materials. Although scholars have recognized the importance of incorporating culturally appropriate strategies in serving Latino stepfamilies, few studies have examined the experiences of participants in programs where this is a priority.

In general there is a need to further understand the experience of Latinos in stepfamily RE. There is also the need for specific research on the experiences of fathers within these programs. Fathers who have a child from a previous relationship are more likely to experience a number of negative relationship outcomes (e.g., higher relationship dissolution and instability) and skill-based services could assist fathers in overcoming these difficulties. Fatherhood education programming has demonstrated positive effects on father involvement within the family, positive fathering attitudes (e.g., coparenting), coparental support, and improved father-child relationship outcomes (for full review see Holmes, Galovan, Yoshida, & Hawkins, 2010).

Although fathers might benefit from RE, they might also have negative attitudes toward these services, at times feeling ignored or misjudged (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Mistrust among fathers is not uncommon in family programming. Couples who do not attend RE often feel that relationships are private and intervention programs can be seen as intrusive (Simons, Harris, & Willis, 1994). Although men find RE to be helpful once attended (e.g., Higginbotham, Miller, & Niehuis, 2009), recruiting these participants into RE might be difficult, particularly because of the unclear norms, expectations, and social stigma related to stepfamilies (Nicholson, Phillips, Whitton, Halford, & Sanders, 2007; Robertson et al., 2006; Skogrand, Reck, Higginbotham, Adler-Baeder, & Dansie, 2010).

In one examination of fatherhood programming, Hawkins and Fagan (2001) suggested several implications for current research. First, further examination of the programmatic impact on fathers is needed. Second, specific programs need to be highlighted to demonstrate the value of non-traditional intervention approaches. Finally, greater sensitivity in the ways men experience the world is needed to fully understand how to serve them. Although increased efforts to support fathers and fatherhood programs is evident, there remain many unknowns in terms of the experiences of and outcomes for diverse fathers (Holmes et al., 2010).

METHOD

This study is part of a larger federal demonstration project designed to strengthen and enhance stepfamily relations. Previous research from this program has focused on recruitment and retention strategies of stepfamilies (Skogrand, Reck, et al., 2010), examining the benefits of a group-formatted intervention (Skogrand, Torres, et al., 2010), outcomes for married and unmarried stepcouples (Higginbotham & Skogrand, 2010), one-year post-program benefits (Skogrand, Davis, & Higginbotham, 2011), and perceived benefits for children (Higginbotham et al., 2010). This research project differs from those of previous publications in that it focuses only on the experiences of Latino men within the RE program.

The curriculum used for this project, *Smart Steps: Embrace the Journey* (Adler-Baeder, 2007), is a nationally recognized, research-based program that assists stepfamilies in gaining the skills and understanding needed to meet the common difficulties they might face. The *Smart Steps* program consists of six 2-hour sessions where the entire family is invited to attend. During each session, parents and children (ages 6 and older) are separated into different classrooms and taught parallel, age-appropriate content on a number of stepfamily-related topics, including: conflict resolution, empathy, dealing with ex-spouses, stepparenting, and communication to name a few. For the last 15 minutes of each session, parents and children are brought together

for a family-strengthening activity. Child care was provided for preschool-aged children. Sessions were taught by family-service organizations across the state, targeting low-income European American and Latino stepfamilies. During the first cohort of the project, 230 adults and 222 children ages 6 to 17 years participated. Forty-four of these adult participants were Latino.

The sample for this study consisted of 16 Latino men who completed the *Smart Steps* program. Nine of these men were stepfathers and seven were biological fathers who were currently living in a stepfamily relationship. Selection of participants for this study was based on a convenient sample chosen by the project manager who identified potential participants to be interviewed from attendance records. The project manager had no prior knowledge of the participants and substituted available participants if the identified individuals were not available. Qualitative interviews were then conducted by trained researchers after the completion of the last session.

Interview questions were developed by the program evaluators. The purpose of the interviews was to gain insight and understanding of the experiences, benefits, and negative aspects of the course for program participants. Examples of the questions include the following: What was your experience of taking this course with other stepfamilies? What was the best part of the stepfamily course for you? What are some of the positive and negative experiences, as a couple or family that have resulted from participation in the course? Interviews were conducted in Spanish immediately after the completion of the last session. After completion, interviews were translated into English and transcribed.

The sample of Latino men used in this study ranged from 26 to 48 years old, with a mean age of 36. The mean education level for this sample was a high school degree with a range from completing sixth grade to having a graduate degree. Income ranged from \$0–\$5,000 to \$35,001–\$40,000 with a mode of \$15,001–\$20,000. There were no statistically significant differences on demographic variables between the sample of 16 interviewed men and other Latino men in the course.

Procedures used to analyze the qualitative data are described, in detail, by Bogdan and Biklen (2003). This procedure consisted of program evaluators identifying coding categories in answer to this research question: What was the experience of Latino men in the *Smart Steps* education program? The researchers read and reread the participant interviews to gain a “totality” of the data. Coding categories of reoccurring themes were developed by the researchers to describe the participant’s responses throughout the interviews. Coding of these categories was completed independently by two evaluators, using a qualitative software program NVivo 8 (QSR International, 2008). After completion of coding, reliability analysis was run to ensure the researchers were consistent throughout the coding process. Coding categories identified by the software program as having less than 80% agreement between the

two researchers were reviewed and discussed by the researchers to clarify categories and understanding of the data.

Of the 16 Latino men interviewed, data from 4 have been previously included in a published study of recruitment and retention strategies (see Skogrand, Reck, et al., 2010). In that publication, only the questions referring to recruitment and retention were examined using 40 interviews of both European American and Latino participants as well as 20 interviews from program facilitators. In an attempt to gain further understanding of Latino men's experiences, this study examines all questions asked in the qualitative interviews as well as including 12 additional interviews of other Latino men who participated in the program.

FINDINGS

Results from the qualitative analysis of this study resulted in four major themes: class recruitment and participation, improving family relationships, value and importance of the family, and normalization of the stepfamily situation. Each of these major themes is separated into subsequent subthemes. Major themes are listed in order of prevalence as indicated by the number of respondents.

Class Recruitment and Participation

All of the men in this study were asked and responded to questions that focused on how they were recruited and why they participated in the stepfamily program. Of the participants interviewed, half were recruited through personal invitation by a facilitator. The remaining participants were recruited through referrals by individuals such as a counselor, friends from church, previous class participants, or a family friend. More important than how participants heard about the class is the reasoning behind why they decided to attend. The most prevalent reason for attending the course was to gain information and understanding on how to deal with (step)children. This motivation to attend the class was reflected through statements describing participants' desire to have a positive relationship with their (step)children and learning how to get along.

I was motivated [to attend the class] because I am a father that has been previously married. I wanted to learn how to treat my stepchildren and have a good relationship with them. I wasn't prepared for any of this because it was something totally unknown to me.

A secondary motivation for attending the course was to learn how to resolve issues within the stepfamily as a whole. For example, participants

recognized they were having difficulty within their family dynamic and therefore needed assistance in overcoming these issues:

[I attended] mostly because I see that my family has problems. Sometimes, we think we can solve our problems by ourselves, but sometimes it is good to receive help from someone else and listen to others testimonies. Because one thinks the problem is only in your family, but really every family has problems.

Other less prevalent reasons for attending the class included learning how to manage many of the unique situations that arise with stepfamily living, including getting along with a spouse, checking to see if the family was “okay,” and learning how to deal with an ex-spouse.

Improving Family Relationships

When asked what the best part of the class was for themselves and their family, every participant responded that their family relationships were improved. As described, these family relationships were improved through two means: (a) improved parenting or fathering and (b) developing a positive couple relationship.

IMPROVED PARENTING AND FATHERING

Becoming a more effective father was found to be the most important sub-theme when discussing family relationships as indicated by Latino men. Although expressed in different ways, the importance of understanding (step)children and becoming an effective (step)father was of specific interest. Participants discussed two primary areas in which the class assisted them in their fathering goals: (a) gaining parenting skills and (b) developing a positive parent–(step)child relationship.

GAINING PARENTING SKILLS

Through participation in the stepfamily course, Latino men recognized the importance of gaining parenting skills that would assist them in becoming more effective fathers. Gaining these skills was described in several ways. First, the men were able to recognize what problems they were having within the stepfamily as a (step)father. One father described this recognition, stating:

For me, our family relationship wasn't bad or good, it was regular. I think in the third class, when it talked about children, stepchildren and stepparents, I realized where I was doing things wrong. . . . [I also realized] how to now see the errors that we were committing with our stepchildren.

It [the class] was one of the best experiences we had to recognize what I was doing wrong.

Fathers were able to gain the skills needed to overcome many of the issues they faced. For example, one father whose fiancée had moved in with him and his children during the time of the course stated, "I think [*Smart Steps*] helped us transition, gave us some tools that we can use, and kind of expect a little bit of what we need to do." The tools gained from participating in the class assisted fathers in several ways, including: being more empathetic toward their children, dealing with anger, and being able to communicate more effectively. For example, one father realized, "I have to change the way I communicate. . . . We have the tools given to us by the people who taught this course."

Because fathers were able to obtain new tools and skills through the course, they experienced positive growth: "I can answer one thing . . . I think the best part of the class, now as a stepfather, is I'm better than I was. I think it has been the best thing that has happened." At a personal level, fathers seemed to sincerely value the skills being taught. One father stated:

I grew up in a stepfamily and I think that if this had been available when my mom and my stepfather got married that a lot of heartache we went through could have been avoided if we had some of the tools back then that I currently have after taking this class.

DEVELOPING A POSITIVE PARENT–(STEP)CHILD RELATIONSHIP

According to the interviewed men, the most affected relationship as a result of the stepfamily course was the parent–(step)child relationship. Latino men recognized positive developments in their relationships with their biological and stepchildren. One father stated:

My daughter, for example, prior to this class . . . there was a little bit of negativity toward each other. After the second class, we started talking, we started running around, we started doing things [and became] closer than we did before we started. So because of this class . . . she turned a little bit and saw I guess my point of view as a stepfather.

Some of the men described their intention to create a more positive relationship with their (step)children because of the course. One father described a complex situation in which he maintained a distant relationship with his daughter who lived with her mother. He stated:

Because I don't have an extensive relationship with my daughter, I need to be with her in places where she doesn't feel so much pressure and places that won't cause her stress when she returns back home [to her

mother's house]. Perhaps it is better that I go down to her on Saturdays, take her to eat, enjoy the weekend, talk . . . and then take her home. If further in the future she wants to be with me more, great!

Other ways fathers planned to develop their parent–(step)child relationship included strategies such as: spending time together, becoming more involved with their (step)children, and increasing communication. These changes made by fathers with their (step)children were found to foster a positive parent–(step)child relationship, which was the original goal of many fathers.

DEVELOPING A POSITIVE COUPLE RELATIONSHIP

Nearly as prevalent as improving parenting or fathering, developing a positive couple relationship emerged as an important theme in men's experiences within the course when discussing improved family relationships. These men described a desire to renew their current relationships to make them stronger and healthier. One husband described this, stating:

We now have about 9 years in a relationship, we are going for 10 years, and I think when we started there was a stronger relationship and it loses intensity . . . now with this class I think it helps.

Husbands described several issues that were addressed during the course that affected their couple relationship, including fighting with a spouse, dealing with finances, and spending time together. The most reoccurring of these issues, as described by men, was increasing positive communication with their spouse. As one husband stated:

One of the most important things that benefited us was that now we know how to listen to the partner and we know that we will be listened to. So, we learned, or I should say I learned, that communication is something that is difficult, but if you know how to apply it, we are going to have good results.

In general, these men recognized the importance of positive couple communication and showed a new determination in creating a better couple relationship: "I am going to work harder to understand my relationship with my wife and her problems to find better solutions."

Value and Importance of the Family

A third theme, as described by nine of the men, was the value and importance of the family. The men in this sample continually described

the importance of the family. These responses are described using two subthemes: expanding the family and family unity.

EXPANDING THE FAMILY

In discussing the importance of the family, the definition of who “the family” is was expanded. First, when discussing children’s perceptions of the family, these men felt that including not only the immediate family but also extended family into the family dynamic was important. For example, when discussing activities their children participated in during the course, one father stated, “My wife’s daughter liked it when they drew pictures. She drew the entire family, even her grandparents and aunts and uncles. She didn’t only draw us as parents, she drew everybody.” Similarly, another father discussed how his daughter perceived her family to include a larger extended family, “Well, the best part was that, like my brothers or my wife’s brother, it is her [the daughter’s] family. I liked that they are all part of the family.”

In addition to including the extended family, the term *stepfamily* was discussed as inadequately describing the family dynamic. One father described this, stating, “One of the things that I have realized is that there isn’t a good translation for stepfamily in Spanish. [In Spanish, the term stepfamily] is “familia ensamblada,” which is alright and even sounds better in my ears than stepfamily.” As described by this father, the term *stepfamily* is not necessarily positive within the Latino culture and is not commonly used in defining the family. In discussing issues that arose during the course for his family, another father stated, “Now, the problem isn’t my wife, but she is in a bad situation because the stepmother is always the witch, even if she hasn’t acted that way with my daughter.” The negative stigma that is present within the Latino culture hinders the idea of a stepfamily being a real “family.” For example, one father described this through an example of what was the best experience for his children during the course:

One thing, as far as me and my wife, my daughter is not my stepdaughter, she is my daughter. She is my son’s sister, not their stepsister. We’ve always been that way. She [wife] had two from her first marriage; I had three from my first marriage . . . and two babies that we’ve had together. When my daughter comes over they don’t say, “Hey, there is my stepsister.” [Rather it’s] “This is my sister,” “This is my brother.” They don’t distinguish stepbrother and stepsister because we are not, we are a family.

Rather than distinguishing between step and biological, the family is defined to include the entire his, hers, and their children. As described by one father, there is no “stepfather” or “stepmother,” but rather his children have “two fathers and two mothers.”

FAMILY UNITY

When asked about important aspects of the course, several men in this study emphasized the importance of having the entire family involved in the class, particularly the inclusion of (step)children. For example, one father stated, "I think this course was not only thought about for the adults, but for the children as well." Other fathers discussed how the family strengthening activity at the end of each class was a positive experience because it included the entire family: "I think from my perspective it was the family strengthening. When we went home and talked about it . . . I really think it made them [(step)children] feel important and like they're part of this." Because participants were able to attend the course as a family, program participants felt that their families became stronger and more united. One father simply stated, "I think it helped us to become a stronger family." Another father, when asked what he planned to do differently after the completion of the course, stated, "I want to have a more united family and do more activities together."

Normalization of the Stepfamily Situation

Due to the group structure of the course, 11 of the men in this study described how their stepfamilies were able to meet and share experiences with each other as adults. This was found to be particularly helpful for men because it allowed for their situation to become normalized, realizing that they were not alone. For example, one man stated, "[Throughout the course] you get to meet other people and see that we are not the only ones." Other men described this normalization process as a learning experience, stating, "We'd get different ideas from different couples" and through this process couples were able to learn from each other.

This interaction among couples in the group was viewed as an important social support system. For example, one man observed, "I've seen here that I have another family to support me. A family that comes together with the same goal: to help their own family's progress." Through the interactions with other stepfamilies in the course, men were able to feel greater support. As stated by one man, "The stepfamilies [in the course] have made this a great experience."

DISCUSSION

In light of the limited research available regarding the experiences of Latino men in RE targeting stepfamilies, this study is one of the first to provide insight into this population's experience. Through qualitative interviews of 16 Latino men, four major themes emerged: class recruitment and participation, improving family relationships, value and importance of the family, and normalization of the stepfamily situation.

As expressed in the first theme, class recruitment and participation, personal invitation by a facilitator or family and friend referrals were the most common means of recruitment into the stepfamily program. The men were predominantly motivated to attend the course because of their desire to gain information on stepfamily issues (e.g., stepparenting, dealing with an ex-spouse).

As discussed by Karney, Kreitz, and Sweeney (2004), recruitment and retention strategies might have different effects on different populations; therefore having a clear understanding of why individuals participate and making necessary adaptations to recruit and retain them is advisable (Rogge et al., 2006). For example, men and stepfamilies have historically been difficult to recruit into RE programs and therefore might require different approaches to recruitment and retention than European American and first-marriage families (Adler-Baeder et al., 2010; National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, 2009; Nicholson et al., 2007).

According to the Latino men in this study, being able to foster healthy family functioning was an important incentive to attend RE. In a way, Latino men in this study wanted a “check-up” for their stepfamilies. Future programming therefore might need to adjust recruitment strategies to emphasize the concerns of the targeted population and how the program will address these needs (Adler-Baeder et al., 2010). By using key terms such as *check-up* or by emphasizing the benefits gained by the entire family, programs could be more effective in recruiting Latino men.

The second most reoccurring theme in this study was the importance of improving family relationships, more specifically improving skills in fathering and developing a positive couple relationship. Latino men in this study discussed the importance of gaining tools to first recognize the problem areas they were having within their stepfamilies and then determining how to change their behavior to reach their goals. As described by Adler-Baeder and Higginbotham (2004) and Robertson et al. (2006), stepfamilies might not realize the unique situation they are in, or might not feel they need educational services. Latino men in this study realized the importance of gaining information to assist in their families’ functioning and then applying those skills they learned. This is consistent with previous research by Fitzpatrick, Caldera, Pursley, and Wampler (1999) stating that fathers have a desire to understand their children and be good parents. According to Coltrane, Gutierrez, and Parke (2008), the majority of Mexican American stepfathers report being very involved with their children and the majority of Mexican American stepfathers embrace the parent–stepchild relationship wholeheartedly. Therefore, by understanding the need for skills and implementing the skills learned through RE, Latino men might improve important family relationships. In addition to discussing the parent–child relationship, the Latino men expressed a desire to improve the couple relationship. Similar to other studies (Snyder, 2007), these men wanted assistance in dealing with

conflict with their spouse, including topics such as dealing with finances, spending time together, and communication.

The third theme emphasized the value and importance of family and children. Coltrane et al. (2008) determined that a majority of Mexican American stepfathers play a significant role in their stepchildren's upbringing. The findings from this study support previous research noting the importance of the family unit and the inclusion of children as part of having a strong marriage and family (Skogrand, Hatch, & Singh, 2007). According to these men, having the entire family participate in the stepfamily program, including children and stepchildren, assisted in strengthening the family unit as a whole. This follows the cultural idea of familism and implies that through the inclusion of the entire family in an education model, Latino families can effectively strengthen their families (Skogrand et al., 2009; U.S. Department of Agriculture, n.d.).

In addition to the importance of family and children, participants in this study discussed the negative stigma that is associated with the use of the term *stepfamily* as well as how they redefined their family to avoid possible negative stigma. The stepfamily term is rarely used within Latino culture and there is no Spanish term for stepfamily (Skogrand et al., 2009). Although descriptive words such as *familia ensamblada* (assembled family) and *familia reconstituida* (reconstituted family) are used to describe stepfamilies in Spanish, there remains a negative connotation to these terms.

Because of the negativity surrounding the definition of stepfamily, Latino families in this study tended to "redefine" their families to be perceived as a first or nuclear family rather than a stepfamily, therefore avoiding potential negative stigma. Additionally, Latino men saw the exclusion of stepfamily terms within their families as a positive sign that their children understood that their family was a single unit. This verifies the possible "hidden family" analogy presented by Ganong and Coleman (2004) in which adults might teach their children that they are a nuclear "regular" family. This corroborates research that indicates within Latino cultures, stepfamilies are more likely to dissolve the link between the biological father and children, therefore creating the perception that the stepfamily is a first-marriage family, where there is only one father role rather than "father" and "stepfather" roles (Coltrane et al., 2008).

Closely related to the identification of being in a stepfamily, the fourth theme, normalization, highlighted how participants were appreciative in learning that they were not the "only ones" in a stepfamily relationship. In this study, Latino men felt supported through "an additional family" of stepfamilies who had similar goals as themselves. This attitude is consistent with Latino cultural values such as *familism*, in which loyalty to the family and support for others is essential (Alvarez & Bean, 1976). Latinos are more likely to turn to family members rather than outside sources for support when there are feelings of strain or stress. With the creation of

an additional family that can provide support, Latino men in stepfamilies might gain the support needed while still meeting family loyalty expectations as set by the culture. By facilitating this group-format approach, where stepfamilies can support other stepfamilies, participants might gain not only the benefit of feeling normal, but could assist in teaching and learning from others how to deal with common stepfamily issues (Skogrand, Torres, et al., 2010).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Historically, RE has lacked in serving the needs of underresearched and underserved populations such as those of ethnically diverse populations and stepfamilies. In an effort to increase this knowledge, this study provides insight into Latino men's experiences in an RE program targeting stepfamilies. Among the results of this study, practitioners can now more fully understand how Latino men are recruited, why they attend, how their stepfamily relationships were improved, and what Latino men gained out of this RE course. Furthermore, Latino men in this study were able to recognize the need for education; gain important skills to improve their ability to be good fathers, stepfathers, and spouses; and gain a sense of normalization within their stepfamily dynamic.

Findings from this study imply that when recruiting and retaining Latino men, programs should consider utilizing personal invitation by program staff, family, and friend referrals to gain trust among male participants. This could be done with an emphasis on what is being taught in the class and how the skills learned can impact family outcomes (i.e., improving the parent-child relationship). When targeting male Latino participants, a focus on improved fathering should be emphasized, particularly when dealing with stepchildren.

RE programs targeting Latino stepfamilies should also be cautious in using the term *stepfamily*. Program staff should understand the negative implications of the word, and should assist participants in gaining a positive view of this family type. Programs should also account for possible "hidden" stepfamilies within the Latino population who might be in need of the information provided through RE programming, but might not want to identify themselves as such. Curriculum development should take into account the cultural implications affecting Latino stepfamilies in education programming (i.e., familism, religion, machismo, etc.). More specifically, an emphasis on including the entire family into the program should be a focus.

Although these findings provide insights into Latino men's experiences in a stepfamily RE program, it is important to note, as other authors have criticized in previous research, the findings in this study cannot necessarily be generalized to all Latino populations. This study focused specifically

on Latino men in a stepfamily education program in one western state and therefore findings should be used with this limitation in mind. The Latino population is a diverse population in and of itself and can differ greatly depending on acculturation, geographic location, educational achievement, socioeconomic status, language, and the individuals' own interpretation of their ethnicity and culture (Kumpfer, Alvarado, Smith, & Bellamy, 2002). However, as a stepping stone, this study provides a unique examination of Latino men that can be expanded on in the future.

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