

# Latina Women's Experiences in a Stepfamily Education Course

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## Abstract

This study highlights the experiences of low-income Latina women who participated in a nationally recognized, research-based stepfamily education program. From a multicultural feminist framework, interviews were conducted with 13 Latina women living in stepfamilies. They were asked, using a semistructured protocol, about their experiences of taking the course with other stepfamilies, the best part of the course, and anything positive and negative that resulted from participation. Participants identified improvements in parenting, couple, and overall family relationships. Improved communication, both as a learned skill and as a positive outcome, was reported most frequently in all areas of improved relationships. A small number of participants reported discomfort with "step" terms. Implications for providing education and individual and family therapy are provided.

## Keywords

communication, Latino, relationship education, stepfamily

Divorce, remarriage, nonmarital childbearing, and cohabitation have resulted in an increase in the number of stepfamilies in the United States (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). It is estimated that approximately 40% of all mothers and 30% of all children will spend at least some time in a stepfamily, and these estimates are likely to be an underrepresentation (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). Because stepfamilies face unique challenges, there has been a corresponding interest in stepfamily education (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; McCarthy & Ginsberg, 2007; Whitton, Nicholson, & Markman, 2008). Simultaneously, minority populations are increasing in the United States with the Latino population growing most rapidly (Fry, 2008). It has been estimated that half (52%) of the marriages including Latina females will divorce before the 20th wedding anniversary, and of these, 44% will remarry (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001). Two thirds (68%) of remarrying Latina females will do so within 10 years of their divorce (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001). The growing Latino population and the potential number of Latinos in stepfamilies create a need to better understand Latino stepfamilies and the possible benefits of stepfamily education. This study explores the experiences of 13 Latina women who participated in a formal stepfamily education course.

Research has shown that parent/child, couple, and family relationships in stepfamilies can be more challenging than for first families (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; McCarthy & Ginsberg, 2007). Couples in remarriages are more likely than first marriages to divorce and couples with children from previous marriages are at an even greater risk of family dissolution (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Manning, 2004; Osborne, Manning, & Smock, 2007). Some of these challenges stem from difficulties in communication and conflict, commitment and

loyalty issues, stepfamily expectations, (step)parent-child relationships, and social isolation (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Stepfamily education holds promise to mitigate these stressors or at least assist stepfamily members in dealing with them more effectively (Nicholson, Sanders, Halford, Phillips, & Whitton, 2008; Whitton et al., 2008).

We know very little about meeting the needs of Latino stepfamilies regarding relationship education programs or other interventions. Most programs and interventions for, and studies with, stepfamilies have focused primarily on European American, middle-class samples and ethnic groups, and lower socioeconomic groups have not been represented (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Ooms & Wilson, 2004). We also know relatively little about which relationship education interventions are effective with low-income populations (Ooms & Wilson, 2004).

Although we know very little about Latina women in stepfamilies, there is some research about Latino stepfathers and their adolescent children (Coltrane, Gutierrez, & Parke, 2008; King, 2006). Coltrane, Gutierrez, and Parke (2008) found that Mexican American stepfathers took a fatherly role in the lives of their stepchildren in that they knew where they were, knew about their school lives, and were generally involved in the

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lives of their stepchildren. The great majority (85%–95%) of both stepfathers and stepchildren were happy with their relationships. These stepchildren indicated that their stepfather was a good partner to their mother and that they respected their mother's parental decisions. Stepfathers who had a loving and nurturing relationship with their wives or partners typically also maintained a loving and nurturing relationship with their stepchildren. Thus, a positive couple relationship was an indication of positive stepfather–stepchildren relationships.

Due to the increasing number of Latino families in the United States who are experiencing divorce and remarriage and, because couple, parent–child, and family relationships can be challenging in stepfamilies, Latino stepfamilies may benefit from attending relationship education or other family-strengthening interventions. With the goal of supporting Latino families, the federal government initiated a Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiative (HMI) and related funding streams (Administration for Children & Families, n.d.). Stepfamily education programs targeting this population, however, are a new endeavor. The present study, which is a subsample of a larger HMI evaluation study, can help fill the gap in the literature by analyzing the experiences of low-income Latina women who attended a nationally recognized stepfamily course as part of a statewide federally funded demonstration project on stepfamily education.

## Theoretical Perspective

This study was conducted from the perspective of multicultural feminist theory (Tong, 2009). One of the core assumptions of feminist theory is that women's voices need to be heard and their experiences are real (Tuana & Tong, 1995). In addition to being concerned about the experiences of women as an oppressed gender, multicultural feminism is concerned with the “women-of-color feminism” (Tong, 2009, p. 202) in the United States. In the early 1900s, it was expected that people who came to this country as immigrants became Americanized, and everyone became assimilated into the new country. Multiculturalism, which began to be evident in both practice and scholarly literatures in the 1970s, however, focused on people being encouraged to maintain their ethnic pride. Multiculturalism promoted the view that diversity is to be valued and that all ethnic and cultural groups be respected and treated as equal (Fowers & Richardson, 1996). Multicultural feminism, therefore, is about making the voices of women from diverse ethnic cultures heard.

Feminism is also about making these voices heard within the context of families in order that we understand the totality of family life (Ingoldsby, Smith, & Miller, 2004). Historically, this view of families was from women in the traditional nuclear family but has recently expanded to include the variety of family forms in today's society. This totality of family life includes all kinds of families including cohabiting families, single-parent families, and stepfamilies. Therefore, this study was conducted from the perspective of multiculturalism, focusing on Latina women and on the nontraditional family form of

stepfamilies. This study is about making the voices and experiences of Latina women in stepfamilies heard.

## Method

The current study includes a subsample of a larger demonstration project, which included an evaluation of the *Smart Steps* stepfamily education program (Higginbotham, n.d.). Several other publications have resulted from this project (i.e., Higginbotham & Myler, 2010; Higginbotham & Skogrand, 2010; Reck, Higginbotham, Skogrand, & Davis, 2012; Skogrand, Dansie, Higginbotham, Davis, & Barrios-Bell, 2011; Skogrand, Torres, & Higginbotham, 2010). The *Smart Steps* program (Adler-Baeder, 2007) is a research-based couple and relationship education curriculum and targeted low-income European American and Latino stepfamilies. This stepfamily education program was implemented in collaboration with community agencies who serve these populations. Participants received 12 hr of couple and relationship education through six 2-hr sessions offered in the evenings. The program content addressed the prevalence of stepfamilies in today's society and the difficulties they frequently face. The entire family was invited to attend the course, and the classes began with a meal. Adults and school-age children were in separate classrooms with school-age children being taught parallel, age-appropriate content. The adults and children came together for the last 15 min for a family-strengthening activity. Child care was provided for preschool children.

Although Latinos accounted only for approximately one quarter of the participants in the statewide stepfamily education demonstration project, the present analyses focused exclusively on Spanish-speaking Latina women participants and their experiences in taking the course. In the spirit of feminist theory, we wanted to hear and raise up Latina women's voices apart from other participants in order to learn about their unique experiences with the course.

Qualitative interviews were conducted with 27 adult Latino participants from Spanish-speaking classes and 13 were women. The language preference for all 13 women was Spanish and, therefore, all of the interviews were conducted in Spanish. Eleven of the women had biological children, four had partners with biological children, and six had children together. Therefore, some of the participants were biological mothers, some were stepmothers, and some were both. In this article, we will refer to all participants as mothers. Eight of the 13 women had their children living with them for more than 6 months of the year. In this study, there were a total of 31 children who lived with the women, and their ages ranged from 2 months to 18 years.

Because this was an evaluation of a statewide stepfamily education initiative, in a state which is predominately European America, the approved project protocols and surveys were general in nature. Although Latina families enrolled in the courses, the project did not focus on cultural differences nor did surveys gather in-depth information about cultural backgrounds such as country of origin and length of time in the United States.

However, because there is no information available about Latinas in stepfamilies and their experiences in stepfamily education, we are reporting what we have found as a way to provide a base for further research and subsequent information about how to serve Latinas through stepfamily education.

The project manager, who did not personally know any of the participants or their perceptions of the course, identified potential interviewees from the attendance records. Participants were interviewed immediately following the last session of the 6-week course by trained research assistants. The ages of the 13 women ranged from 22 to 43 years with a mean age of 35 years. Education ranged from third grade to high school education with the mean number of years equivalent to a ninth-grade education. Their income level ranged from less than US\$5,000 to US\$30,000 a year. Seven percent of the women reported earning less than US\$5,000 per year, 45% earned between US\$5,000 and US\$15,000 a year, and 15% made between US\$15,000 and US\$30,000 a year. Four respondents had missing information on income and, therefore, were not included in this report.

In the spirit of multicultural feminist theory, the interview questions focused on hearing the voices of Latina women as they describe their experiences with the stepfamily course. The overall research question was as follows: What were the experiences of Latina women who were taking a stepfamily education course? Interview questions to address this question included 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/negative experiences, as a couple or family that have resulted from participation in the course?

Data were analyzed using the procedure described by Bogdan and Biklen (2003). Researchers (one faculty member and one research assistant) identified coding categories regarding the research question. The coding categories that resulted in the analysis included the multiple ways these women talked about their experiences. The researchers then developed themes that reflected the broader, more abstract summary of what was experienced by the participants. The coding was done independently by each researcher, and coding schemes were identified using free nodes in the qualitative software program NVivo, which was used to facilitate data analysis (Bazeley & Richards, 2000). Coding was consistent 80% of the time. When the researchers identified differences in the coding categories, they went back to the data and developed a consensus about which categories best reflected the participants' responses. The findings in this article reflect the coding categories most often reported by the participating Latina women.

## Findings

Latina mothers described their experiences of attending the stepfamily course, and three major themes emerged from their responses. Participants said their parent-child, couple, and overall family relationships improved as a result of the course. Parent-child relationships improved because of improved communication, learning to treat their children and stepchildren

fairly, and by engaging in activities with their children. Couple relationships improved because of improved communication and utilizing other relationships skills learned in the class. Family relationships improved as a result of improved communication among family members, engaging in family activities, changing attitudes, and empathizing with what other stepfamily members were experiencing. Although they were very limited, a small number of participants indicated there were negative impacts as a result of attending the course. These negative results centered on the use of the step term.

### *Improved Parent-Child Relationships*

Most mothers in the study (12 of 13) reported that there were improvements in how parents and children related to each other as a result of attending the course. This was accomplished by developing more effective ways of communicating and learning to treat the children and stepchildren fairly. Increased closeness between parents and children resulted. According to mothers' reports, parents and children increased their understanding of each other, which fostered closer relationships between parents and children, promoted acceptance, and increased respect and validation.

*Communication.* Several women indicated that by attending the course, they had acquired skills about how to cultivate healthy relationships with their children. Improved communication took the form of asking children about their day or what happened at school, listening, exploring their children's perspectives, and refraining from criticisms. One mother described how her son became more considerate of others by modifying the way he responded to his parents. She explained, "When we're at home, he remembers many of the things that he learned such as saying please, not getting angry, not yelling, to be happy and laugh with his parents." According to another woman, communication was particularly helpful in improving relationships with adolescents, "Being able to communicate with them [children] is the most important, especially with the adolescents, it helped me a lot." Another stated:

The best part was how we talked to them. I didn't do it before and now that I've had the classes we talk more. My daughter and I talk more at night and I find out how school went and that has helped me since I started the classes.

*Treating Children Fairly.* Having participated in the course, women faced the challenge of learning how to share time with their children and stepchildren in ways that were fair. Some mothers who had given preferential treatment toward one or more of their children acknowledged the difficulties in changing this behavior. A mother said, "We treat them the same now, my husband too. We were having a problem with him being indifferent towards her, but now everything is good." Another woman said she had to learn to not only talk to her husband's children but also how to interact with them in a more positive way. She said, "I'm not the biological mother so learning how

to raise and talk to them helped. I also learned how to be more involved in their lives without hurting them or being seen as the 'evil stepmother'."

A mother talked about having difficulty accepting her stepson because she was used to dealing with her daughters. She said, "Getting used to having a son was hard for me because it is different having girls than having boys. But this course has helped to understand him and accept that he is different, and to respect him."

### *Improved Couple Relationships*

Nine of the 13 women talked about how their relationship as a couple had improved and that they had become closer as a result of their participation in the stepfamily course. Their relationships improved because they were communicating more effectively and had begun to use other relationship skills to have more positive feelings for each other. For some, attending the course helped them realize that there were things they could work on to improve their relationships, and they were looking forward to trying some new things.

**Communication.** Learning how to communicate more effectively was the skill that was most often cited by participants as being important in improving couple relationships. Participants identified specific communications skills they learned that were particularly helpful. One woman said she would yell at her husband, but not really communicate about what was bothering her. The course taught her how to talk to him about problems. Another woman also shared her experience talking about difficult issues:

Well, as a couple there is better communication. There were times where I was stressed because there were difficulties or problems . . . He would say something and I would feel offended and I would keep it in. I would not tell him how I felt and that frustrated me . . . But now I've been able to communicate better. When something is bothering me or something happens to me or him, I try to see the different ways they have taught us to say things about something that is bothering me.

Other participants were specific about how improved communication skills enhanced their relationships. One woman explained that they had felt it was wrong to spend time as a couple without the children. The course had emphasized that couples need time to maintain and enhance their relationship. After talking about it as a couple, they had concluded "it's okay to leave the kids" and as a result they spend time together without the children and their relationship improved.

Participants also explained that as their communication skills improved they spent more time talking as a couple. According to one woman it often resulted in a closeness that was not present before:

When I shared and found out more about my husband, there were some things that we really have not talked about and he was able to

share those with me. I felt like we were courting again and that was very pleasing to me.

**Other skills.** Participants described how skills learned in the course, in addition to communication skills, also helped them enhance their couple relationship. One woman talked about skills in general, "There are things we need to practice, we need to say them and practice them in order to grow more, so that our relationship grows and is strengthened more." Another woman added that the skills learned needed to be maintained:

The both of us agree often and we've applied what we've learned. If we forget, I remind him what they taught us or he reminds me of what we learned. That way, we're always reminding each other of the skills we learned in the class.

Another woman talked specifically about learning to be empathic with her husband:

Learning about empathy and putting yourself in your partner's shoes helped. Sometimes I only see what is in front of me and don't see everything else. I now try to put myself in my husband's shoes first and try to see if he is understanding things in a different way. If so, that's something I need to understand.

### *Improved Family Relationships*

Eight of the 13 participants reported experiencing improvements in their family relationships. Things that contributed to improved family relationships and family unity were improved communication, doing activities as a family, and a change in attitude toward other family members.

**Communication.** These mothers said that communication improved because they were more open about sharing opinions and could listen more effectively. This open communication helped bring family members together and contributed to family unity. One woman said, "We also learned about listening to others. We didn't share our opinion with others in the past like we do now." For some of the women, improved communication helped the family work together in a way that had not happened before. They were relieved and had hope that their family life could be better.

**Joint Activities.** Participants described doing activities together as a family, which was encouraged and modeled in the class, and this helped improve family relationships.

Well, just like being with the kids more, play with them more. We try to go out with them and play ball with them and be close to them. Even just at home, when it snows, we bought a ball and they play in the living room. Since we've been coming [to the class] we've been doing that, and we never did that before.

Woman said their families spent time eating together and playing together. Spending time together was a positive experience that spurred the family members to want to do even more

things together. For example, one woman said, “I want to have a more united family and do more activities together.” Another woman recognized she needed to spend time with her family. She explained, “I wasn’t as nice as I could have been. I would get mad easily and that’s not how I should be, and I need to just spend more time with my family.”

**Change in Attitude.** Another aspect of the course that contributed to improved family relationships was the increased understanding of how others in the family were feeling. Becoming aware of others’ feelings became evident for this mother who said, “I am going to be more aware of other peoples’ feelings that are affected, but at the same time explain to them you need to do this or you need to do that, but now with more experience.” Another woman described increased appreciation for other family members:

It’s made our family relationships better, like the relationship that I have with my husband and the relationships that I have with the kids, especially with my stepson. I think that I appreciate the things that people do in our home more.

One woman described her family’s healing process, feeling that the relationships in her family were improving. She said, “Because of this program, I have a united family. I thought because of so much damage, I thought we were all going to go our different ways, but no.” Another woman expressed a similar feeling on the part of family members wanting to be more united, “It helps, it really helps to be able to unite the family . . . if they want to do something to keep going; this course is very worth it.”

### Concerns

Two participants expressed concerns with the label step in reference to their stepfamily members. One woman who had always referred to her stepchildren as children said, “It was hard in the beginning. It was like we were trying to reject [them] and the children were hearing these words stepchild, stepmother, stepfather.” She ultimately felt better about the use of the term and felt good about the overall experience. She concluded, “but later I understood that it was a reality that my family is in that situation, that it’s a reality that we want to change, to be able to unite our family.” Another mother described her daughter’s emotional experience in the class when she heard the “step” term. The mother said, “. . . she felt very sad in her heart.”

### Discussion and Implications

The government’s interest in the effective implementation of marriage education for underresearched and underserved families—such as low-income and Latino couples in stepfamilies—stems from the fact that most marriage-related programs have historically been developed for and offered to middle-class European Americans who are married, or will be getting married, for the first time (Ooms & Wilson, 2004). Even programs

designed for diverse audiences are largely based on research from nondivorced, middle-class, European Americans (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). Thus, one might raise the question of suitability of these programs for members of diverse populations who face unique barriers to healthy marriages (Dion, 2005).

The government has also acknowledged the need for culturally appropriate and linguistically responsive marriage education services for Latino families. To this end, the Administration for Children and Families (n.d.) created the HHMI with the goal to “address the unique cultural, linguistic, demographic, and socio-economic needs of children and families in Hispanic communities.”

According to the Latina mothers in this study, there were significant benefits from attending the stepfamily education program using the *Smart Steps* curriculum. Although the curriculum is based upon research, it did not focus on research with Latino or low-income stepfamilies. Yet, these women were able to use the information to improve family relationships. This study provides a qualitative overview of the experiences of Latina women in what is the first federally funded program specifically for stepfamilies.

What made it work? Was it because the program was implemented by collaborating with community organizations that serve these populations? Others have cited that partnering with trusted organizations is a critical aspect of working with culturally diverse audiences (Skogrand & Shirer, 2007). We do have an indication based upon interviews with facilitators who led the Spanish-speaking stepfamily courses that they encouraged discussion and they wove their own understanding of Latino culture into their facilitation (Reck et al., 2012). It has been suggested that both of these strategies would be welcoming and comfortable for Latino participants (Skogrand, Barrios-Bell, & Higginbotham, 2009). Children are also very important to Latinos and are important components of Latino marriages (Skogrand, Riggs, & Huffaker, 2008), and children typically accompany their parents to events and are not left with other caregivers (Skogrand et al., 2009). Children were a part of this stepfamily education program, and children were provided age-appropriate information with the classes ending in a family strengthening activity that included both adults and children. This format is likely consistent with Latino cultural practices that may have also contributed to these Latino women in stepfamilies benefiting from the format of this stepfamily course. Although this is speculation, we hope that other researchers will focus research questions around these issues.

There were problems or concerns, however. The present study identifies discomfort, by some Latina women in stepfamilies, with step terms. Two of the 13 women struggled with the use of the term step. Given that Latinos place great emphasis on the family, it is possible that the use of the word step could have been incongruous with their desire for or sense of familismo (Hurtado, 1995; Skogrand et al., 2009; Weaver, Umaña-Taylor, Hans, & Malia, 2001). Multicultural feminist theory should sensitize educators to the dilemma that Latina women in stepfamilies may find themselves. Coltrane, Gutierrez, and Parke (2008, p. 107) explain:

A certain degree of stigma may arise for Latino families, especially the blended types, 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.

We might speculate, based upon findings in this study, that curriculum that is not developed for a particular cultural group will work for most content but not all. In this case, familismo may be such a pervasive cultural theme that a cultural clash results with terms or issues around divorce and remarriage. It would be important for additional research to explore this issue. With the steady increase in the number of Latino stepfamilies, it is important to know what works and does not work with the use of existing curricula, even if it is not developed for the Latino population.

The effectiveness of the stepfamily course was evident throughout the interviews as participants identified several benefits in their family relations. Parent-child relations, couple relations, and family relationships in general had identified improvements. Communication was the most commonly cited benefit in all areas of improved relationships in that it led to better understanding in couple, parent-child, and family relationships, and it created an emotional atmosphere that promoted trust and family unity. We might speculate that communication is a critical component of any stepfamily education, including Latina mothers—whether the participants are adults or children.

Although this study was about stepfamily education and counselors and therapists do provide education, these findings might also be useful for therapists, as they provide individual or family counseling with Latinas. For example, including all appropriate family members, specifically children, in therapy might be especially important for Latina women dealing with stepfamily issues. The benefits of therapy and counseling may result in improvements in parent-child, couple, and family relationships as was found in this study focusing on education. Also, if the therapist is not Latino, a cotherapist who is Latino might be engaged in order that Latino cultural issues might be incorporated into the therapy process. Given the problem with the step term, therapists might consider using other terms when providing therapy or counseling.

The findings from this study of Latina women resulted in findings different from the Coltrane et al. (2008) study which found that stepfathers were very involved in the lives of both stepchildren and children. This study found that the large majority (95%) of Latino stepfathers reported having a very positive relationship with their stepchildren. Although this question was not asked directly in this study, there were indications that these Latina mothers had not always have positive relationships with their stepchildren. For example, there was evidence of difficulty in treating children fairly and wanting to interact with stepchildren in a more positive way. One mother also said the course helped her be more involved in her stepchildren's lives and not "being seen as the 'evil stepmother'." One might wonder, based

upon this study compared with the Coltrane et al. (2008) study, whether Latina or Latino stepmother and stepfather parent-child relationships differ. If they differ, should these differences be acknowledged and addressed in Latino stepfamily education?

This qualitative study was conducted with a relatively small sample of low-income Latina women who participated in the *Smart Steps* stepfamily program. Further research might consider participants from other stepfamily programs. Would Latina women benefit from other stepfamily programs as well? Would the step term be viewed in the same way with other programs or with a larger sample? Does the advertising of a stepfamily program keep Latina women away from such programming? If so, how might the step issue be addressed with advertising a stepfamily program and how might it be addressed in the classes?

The limitations of this study and the need for further research are clear. This was an evaluation study that included Latina women, and we learned some things that might be helpful and a basis for further research in an area where there is clearly a need to develop further understanding. For example, it would be important to know more about the role of culture and language in stepfamilies and the role of culture and language in stepfamily education. McNamee and Raley (2011) have also clearly described the need to consider whether members of stepfamilies are foreign-born or born in the United States, the length of time in the United States, and the country of origin as impacting marriage, divorce, and cohabitation, and, thus, impacting stepfamily formation. These are all issues that could not be explored in this study but are important to consider in future research.

Given the need for stepfamily education for Latinos, however, using existing curricula—even if it is not based upon research with this population—may be a useful strategy until such research is available. It is important, however, for educators to be alert to times when the information is not culturally appropriate and may need to make changes based upon cultural differences.

### Authors' Notes

Elisaida Mendez is now at Western Reserve University.

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