



# Cultural Adaptation and Relationship Dynamics





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This brief presents information about the cultural adaptation process of Hispanics into the United States and the main relationship dynamics and characteristics of this ethnic group as presented during the Administration for Children and Families Hispanic Healthy Marriage Research meeting. The findings and recommendations in this memo are drawn from discussions at the Supporting Healthy Marriage and Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiative Joint Research Meeting held on September 12-13, 2005 in Washington, DC and a research meeting held in conjunction with the Hispanic Healthy Marriage National Conference May 11, 2006 in San Antonio, TX.

This memo is not intended to be a complete discussion of these issues, but rather to summarize the advice received from researchers and practitioners in the Hispanic community at the research meeting for discussion purposes only.

### *Introduction*

According to Census estimates, Hispanics are the largest ethnic or minority group in the U.S., representing 15 percent of the total population (Census, 2000). In 2002, there were 37.4 million Hispanics in the United States, and it is expected that the number will reach 51 million by 2020 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2003). Hispanics are the fastest growing and youngest segment of the U.S. population, and Hispanic children are the second largest group in the nation (Child Welfare League of America, 2003).

Regretfully, Hispanics are over-represented on low educational achievement, poverty, teen pregnancy, and domestic or intimate partner violence (Perilla). One strategy to deter these social problems is through family strengthening efforts supported by the federal Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiative. This initiative encourages communities and organizations to offer services that strengthen the couple relationship, increase communication and problem-solving skills, and increase family stability and parental involvement. It is hoped that over time these efforts will help to reduce poverty and consequently increase child well-being in the Hispanic population.

In order to improve these social outcomes, an understanding of Hispanic cultural characteristics is essential. As a group, Hispanics in the United States are characterized as a very heterogeneous group, originating from 22 countries with diverse historical, political, economic, and social backgrounds, and they have diverse ethnic, immigration, and cultural traditions (Tulane Hispanic Health Initiative, 2002). Although most Hispanics are from Latin and South American countries, some Hispanic populations resided in this country prior to the establishment of what is known today as the United States. This rich and inter-ethnic diversity within the Hispanic/Latino population increases the complexities of truly understanding the cultural adaptation issues faced by Hispanics currently living and arriving in the United States. Understanding the particularities of Latino/Hispanic<sup>1</sup> culture is central to the development of a responsive Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiative, the preparation of relevant curriculums, and the training of effective staff.

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<sup>1</sup> The terms Hispanic and Latino will be used interchangeably throughout this document.





### **What Do We Know?**

As Hispanic individuals, couples, and families reside and interact in the U.S. they enter a state of disequilibrium that requires them to develop the skills to function within two different cultural contexts. Each culture has its own set of rules—the rules sanctioned by their original culture, and the rules required by the mainstream culture in the United States.

There are many studies that define acculturation in terms of the English linguistic capacity of Hispanics. However, those definitions are limited by their inability to capture the complexities of cultural adaptation as experienced by Hispanics (Reyes). The process of cultural adaptation, or acculturation, of Hispanics is not linear. There are many variables that interact and proceed at a different pace. For example, the acquisition of language proficiency is related to the ability to secure a job. Employment may be associated with both a gain in social status for the poor or a loss of social class for those who were considered privileged in their native countries. An individual's level of education, the degree of similarity between the U.S. and original culture, and the reception of the host country all influence and determine the subsequent cultural adaptation process.

Previous research identified that, for new immigrants in the United States, at least two generations are needed for them to acquire economical parity with Anglo-Saxon Protestants (Sowell). There are groups that succeed faster, and others that require more time to adapt to the U.S. culture depending on a complex set of factors. Key factors for adaptation include:

- 1) Individual characteristics such as adaptation and flexibility, education level, future orientation, language and working skills in their native country and in the U.S. economy;
- 2) Family and community resources and relational variables such as group cohesiveness and connectedness, insular or open neighborhood characteristics; and
- 3) Systemic social structural opportunities established by the host culture such as economic, education, and resettlement opportunities.

Latino families, couples, and individuals living in the United States are not exempt from the tension and pressure to function in both cultures, or from the challenges and barriers to success. Hispanics are in a continuum of adaptation as they deal with the unique stressors created by the immigration process. They need to grieve the losses of their home country, loved ones, and cultural identity, which intersect with the reality of dealing with the host culture in the United States. This process can be described in terms of “transculturation” wherein Hispanics exhibit changing behaviors due to new social contexts that, in time, influence the population in a very direct and observable way. For many Hispanics, as with any new immigrants, their process to adapt and create their own unique way to function is colored by both the hope and joy of the new opportunity as they escape from real or perceived fears, and the hard reality of surviving in a very different culture and society.

### *Acculturation in Couples and Families*

Cultural adaptation affects men and women differently. For example, husbands or men seem to acculturate faster than women, which may be related to their role as providers and resulting exposure to work outside the home. Different stages of cultural adaptation are associated with increased dissonance in couple expectations and increased couple conflict. For example, Negy reported that in their study on marital satisfaction, the disparity in couple rates of acculturation correlated with decreased marital





satisfaction for women and increased conflict for men.

Cultural adaptation may increase desirable outcomes in some areas of family life while also increasing non-desirable ones. For example, Cabrera reported that increased cultural adaptation by parents is correlated with a positive increase in child-centered parenting styles and a negative increase in overt couple disagreements and conflict. Regretfully, there is not enough information about the impact of open conflict on children. Cabrera added that perhaps it is not conflict, but the management and effective resolution of conflict that is essential for couple stability and child well-being.

Cultural adaptation, as mentioned earlier, is also affected by geography, neighborhood characteristics, exposure to U.S. mainstream culture, language, and family and couple goals. Many Hispanic/Latino communities are very isolated from the predominant culture. Couples in those communities will have a different sense and rate of adaptation that needs to be identified.

Language proficiency and the length of time in the U.S. are crucial cultural factors to consider among Hispanics living in the United States. For example, younger generations, or those born in the United States, may not be grounded in Spanish, which may mitigate the influence of the extended family and consequently some of the traditional values. Older, first generation immigrants, or non-bilingual couples may require marriage and relationship education to be delivered not only in Spanish, but also adapted to be more attune with the traditional values of the original culture due to the isolation that the lack of language proficiency can impose. It is also important to clarify that language refers to more than a means of communicating. For monolingual and bilingual Hispanics, Spanish may be the recommended language to use in a program setting as it was in Spanish that the emotional affective meaning of relationships was encoded. A solid understanding of cultural ideas and concepts is crucial in order to convey the most accurate message.

Using the second language of clients may only reach them in a superficial manner.

### *Bi-Culturalism*

Reyes explained that there are several theoretical and paradigmatic positions explaining this complex process of acculturation. For example, there are some schools of thought that relate more to linear models of cultural adaptation endorsing the progressive movement through levels of acculturation with the ultimate goal of assimilation into the dominant culture. There are others that endorse a bi-cultural stance in which different dimensions at different stages or states of adaptation co-exist within the same individual. Bi-culturalism recognizes the non-linear co-existence of an ethnic-self in the dominant culture; it acknowledges that individuals live concurrently within two main systems: 1) that of the dominant society, and 2) that of the individual's immediate physical and social environment (Norton et al., 1978). This bi-culturalistic position endorses the belief that minority or new arrival groups can achieve balance living in the United States by honoring their culture while adapting to function in the mainstream U.S. culture too. Total assimilation to the U.S. culture is not the goal in a bi-cultural model.

Bi-culturalism may be a goal for some couples (feeling acculturated while in the United States but also functioning comfortably while in their native country). There are Hispanic families, and couples, for whom the goal may be to return to their country of origin, whereas others may desire to be successful and comfortable in both countries. For some couples, such as transient and seasonal workers, their stay





in the United States may be perceived as transitory or periodical, which may impact their motivation to adapt to the culture. It is important for curriculum developers to understand that not all couples going through the acculturation process have the same goals.

### *Legal Status*

The difference between documented and undocumented Hispanics residing in the United States is significant. It can allude to matters of freedom versus incarceration or deportation, and in many cases life and death. Legality in the barrios and communities creates a dualistic type of existence, control, and power imbalance. This is not an uncommon experience among Hispanic families whose members often include both documented and undocumented individuals. The lack of documentation adds pressure and impacts the psychology and cultural adaptation of Hispanics in a very special way. Survival for many includes living in anonymity, constant fear, and hyper vigilance about the “migra” or immigration laws and agents. Access to services for these Hispanics and outreach efforts need to be thoughtful and diligent. With this population, program developers must build trusting relationships within the community before programs can expect even partial participant involvement.

### *Cultural Values*

Latino marriages and couple relationships are embedded in strong cultural values (Flores). These values may counteract U.S. mainstream attitudes toward marriage. Consequently, successful marriage education programs should consider the cultural values of the couple. For Hispanics, there are some key cultural components that intrinsically relate to effective marriage education. Based on Pinzon and Perez (2000) some of those cultural components included are:

- 1) *Familismo* - the value of the family as the central unit rather than the couple. This is important as the Latino culture places more emphasis on child rearing, family activity, and family obligations than on the functioning of the couple. Marriage education programming targeting only couples may limit their success.
- 2) *Simpatia* - the value of promoting behaviors that generate pleasant social interactions while avoiding conflict or disagreement that is perceived as impolite. This is fundamental for curriculum designers to understand as they present couples with tools to improve communication skills and problem-solving techniques. Direct conflict expression and management may be an indicator of acculturation. Perhaps recent immigrants, first-generation families, or more traditional couples need to be oriented differently before providing these direct approaches for conflict resolution and communication that could be seen as impolite, rude, and aggressive. In either case, while techniques such as “I-messages” may appear to be effective while a couple participates in a program, deep rooted beliefs that one should not “rock the boat” may hinder the technique’s long-term effectiveness.
- 3) *Personalismo* – alludes to personal space and closeness that is expressed by shaking hands, giving hugs, or touching as manifestations of appreciation and affection. For educators and program staff, it is important to understand this dimension of personalismo, as they are the ones in the position to interact directly with their Hispanic clients, and the ones to secure adequate time and space for these types of interactions within the education sessions or activities.
- 4) *Allocentrism* – it is opposite to individualism as it refers to the emphasis placed on the needs, objectives, and points of view of the extended family and the community over the individual’s. As one adapts curricula for Hispanics, it is necessary to understand that one is dealing with the extended families as well as the couple.





- 5) *Confianza* – relates to trust and expected reciprocity. There are often family and community “gatekeepers” that can assist or hinder intervention efforts. Food, familiarity, and relationship-building over time are critical to gain “confianza” and entrance into the family or community.
- 6) *Machismo* – it refers to presence of males as the dominant figures in the family structure and as the primary decision maker. Machismo is often mistakenly understood only to refer to the dominance and pride of males relative to females, but seldom with positive attributes. Being “macho” refers to the ideals of men’s strength, their ability to contain feelings, tolerate pain and adversity, and being “man enough” to transcend these challenges. Machismo speaks to gaining a sense of control in a society that categorically limits Hispanic males’ sense of control over their lives. It also relates to the strength and work ethic that is characterized by Hispanics. A “macho” is a hard-working, responsible protector of the family who does not allow himself to be undermined by obstacles or fear.
- 7) *Marianismo* – this value typically promotes chastity and family-centered behaviors among women. It places the family health and well-being primarily in the hands of women. A limited understanding of this value may associate “marianismo” with lack of power and the submissiveness of women. However, this underestimates the complexities of the role of females within the traditional Hispanic family. Women enjoy great power, although it is exercised in an indirect way; power comes through their submissiveness. There is a balance of power within Hispanic couples that often is not obvious to the outside observer. His power lies on making decisions that are pleasing to her to alleviate her suffering or pain; her power is in creating a desire to please by showing her commitment.

The influence of *machismo* and *marianismo* are essential for curriculum developers to understand. Similarly, the younger-than-average age at first marriage among Hispanics, which is rooted in the value of marriage and family, is another important characteristic for program developers to consider.

Culturally relevant marriage education curricula should respect these concepts and include these values, especially in the context of discussing gender roles, parenting, and intimacy. Couples from cultural groups that foster the cultural connection between them may fare better than those that are more culturally isolated. Couples tend to do better when you strengthen community connections (Stanley). Culturally insulated programs may not respond to the needs and reality of Hispanic couples. Instead they may inadvertently alienate couples by responding to misunderstood expectations, myths, and stereotypes of certain ethnic groups. A culturally sensitive curriculum requires an in-depth understanding of the Hispanic culture and the target audience of the program. In this regard, an intervention for Hispanics needs to respond to the degree and impact of acculturation on males, females, individuals, and couples.

### **What Should We Do With What We Know?**

Marriage education programs should be informed by culture. It is important to develop evidence-based and culturally centered interventions. As a group, Hispanics must deal with the increased stressors associated with living in a new country and society with different values. Marriage education curricula need to recognize and address the impact of those stressors on couples and family life, so the information is meaningful and relevant. Curricula adaptations for Hispanic couples should be prepared to address changing expectations, challenges to traditional gender roles, increased conflict in the household, and effective techniques to resolve conflict. Attention should also be devoted to stressors





such as losses, hopes and disappointments, language acquisition, and immigration and deportation. New approaches and additional resources may be required to address these issues.

It is important for a marriage education curriculum to recognize the barriers to engagement for participants communicating in a second language. When offering services to bilingual couples who are native Spanish speakers, curricula may need to teach less direct verbal communication styles and provide alternatives for couples to identify their non-verbal messages (as opposed to teaching only a verbal and direct style of communication). Also, for those who are monolingual and bilingual, the use of Spanish may be more attune to discuss issues of intimacy, commitment, loyalty, expectations, and values as they relate better to the core emotional meaning attributed by the original culture. These strategies will allow programs to present information sensitive to the audience's command of English as well as the cultural meaning of the translation.

The primary goal of a marriage education program should be to help couples achieve better communication in their unique relationship. Since definitions of "good communication" and "good relationships" may vary by generation based on time in the U.S., across cultures and across inter-ethnic Hispanic/Latino groups, effective programs should not seek to define this for couples, but allow them to define these outcomes for themselves. Involving couples in the program design and specifically asking what strong couple relationships look like will help in developing a program that is culturally appropriate and specific to that particular community (Skogrand).

Curricula developers may also want to consider how to adapt curricula to respect the value that Hispanics attribute to the extended family. The use of a "we" message versus an "I" statement is recommended as a specific way to respectfully address the value of the extended family. "I" statements may require a higher level of acculturation, self focus, and assertiveness that for some Hispanics may seem oblivious to the value of the extended family. Similarly, the goal of strengthening the couple relationship may be addressed in the context of the extended family to improve cultural relevance.

Considering familismo, education programs may benefit from being presented as "family" oriented. The link between the enhancement of the couple relationship and the impact on child well-being needs to be salient. This speaks to the idealization of the role of parent and the value of the family versus that of the couple.

Effective interventions should also be delivered by individuals/organizations that have built rapport and trust within the target community. These individuals are most likely to be successful if they understand how acculturation affects couple dynamics. These individuals may be trusted leaders such as priests and school teachers or service providers already working in the community. Program staff should also invest time to engage interpersonally with participants before teaching programs to build relationships. Finally, Parra suggested that program leaders should make things fun, communal, and appealing (like a fiesta) to engage Hispanic couples.

In summary, effective interventions with Hispanics need to respond to the stage of cultural adaptation of the couple and each individual. The degree of acculturation will affect their directness and openness while learning communication skills, discipline techniques, parenting attitudes, views of gender roles,





and issues of commitment, assertiveness, and intimacy. Curricula and/or program leaders need to be sensitive to how these cultural adaptation issues are addressed in the program setting. Specifically, they need to be aware that adaptation will vary by gender, length of time in the U.S., immigration patterns, and the integration of the couple/family with the larger society, and that culturally sensitive material should be offered both in Spanish and English.

### **What Do We Still Need to Know?**

There is a growing need for culturally relevant services targeted to Hispanics families. Understanding the varying aspects of cultural adaptation is imperative to the success of these services. Research on acculturation among Hispanics needs to expand to include adequate definitions that respond to variations of gender, age, immigration status, country of origin, socio-economical status, motivation and intent to stay in the United States, and desire to maintain the culture of origin while also participating in the dominant society (biculturalism).

Empirical and qualitative studies on Hispanic/Latino marriages are needed to answer questions such as how the adaptation to the U.S. culture impacts Hispanic/Latino individuals, couples, families, and gender roles (Flores). Further, measuring tools to adequately assess cohesion, connectedness, and adaptation to the culture are needed. The current linear models and/or those focusing on English language acquisition are insufficient to provide information on topics that involve multiple and complex variables.

The great diversity within the Hispanics population demands interethnic studies to provide information on the different subgroups of Hispanics/Latinos. Study samples need to secure representation from various Hispanics and not just limit themselves to comparing Mexicans to “other” Hispanics.

Similarly, an examination of generational differences among Hispanics living in the U.S. is needed to further explore the needs of different subgroups. For example curricula may use language and cultural examples differently for first versus third generation Hispanics. Additionally, intermarriage among Hispanics from differing countries of origin will present unique challenges from generation to generation with respect to how these individuals respond to cultural constructs (Reyes).

Culturally supportive programs should consider whether their goal supports assimilation, acculturation, or biculturalism. It is unknown what is in the best interest of Hispanics or how to best balance their positive cultural traditions with those of the U.S. mainstream culture. There may also be opportunities for Hispanic culture and its values to positively influence mainstream U.S. society. To address some of these issues, marriage and couple education programs need accurate information about the traditions of Hispanics and how they inform and support healthy couple and family relationships. Questions still remain about these cultural traditions and how they vary by country, religion, and rural/urban living.

Acculturation also needs to be disentangled from issues of poverty, socio-economic status, ethnicity, and culture. Often the existing literature presents both poverty and ethnicity together, confusing the impact of culture and that of poverty on couple and family dynamics.

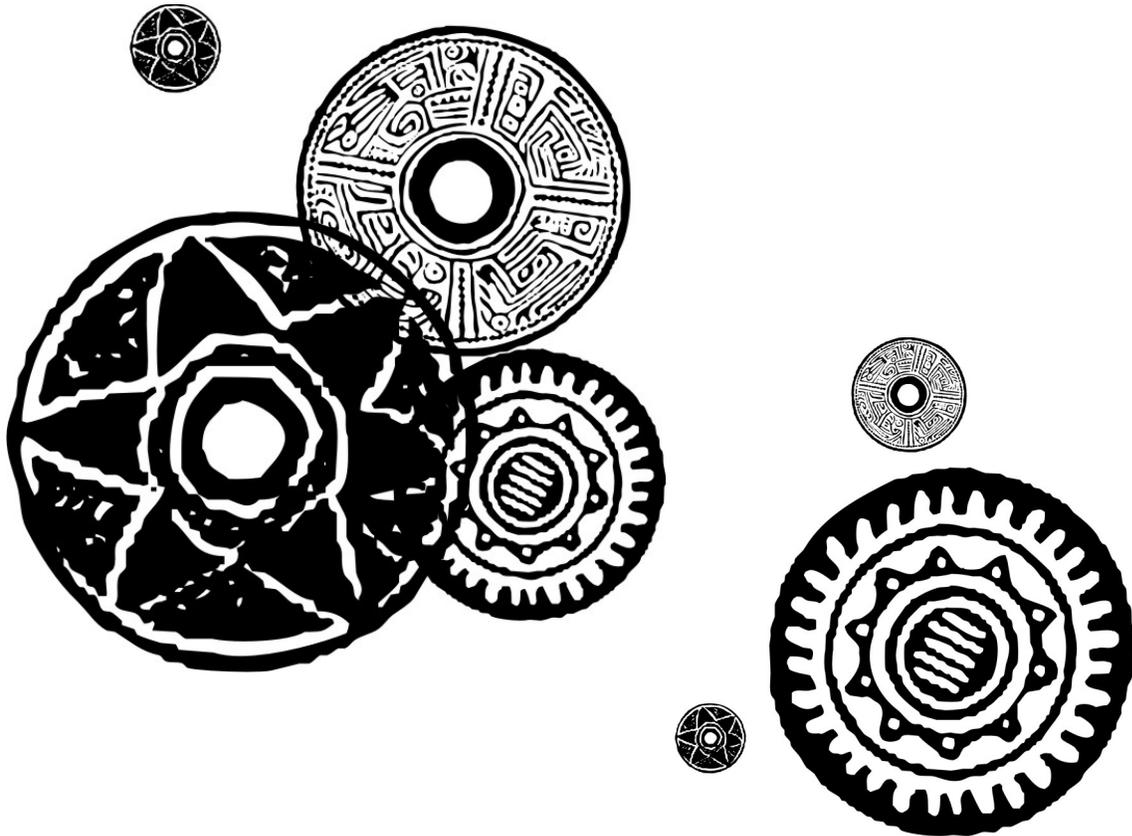
Finally, it is unknown if the current U.S. mainstream focus on couple relationships may be detrimental





for Hispanic families. Little research is available to determine how the couple dyad affects the other parts of the family system within Latino families. Caution must be taken to determine if the existing marriage education curricula may alienate an already disenfranchised population by imposing values and relationship dynamics that are not relevant.

Understanding the issues of acculturation and relationship dynamics are central to informing culturally relevant adaptation of curricula for Hispanics in the United States. Although further research is needed, this briefing report provides some insight into key cultural issues that can assist in the development of effective marriage education programs for Hispanic families.





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