



# Measuring Program and Marital Satisfaction Among Hispanic Couples





## **Measuring Program and Marital Satisfaction Among Hispanic Couples**

Hispanic family researchers and national marriage researchers convened at national forums to address the challenges of assessments utilized to measure aspects relevant in parenting, family, relationship satisfaction, and marital quality in Hispanic families. The recommendations summarized in this memo are drawn from discussions at a research meeting held in conjunction with the Hispanic Healthy Marriage National Conference, May 11, 2006, in San Antonio, Texas, and a research meeting held in conjunction with the Center for Latino Family Research on September 15-16, 2006, in St. Louis, Missouri.

Given the wide scope related to outcome measures, this memo will not be comprehensive and will only summarize the discussion of the main themes in relation to Hispanic marriage and families as raised by researchers attending the forums.

### *Introduction*

Public policy and social programs providing marriage enrichment services are relatively new fields. Historically, the dynamics relevant in marriage and relationships have fallen outside the scope of government programs and social services. Instead, couples and families have privately struggled with internal and external stressors impacting their relationships. Friends, family, marital and family therapists, clergy, and religious institutions have been the only sources of support for couples who turn towards the community for direction. Many couples, however, choose to struggle in isolation and turn away from traditional sources of support because of stigma, lack of knowledge of services available, financial hardship, insurance limitations, transportation, and resistance towards opening up to others.

Evidence of the negative repercussions of coping with stressors in isolation is observed in social science research reporting that 50% of marriages in the United States end in divorce. In contrast to traditional reasons for divorce – e.g., nonsupport, abuse, or alcoholism – couples today are more likely to say they are separating because of communication problems, a lack of fulfillment, or incompatibility (Sigelman and Schaffer, 1991). The effects of divorce on children including increased aggressiveness, noncompliance, acting-out behaviors, disruptions in peer and other interpersonal relationships, academic difficulties, and poverty have increased awareness of the importance of family structure and attitudes about marriage and relationships (Hetherington and Clingempeel, 1992). As research reveals the cost generated as a consequence of disintegrated families, marriage and couple relationships are now viewed as social constructs that influence social issues such as child well-being and poverty.

As government and social service providers implement programs designed to help individuals who choose marriage for themselves form, sustain, and maintain healthy marriages, researchers are challenged to adequately measure program and individual outcomes. Developing and implementing valid and reliable outcome measures of marriage and family formation dynamics is a complex process that requires a multifaceted approach. Apart from obtaining nominal measures depicting frequency of participation, participant satisfaction, outreach and delivery format, and adequacy of facilities where programs were rendered, observing the effects of the programs on marital satisfaction and distress requires quantitative and qualitative measures. The social sciences have struggled with successfully





capturing the ultimate criterions of relationship dynamics such as: affect and context communication, problem solving, child-rearing, friendship and sexuality, nuclear and extended family, religious influence, aggression and anger. Accurately converting these ultimate criterions into actual measurable criterions is a challenge. Even when social scientists succeed in achieving this with some statistical significance, additional limitations arise.

Limitations can range from internal to external factors that threaten the validity of the measure. Is the measure written at a reading-level appropriate for the couple taking the assessment? Are there cues in the environment that influence, either negatively or positively, the manner in which the couple responds? Are there external or internal events occurring in the life of the individual or couple that are not accounted for that may influence their response? Does a self-report provide an adequate depiction of the nature of a relationship? Researchers developing valid and reliable measures to observe the outcomes of programs for couples are plagued with these and many other nuances of measurement construction.

Moreover, the challenges of developing outcome measures for programs developed for couples are complicated further when influencing factors of personal values, personality, diversity, and social and economic factors are also considered. Individual values are influenced by culture, religious and ethnic background, environmental context in which the person was raised, social context, and belief system. All of these aspects interact in forming aspirations and expectations towards marriage, which in turn impact negative and positive interactions in relationships.

This is particularly important as our attention is turned towards developing and implementing program outcomes related to marriage and family in the Hispanic community. Given the growth of the Hispanic population in the U.S., providing adequate programs that serve this community has become a concern of public policy. Thus, as local programs and federal initiatives develop that encourage healthy marriage, evaluators and researchers are challenged by the question “what works best for Hispanics living in the United States?” To answer this question, investigators must have the tools to measure these programs. Similar processes that have been undertaken by social scientists to develop tools to assess marital enrichment programs for the mainstream community in the United States will also need to be undertaken for the Hispanic community. One exception to this process is that in order to create valid outcome tools for Hispanics residing in the U.S., social scientists will also need to focus attention on the interaction of the dimensions of culture as influencing latent traits of marriage and relationship dynamics.

The purpose of this memo is to initiate a conversation among the research community on how to measure programmatic and individual success in healthy marriage programs that are culturally relevant and statistically valid among Hispanic couples in the U.S.

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

At least three processes are involved in administering measurement tools to Hispanic marriages and families: 1) development of culturally relevant tools, 2) format and contextual administration of the measurement tool, and 3) analysis of the results. Although the available research conducted in the arena of marriage and Hispanic families provides limited information with regards to these three





processes, additional lessons can be gleaned from research on other aspects relevant to Hispanic families that have been investigated more widely.

#### *Development of Culturally Relevant Tools*

Although universal factors can be found across cultures, such as facial expressions (e.g., sadness, happiness, surprise, anger, fear, contempt, and pain), interpretations of experiences and modes of experiences may differ from culture to culture. Individual or relational constructs or concepts may interact with cultural and social factors. For example, in the United States, low-context communication is prevalent, meaning it is highly dependent on verbal cues and content. Whereas in Latin America, high-context communication or communication that relies on non-verbal body language is most prevalent.

Cross-ethnic and cross-cultural research can be approached from an etic or emic perspective. The etic perspective is comparative and the emic perspective is intracultural. The etic perspective attempts to explain common and similar phenomena across different cultural contexts, while the emic perspective seeks to understand the elements from within the culture and its context. The emic perspective aims to study the internal logic of culture, its singularity, and interrelationship with other intracultural elements. Cross cultural researchers are challenged to reconcile these two approaches as they adopt and translate measures.

The role of culture is key in integrating universal similarities and contextual differences. Culture provides categories and lexicons for emotional experience and expression, sets limits of tolerance for specific emotions and affect, shapes social responses to distress and disability, influences beliefs about the etiology of distress, provides a context for making meaning out of suffering, and sets variations in family structure, composition, and interactions (Zayas). Care must be taken, however, to hold the tension between inherent human characteristics and culture and individual and/or relational elements as a result of our common humanity. Culture has a significant impact on how individuals understand and negotiate daily activities and relationships. Cultural factors do not eliminate individual or relational constructs but inform their operation. When conducting research with Hispanic and other ethnic families, these constructs provide the language needed in order to identify areas of behavioral change (Reyes).

If Hispanics immigrating to the U.S. preserved aspects of the culture in a dynamic form, researchers would readily isolate cultural variables and translate these into measurement tools. Even though Hispanics tend to preserve culture, culture does not remain static. It is dynamically interacting and evolving and can be explained by theories of acculturation.

The process of acculturation for Hispanics varies from individual to individual. The process may encompass adhering to the dominant culture and maintaining the culture of origin. The acculturation process is assessed by two separate models each containing limitations (Cabassa). The acculturation process may be described as either one-dimensional (acculturation process moves along a single continuum – from immersion in culture of origin to immersion in new culture) or bi-dimensional (the person opts to either neglect or maintain the culture of origin while participating in the dominant culture). However this process is described, in addition to developing operational constructs of culture,





measures also need to address the process of acculturation. The challenge in developing culturally relevant tools for marriage programs and couples is incorporating dimensions of the Hispanic culture and assessing the role of acculturation while holding individual and marriage universals constant.

Given this tension, it makes sense that translating existing measurement tools has proven to be inadequate. Translations ignore the premise that culture is an influencing agent in marriage and families, and assumes that aspects that have been found to be relevant in one culture can be directly observed and applied in another culture. Equally important to recognizing differences between Latino and non-Latino cultures, is the diversity within the Latino community. Hispanics residing in the United States are rooted in different cultures with different colloquialisms and nuances in language. This requires that the translation be as general as possible. Measurement instruments should be comparable before they are administered by utilizing several different groups (Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, etc.) to evaluate whether or not they are understandable. Translations of instruments should also be relevant for recent immigrants and respondents of differing literacy levels. Since literal translations closely follow the grammatical and lexical forms of the source text, a preferred method when using translations is to move beyond literal translations.

When translating instrument tools, a more rigorous approach, back-translations, is recommended. Back-translations occur when a second translator translates the document back into English once it has been translated into Spanish. The back translator must have excellent command of both languages and perform a more literal translation than normal. The original translation is then compared side-by-side with the back translation by the authors of the instrument tool. Even though back-translations are deemed better than literal translations, cross-cultural research also reveals limitations to this approach since cultural equivalency is still not obtained (Hilton and Skrutkowski, 2002).

Translation of an existing instrument not only runs the risk of losing the original intent of the message, but it also assumes that marriage dynamics described in the tool are occurring similarly for Hispanics. For example, an assessment tool may ask the rater to respond either positively or negatively to an item that states, “*my partner sometimes screams or yells at me when he/she is angry.*” Upon translation, the person may interpret the question as, “*my partner is abusive when he/she is angry.*” Based on the respondent’s cultural experience he/she may respond negatively as this second interpretation may be associated with a negative impression.

A cultural equivalence model for translating and adapting instruments may be more appropriate. The cultural equivalence model allows for multiple linguistic and sociocultural factors, such as determining whether the construct that the original instrument evaluates is pertinent to the target culture. It evaluates the instruments in several dimensions: semantic (similar meaning in an item), content (culturally relevant content of items), technical (original and translated version yield comparable data), criterion and conceptual equivalence (similar evaluation of results and similarity of the theoretical construct being evaluated in the different cultures) (Chavez and Canino, 2005).

Another proposed method would be to construct measurement tools that begin with the premise of culture by identifying key concepts/constructs in a culture and generating measurement based on these constructs. In this approach, the task is to understand the phenomenon in the local culture, integrate the known universals of marriage dynamics, and then produce a package of questions that are meaningful for the Hispanic culture. This approach ideally would create valid and culturally appropriate measurements. Although this approach is more demanding, requiring investment of more resources and





the involvement of both researchers and practitioners in the field, it would address some of the previously discussed barriers to translating available tools.

A review of the measures that have been created in Latin America is another approach to create culturally appropriate measurements. These measures incorporate values of the Latino culture which are upheld by many Latinos residing in the United States. Subsequently, researchers may work with developers of the instrument to make adjustments for the population the measurement would be applied to in the United States.

When creating assessment tools to measure program effectiveness, researchers should note the mediating effects for Hispanics in participating in an educational group. Extraneous variables that may need to be accounted for are the benefits that are inherent in participating in a group, regardless of the content that is delivered. Some of the benefits of participating in a cohesive group, which often are formed in educational programs, include: instillation of hope, connection, universality, and support. These factors can in themselves be powerful driving forces of change. Thus, in developing tools to measure outcomes of a marital enrichment program, a researcher would want to control for these as well. Hispanics generally assume a world-view of community and interdependence. Upon migrating to the United States, Hispanics increasingly isolate as adaptation and assimilation occurs. With isolation comes lack of support which combined with added stress from the acculturation process (i.e., new language, culture, community, jobs, schools), leads to increased risk of mental health problems such as depression and anxiety. Groups, even educational groups, provide a medium by which Hispanics find the support they once relied upon in their country of origin. Controlling for these factors presents a challenge when measuring program effectiveness.

Researchers also need to account for social desirability, or the tendency to respond favorably in order to give a positive impression. This is particularly relevant for Hispanics, a culture that places high value on preserving a positive image and respecting authority. Researchers and practitioners will most likely be highly respected by Hispanics. A Hispanic research participant may assume that he or she will be respectful by responding in a positive way to the items. Consequently, measures that exclusively include closed-ended and dichotomous prompts may result in skewed results. Measures developed and implemented for Latinos, will be strengthened if scales of internal validity are included. Furthermore, measures developed for Hispanic couples will be strengthened if they include influences and motivators that prompted participation in programs, exploration of what constitutes healthy marriages for Hispanics, and ways stressors such as discrimination and economic constraints impact couple relationships and child-rearing.

In developing valid instruments to measure program effectiveness, a researcher may choose to utilize outcome measures that focus on the content of the information delivered. That is, tools that answer the question, "*How much did the participant cognitively learn about the material presented?*" A pre- and post- assessment may be developed and the mean results compared to determine whether learning occurred in a statistically meaningful way. However, a researcher would ultimately want to know whether the individual and/or couple applied the concepts learned to their relationship. To answer this question, a researcher would need to develop an instrument that assesses the strengths and weakness in a





couple's relationship and measure if there are any observed differences before and after the program. A clear understanding of what are considered strengths and weaknesses in Hispanic relationships would be necessary to develop an appropriate instrument to make a comparison of this kind.

Furthermore, it would be assumed that the marriage education program delivered included components that would be helpful for the marital relationship. This may also present challenges as many of the curricula used in marriage education programs are designed with the dominant culture in mind. The relevancy of the concepts to Hispanic participants' relationship and experiences would greatly effect whether or not they view the program as being helpful. This may effect whether or not the concepts and skills are applied to the couple relationship.

Another challenge faced by researchers assessing program effectiveness is the reliance on self-reports from participants. Although, there are some promising marital self-report assessments available such as the Marital Satisfaction Inventory-Revised, a main drawback is that they still rely on the report of the individual. A more accurate assessment may be obtained through direct observation although this approach is costly and more intensive.

#### *Format and Contextual Administration of the Measurement Tools*

Determining the type of tool to utilize for Hispanic populations depends on whether the study is quantitative or qualitative. It is not a matter of distinguishing quantitative and qualitative as opposites since all methodologies are crossed in research (Díaz-Loving). Qualitative interviews may be more in tune with a culture that likes to communicate verbally. However, quantitative methodologies are equally valuable. It is important that researchers take advantage of both methodologies (Díaz-Loving). Each methodology provides meaningful information in its own way.

Researchers may experience challenges when using quantitative instruments with Hispanic respondents residing in the United States. One of these challenges is related to language proficiency and literacy. Examples of ways to address these challenges are: adjusting the reading level of quantitative measures making them understandable to more members of the population, providing revised, brief versions of the measures as opposed to longer versions and providing training on test-taking strategies. Furthermore, when administering quantitative measures in groups, it may be beneficial to walk through items as a group. The proctor can prompt and encourage the group to follow along as opposed to having individuals work independently.

Qualitative interviews may be less threatening and more personable then a formal assessment measure. Focus groups are a very effective format for obtaining qualitative data when relatively little theoretical or empirical knowledge is available. Focus groups are useful since respondents feel that researchers want to learn from their experiences. Moreover, participants may be more open to responding when they are surrounded by their peers and when they perceive that they share similar experiences. This may make focus groups particularly attractive when working with Latino couples. Other listed advantages of focus groups include: developing trust and increasing participation due to direct contact with researchers, interpreting and adding depth to responses to quantitative methods, obtaining a large amount of information in the participant's own words, and obtaining data from individuals with literacy limitations (Umaña-Taylor and Bámaca, 2004).





Qualitative measures of acculturation and culture can provide some guidance in terms of the type of variables (such as *respeto*) that could be measured via quantitative measures. For example, a qualitative study by Skogrand, et al revealed cultural values, practices, and strengths evident in strong Latino marriages. The study found components of strong marriages such as children, communication, and religion for Hispanics that may have otherwise been overlooked if the study had originally been a quantitative one. The study revealed that for the couples interviewed, parenthood (not marital happiness) was the primary goal of marriage. For many Hispanics, family and parent-child relationships take precedence over marital relationships.

Given that the family is central for Hispanics, exclusively providing assessments to the marital dyad is limiting. The depth and breath of the results may be strengthened by incorporating measures for the extended family. Exploring ways the family has observed and experienced change on the constructs measured may enhance the researcher's understanding of a given issue.

### *Analysis of the Results*

The influence of culture and values is also addressed during analysis of the results. In order to make meaningful interpretation of raw scores derived from quantitative measures, they must be converted into standard scores that can then be compared to others in the standardized sample. These norm-referenced interpretations allow for comparison of individual differences. This again presents challenges since very few assessment instruments include substantial diversity in their sample to which comparisons of Hispanics can be made. Hence, the results generated from the Hispanic groups are compared to the results of a sample that is usually skewed towards Anglo, middle-class North Americans. The assumption is made that there are sufficient universals present in the values assessed that comparison of the results should be valid. Of the quality marital assessment instruments available in the market, the Marital Satisfaction Survey-Revised, is one of the only instruments where the developers have conducted norm-based studies on Mexican-American populations.

Qualitative measures also need to be coded in order to identify common constructs and make descriptive statements of the results generated. Coding these statements is highly dependent on the rater's objectivity and ability to follow the protocol provided.

Individual, subjective biases may easily influence the manner in which these results are interpreted and coded. Since the process of analyzing results is not a culture-free process, some feel that investigators should reveal their ethnic background so as to inform the reader of the biases they may impart in the interpretation of the results (Umaña-Taylor and Bámaca, 2004).

When researchers are performing analysis, they should consider the attitudes of the research participants. Many communities are hesitant towards investigators "invading," "studying" and "analyzing" them in order provide a list of recommendations on how to "fix" them. Anecdotal stories reveal that communities feel betrayed when investigators temporarily enter their neighborhoods with the pursuit of finding out what is wrong with them and then depart without debriefing or providing a summary of the findings. Failing to return to the community to provide feedback with regard to the findings is concerning as it may create greater distance between communities and investigators. When this occurs in Hispanic communities, Hispanics may feel as if they were disrespected. Integrity and *respeto* (respect) are cited cultural values assumed by many Hispanics. A means by which researchers





may show a sign of respect to the community is by returning and providing specific feedback on the results, limitations of the study, and recommendations.

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

The interest in better understanding marriage and relationships within the Hispanic community has accelerated exponentially in recent years. This interest has made evident the glaring gaps in knowledge in this area and the rigorous work that is still needed. Culturally relevant tools that integrate values of a culture in movement still need to be developed. To do this, a framework for research in the Hispanic community must be established to answer a plethora of questions. Some of these questions include: How can outcome tools be developed so that they satisfy the demands of quality research while at the same time remain flexible and adapt to the growing Hispanic community? What are the recommended guidelines available for investigators developing instruments for Hispanics? How can investigators avoid common errors in the development of contextualized measures?

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

In order to create contextual measurement tools that are valid for Hispanics, the research community should assess measurements to more systematically evaluate how outcomes translate. Focusing on creating and implementing valid and reliable measurement tools for Hispanics would help to increase awareness of the existing need. It would also create a forum to address this need and would synergize the effort and energy needed to implement strategic proposals toward this endeavor. Given the limited knowledge of how to adequately measure program and individual outcomes for Hispanic couples, it would be of great benefit for researchers to evaluate the processes of newly funded healthy marriage programs. Many of these programs will serve a large proportion of Hispanics, and studying these programs and participants would further the knowledge base of Hispanics living in the United States. Evaluation of programs serving Hispanic couples should include back translation teams, rely on Latino researchers to review measurements created, and include both qualitative and quantitative measures with multiple levels of analysis including the family, couple, and individual.

Since time and funding for more in-depth studies may not always be available, researchers should make efforts to develop measurements that are valid and reliable with regards to Hispanic couples. Literal translations of existing instruments compromise the validity of the tool since the audience may interpret items differently than what was originally intended to be measured. Since cultural sensitivity in research increases its accuracy researchers are encouraged to assume a model that falls more in line with the *derived etic* approach (Chavez and Canino, 2005). This approach attempts to integrate both emic and etic perspectives in order to incorporate cultural flexibility into the adaptation of the instrument and to retain cross-cultural generalizability of the findings. Strategies for the *derived etic* approach include using a cultural equivalence model for translating and adapting instruments, focus groups, and a multinational bilingual committee. The reader is encouraged to review the Toolkit on Adapting and Translating Documents prepared by Chavez and Canino and developed by the Human Services Research Institute and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which describes the *derived etic* approach, lists 13 steps for adapting and translating instruments, and provides specific field examples.

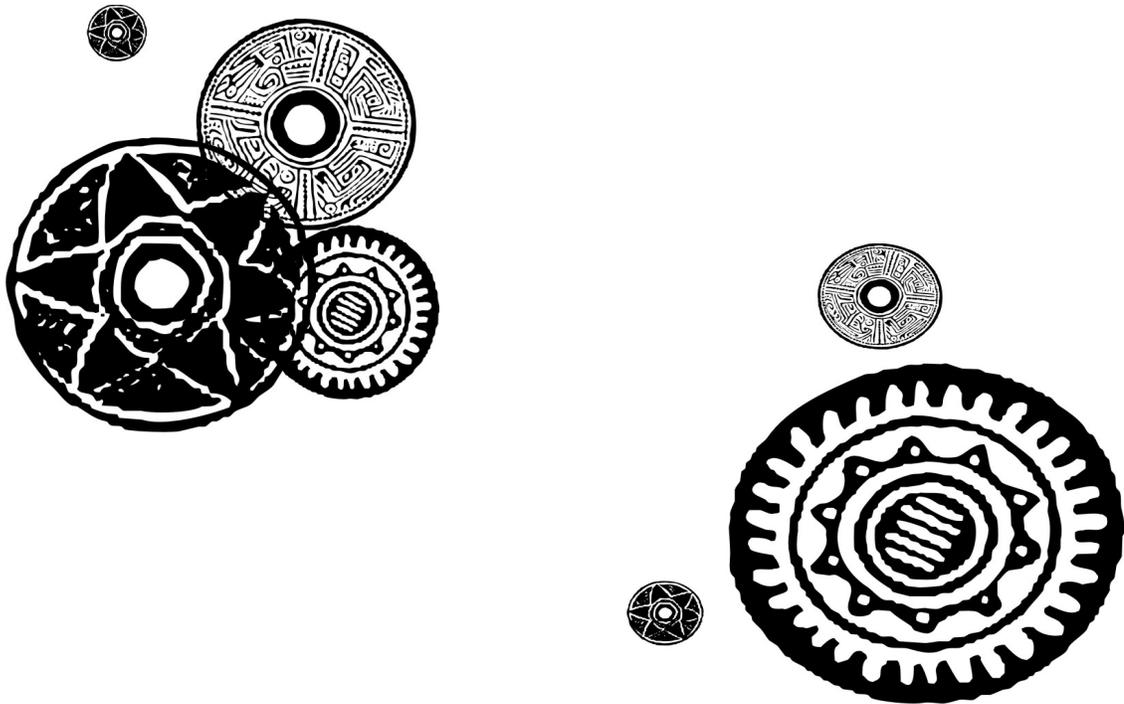




### Conclusion

Opponents of efficacy studies argue that the strict conditions created in clinical trials limit the degree to which the results can be generalized. Individuals and participants in the population are faced with stressors that are not observed with volunteers in experiential groups in a study. Alternative effectiveness studies, which are quasi-experiential are recommended instead. Both positions would agree that even the strictest methodological research study has limitations one way or another. The measurement tool, heavily relied upon for recommendations made towards promotion or elimination of programs, is usually given the utmost care in its construction precisely because of its weight and significance in the study.

For this reason, a myriad of quality assessment instruments are available on the market for assessment of relationships. Even more tools are found for measuring program outcomes in terms of knowledge learned and participant satisfaction. The investment given to development of quality tools has resulted in a menu of options that meet various needs – at least for the majority culture. As expressed by several participants of the research meetings and seemingly a consensus among all present, reliable and valid measurement tools for Hispanics must be created. “Packaged” questions cannot continue to be imported and made to fit the Hispanic population. Further, the statement “we already have an instrument for that” can no longer be comfortably accepted, but instead, researchers must consider cultural factors and the concept of values as they play a significant role in measuring program and individual outcomes.





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