



Gender Norms and the Role of the Extended Family





Gender Norms and the Role of Extended Family

This memo outlines issues raised regarding traditional Hispanic gender roles and the importance of the extended family 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 meetings for discussion purposes only.

Introduction

It is important to examine traditional gender roles and family systems in different populations to understand their impact on couple dynamics. These roles and expectations play a significant part in the way couples interact, family decision-making, and even how one might define marital satisfaction. Hispanic culture is traditionally associated with distinct gender roles for men and women, known as “machismo” and “marianismo,” which dictate certain behavioral expectations for members of that community. In addition, there is a strong emphasis on family and community (“familismo”) that interacts with the couple’s expectations and decision-making while reinforcing the importance of cultural and societal norms.

These cultural values differ significantly from European/Caucasian norms, which have influenced U.S. culture, and can serve as both a protective factor and as a challenge to successful couple relationships. Curriculum developers and program operators need to consider what parts of these traditional roles marriage education programs should try to preserve and what parts might be an obstacle to healthy couple relationships.

What We Know

Gender Roles

Traditional and idealized Hispanic cultural expectations of appropriate male and female behavior are often referred to as machismo or marianismo. Machismo is described as being dominant, virile, and independent whereas marianismo emphasizes being submissive, chaste, and dependent (Rafaelli and Ontai, 2004). Although some research argues that these traditional gender roles are outdated and inapplicable, other studies show that they do influence behavior and interaction in Hispanic couples.

For men, the cultural emphasis on machismo can translate into a positive outcome where the man serves as provider and sacrifices for the family or a negative one that emphasizes dominance and control. The positive side of this gender expectation is that it encourages men to work hard to provide for and protect their family. Some research also shows that the negative interpretations of machismo are less common than the stereotype would indicate. This research argues that Hispanic fathers are much more nurturing and egalitarian than one might expect, perhaps due to the traditional emphasis on familial obligations.





Unfortunately, the other side of these traditional behaviors is that Hispanic men are often seen as cold and domineering, due to the cultural emphasis on their economic role in the family and not on care-taking. Dr. Roberto Reyes, professor of Human Development and Family Science at Messiah College discussed this issue further. Dr. Reyes indicated that some research has shown that when men face difficulties finding employment and are unable to “live up to” their perceived role in the family they have increased self doubt which manifests as withdrawal from the family unit. Some research claims that when Latino men cannot define themselves in a positive, productive way in society they will define themselves in more negative, possibly stereotypical gender identity (drinking, aggression, etc.). What’s more, men may feel justified in engaging in destructive behaviors such as infidelity or substance abuse as long as they are fulfilling their cultural obligations to provide for their family economically.

The primary role emphasized for women in Hispanic tradition is that of mother instead of wife. The cultural construct of “familismo” is defined as “an emphasis on family relationships and a strong value placed on childbearing as an integral part of family life and the feminine gender role” (Rafaelli and Ontai, 2004). This leads women to define themselves through their family and children instead of independently or as part of a couple. The role of martyr is also idealized, with women expected to be submissive and sacrifice themselves for their families. For marriage education providers, this stereotype provides both an opportunity and a challenge. It means that women will be extremely dedicated to their families and the good of their children, which can be a powerful motivator for participating in marriage education workshops. However, women may see themselves as a mother first and place the couple relationship at a lower priority. In many cases, the idea of “parenthood” is valued over “partnership.” In addition, the emphasis on the wife’s quiet submission and the husband’s dominance and independence may make it more difficult for Hispanic women to communicate directly and assertively with their husbands.

Although Hispanic couples immigrating to the United States may acculturate away from traditional behaviors, it is important to recognize that these cultural expectations can still hold. Furthermore, the definition of a “good” relationship can vary dramatically across culture, country of origin, and level of acculturation. For example, some couples that are less acculturated may not view egalitarianism as an important part of a healthy relationship. It is also necessary to remember that different members of a couple may acculturate at different rates, particularly with regards to these traditional gender roles. For example, men often tend to acculturate more quickly than their wives because they often arrive in the United States before the rest of the family and have more exposure to mainstream culture through the workplace. However, shifting gender roles may have a more pronounced effect for Hispanic women than for men due to the greater difference between expectations for their behavior in the Hispanic community and mainstream culture. Marriage educators should be aware that different levels of acculturation are correlated with increased marital conflict as expectations and behaviors change.

Lastly, a stereotype does exist that more conservative gender roles such as those described above can lead to increased domestic violence in the Hispanic community. In fact, traditional Hispanic gender roles can be both oppressive and protective when it comes to domestic violence. The woman’s role as sacrificing and subservient can lead to greater tolerance of domestic violence, as can the strong commitment to the family and the institution of marriage. The view of men as the dominant decision-makers can also encourage controlling behaviors. Lastly, because of their role in the home, Hispanic





women are often economically dependent on men, making it more difficult to leave the relationship. However, although these more dangerous facets of traditional gender roles can encourage domestic violence, Hispanic men who embrace the positive side of machismo might be less likely to be violent. These values instruct men to protect their families, including their wives, which is incompatible with a domestic violence scenario.

Extended Family

Another strong cultural value in the Hispanic community is that of familismo, which was defined above as “an emphasis on family relationships and a strong value placed on childbearing as an integral part of family life and the feminine gender role.” This includes a strong emphasis on family obligation, the value of children and community and the importance of past and future generations. These values often play out in couples’ priorities and decision-making. The boundaries between what are couple issues and what is a family or community issue is often blurred. As with the cultural expectations described above with respect to gender roles, the traditional emphasis on familismo can be protective or it can pose a challenge to the couples themselves and to marriage educators.

Familismo can strengthen a couple’s relationship with some of the positive associations it brings. The importance of extended family provides couples with an extensive social support network that can assist them in times of emotional or economic difficulty. In addition, the emphasis on stability and community means that the importance of the couple’s relationship is validated and supported by the extended family. Dr. Rolando Díaz-Loving, head of the Psychosocial Research Unit at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, explained that this support network need not come exclusively from blood relatives. In many instances, the process of migration and immigration may leave couples isolated from extended family, and support networks are created with others in the community. “Compadres” and “god-parents” may be viewed as part of the family, and their influence on the couple’s relationship is seen as just as important.

A strong sense of familismo may actually encourage a couple to participate in a given program. If a couple is convinced that marriage education is the best thing to do for their family, this obligation can be used to motivate their attendance and engagement in the program. For example, couples may choose to attend a marriage education program if they’re convinced that it’s the best thing they can do for their children.

While the involvement of extended family in the lives of Hispanic couples can help support and validate their relationships and families, this also means that marriage educators must deal with the challenge of extended family being involved in decision-making. The extended family and generational differences associated with length of time in the United States can be a stressor in Hispanic families. Child-rearing, for example, may be considered the couple’s domain in mainstream culture but is considered a family affair in the Hispanic community. This can cause conflict particularly when the couple is more or less acculturated than older generations. In addition, children can be exposed to differing values and behaviors than those of their parents because of time spent with extended family.

Some couples may be dealing with a recent separation from their extended family and social network, particularly those who are recent immigrants. Technology can help mitigate this separation by keeping





immigrants informed of what is happening in their countries of origin, but the elimination of a valuable support network can be extremely difficult for couples to deal with. Other factors, such as substance abuse and incarceration, can also sever extended family ties. Regardless of the cause for separation from extended family members, marriage educators should be aware of the impact this may have on the couple relationship.

What Do We Still Need to Know

Gender Roles

Traditional gender roles in the Hispanic community are well-defined, and there is some research on how closely they reflect actual behavior. However, there is much that is unknown about how these expectations play out for couples, particularly immigrants to the United States. There is little conclusive information about how closely traditional gender roles apply, particularly when some literature emphasizes the importance of machismo and marianismo whereas others, such as the parenting literature, seem to contradict these expectations. There are even some who question whether machismo and the patriarchal system even exist in Hispanic families. Dr. Luis Zayas, professor of Social Work and Psychiatry at the Washington University School of Medicine illustrated this point by stating that many view the mother as being the most significant member of the family and offending or disappointing her is most influential in determining behavior.

Furthermore, it is unclear how gender roles are affected by immigration to the United States and acculturation to mainstream norms and expectations. There is a contradiction between the hypothesis that acculturation would deconstruct traditional gender norms and the assertion in some literature that even highly acculturated couples can still exhibit very traditional roles and behaviors. In addition, it would be helpful to investigate what behaviors and norms expressed as part of traditional cultural gender roles help protect couples. Marriage education programs would do well to preserve these behaviors.

Lastly, as was emphasized throughout the discussion, although there are some commonalities among the Hispanic community, there are also a range of differences based on country of origin, class, and degree of acculturation. More detailed research is needed to determine what these similarities and differences are.

Extended Family

Two particular questions were raised with regards to the interaction of extended family networks with couple dynamics. First, what effect might intervening at the couple level have on other parts of the family system? It is possible that a marriage education intervention, for example, that questions certain cultural norms might cause conflict between generations. A better understanding of generational differences and family systems can help curriculum developers create culturally appropriate tools for couples.

Second, what is the effect of immigration and acculturation on social support? One hypothesis is that couples are forced into social isolation after immigrating because they have less access to traditional family support networks. However, another possibility is that couples replace traditional social supports with new friends and jobs as they assimilate into the mainstream culture. If this transition does occur, it may not happen equally for both members of the couple. For example, a husband might replace lost





social supports more quickly because of his integration into the workplace. This may leave his wife feeling disconnected from her partner in addition to losing her traditional support system. How does this aspect of differential acculturation affect couple dynamics?

What Should We Do With What We Know?

This section of the memo will draw recommendations from the advice of expert researchers and practitioners in the Hispanic community. Some of their recommendations are applicable not just to those programs working with a Hispanic population. They have been organized by those that are more generally applicable and those that will be particularly helpful in primarily Hispanic programs. However, it is important to note that even those recommendations targeted toward Hispanic populations will not apply equally to all Hispanic families, due to cultural variations between different countries of origin, degree of acculturation, and particular families.

General Recommendations

- Marriage education programs should not try to define what a “good” relationship is. Program developers should include couples in program design to be sure that opposing values are not being imposed, and facilitators should allow the definition of a “good” relationship to come from the couples. This applies to every couple, not just Hispanic populations. A huge variety of factors can affect how someone defines a “good” relationship, such as family of origin, culture, age, economic status, and many more.
- Recognize how couples are oriented within their family system and how other members of the family affect the couple’s decision-making. Discuss ways in which the family supports them and issues that may also contribute to conflict in the couple.
- Programs can use children and parenting as a motivator for participation. This may be especially effective for Hispanics, given the emphasis on family responsibility and community. However, all parents may be motivated to participate by what’s best for their children.
- All couples will have some traditions and cultural expectations that they bring with them into their marriage. Programs can help couples identify their relationship dynamics and what causes them and allow them to decide what traditions and norms they want to keep. For Hispanic couples, this might mean choosing to remain connected to extended family while also identifying certain areas of decision-making that belong to the couple.

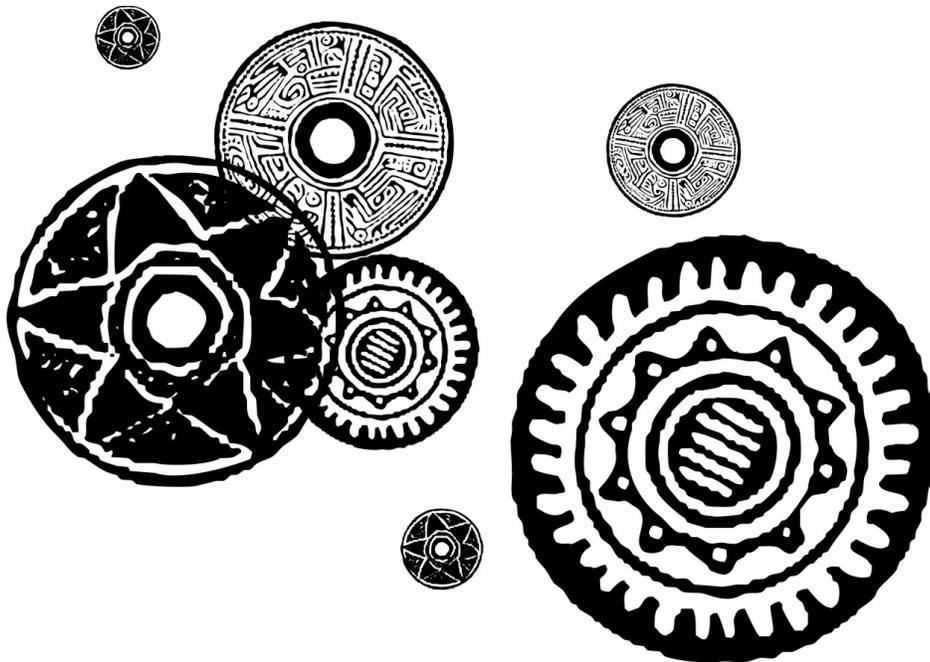
Recommendations for Hispanic Populations

- It may be more effective for program operators to emphasize what’s best for the family and children when trying to recruit Hispanic couples. This message may resonate more than the importance of the couple relationship, due to the traditional role of women as mothers and the cultural prominence of familismo.





- Program operators can try to engage Hispanic men by talking about their dual position as fathers and sons. As fathers, they have a cultural obligation to provide a safe and stable environment for their children. As sons, their strong connection to older generations emphasizes making their family proud and honoring their parents' sacrifices by doing what's best for their family and community.
- Curriculum developers should consider whether certain types of verbal communication are appropriate or helpful, given the traditional gender roles sometimes at play in Hispanic couples' dynamics. For example, Hispanic women may have difficulty in directly communicating their personal needs because of the cultural emphasis on sacrifice and martyrdom. Curriculum developers should recognize that some communication skills and exercises may be more challenging for Hispanic couples due to these traditional norms.
- Curriculum developers may want to pay special attention to challenges that particularly affect Hispanic couples in the areas of negotiating gender roles and extended family networks, including: shifting gender norms resulting from acculturation; lack of social support due to isolation from extended family networks; cultural forms that tolerate domestic violence; and the role of extended family in decision-making.





References

Raffaelli, M. and L.L. Ontai. 2004. "Gender socialization in Latino/a families: Results from two retrospective studies." *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 50: 287-299.

Expert participants from 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.

