



Summary of Issues to be Considered in Curriculum Adaptations





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BACKGROUND STATEMENT

Hispanics/Latinos¹ are the largest ethnic or minority group in the United States, 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, after Caucasian children (Child Welfare League of America, 2003).

As a group, Latinos 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 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 the Latino experience is central to the development of a responsive marriage and relationship education program, the preparation of relevant curricula, and the training of effective staff.

An ever-present challenge in the delivery of marriage and relationship education services to the Hispanic population is identifying culturally relevant and culturally sensitive curricula. Culturally relevant curricula give attention to the values, language, and experiences of Latino couples. Most available curricula were developed with respect to the dominant culture. These curricula may need to be adapted to make them relevant to Hispanic couples. In some cases, the adaptation may be extensive, but many curricula will only need to be “tweaked.”

Tweaking a curriculum involves identifying which examples in the curriculum presentation materials or participant workbook may not resonate with the target population. Including examples of values, needs, and activities that are specific to the local Hispanic community will make the exercises more relevant to the participants. New approaches and additional resources may be required to address the unique needs of the Hispanic population, recognizing changing expectations, challenges to traditional gender roles, different methods of parenting, increased conflict in the household due to acculturation, and effective conflict-resolution techniques. Attention should also be devoted to additional stressors such as losses, hopes and disappointments, language acquisition, and immigration issues, including deportation.

This document is intended to assist practitioners and program developers with the adaptation and evaluation of curricula to ensure that the specific needs of the Hispanic population are met. This memo

¹ The terms Hispanic and Latino will be used interchangeably throughout this document.





is not intended to be an exhaustive discussion of the issue of curriculum adaptations, but rather summarizes advice received from researchers and practitioners in the Hispanic community as part of 1) Supporting Healthy Marriage and Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiative (HHMI) Joint Research Meeting held on September 12-13, 2005, in Washington, DC; 2) a research meeting held in conjunction with the HHMI National Conference, held on May 11, 2006, in San Antonio, Texas; and 3) a research meeting held on September 15-16, 2006, in St. Louis, Missouri, in conjunction with a conference sponsored by the Center for Latino Family Research.

Although there are a variety of considerations for curriculum adaptation for Hispanic couples and families, this brief will discuss the following issues:

- Language: More Than Words
- Acculturation in Couples and Families
- Biculturalism
- Relationship Dynamics

LESSONS LEARNED

Language: More Than Words

The majority of marriage and relationship education curricula were designed with the dominant culture in mind. Although some curricula are available in Spanish, there are additional cultural factors related to language adaptation that should be considered. Existing curricula may use words and phrases that depict beliefs about relationships that are true for the dominant culture but may not accurately reflect the values and ideas about relationships and marriage for Hispanics. These values and ideas are distinct depending on a variety of factors, which practitioners should carefully consider when adapting a curriculum to effectively reach Hispanic couples. Caution should be taken to avoid literal translations that pay little attention to these cultural differences.

Language proficiency and the length of time in the United States are two crucial cultural factors to consider when adapting a curriculum for 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 in Spanish. Furthermore, due to the isolation that the lack of language proficiency can impose, the material may need to be adapted so that it more closely aligns with the traditional values of their original culture. Regardless of whether services are provided in English or Spanish, the vocabulary used in a curriculum should also be considered as education and literacy levels of participants may vary.

It is also important to clarify that language refers to more than a verbal means of communicating. Spanish may be the recommended language to use in a program for native Spanish speakers, as it was in Spanish that the emotional affective meaning of relationships was encoded. Couples may identify with concepts presented in Spanish as this was the language spoken when they first fell in love. A solid understanding of cultural ideas and concepts surrounding relationships is essential to convey the most





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

Acculturation in Couples and Families

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. The process of cultural adaptation, or acculturation, of Hispanics is not linear. There are many variables that interact and proceed at a different pace. Latinos 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. For many Hispanics, as with other new immigrants, the process by which they adapt and create their own unique way to function is influenced by many factors. 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 affect the acculturation process.

Acculturation affects men and women differently. For example, men seem to acculturate faster than women, which may be related to their role as providers and resulting exposure to work outside the home. As with many newly immigrated families, the male may arrive in the United States some time before the rest of the family. More time spent interacting within the English-speaking culture results in a stronger mastery of the language. The acquisition of language proficiency is related to the ability to secure a job, which may be associated with either 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. Practitioners should be aware of how acculturation, language acquisition, and employment status can affect the couple and family relationship and should consider how curricula could be adapted to address these issues.

The process of acculturation may increase desirable outcomes in some areas of family life while also increasing undesirable ones. For example, acculturation may result in an increased dissonance in couple expectations and increased couple conflict, whereas it is also correlated with a positive increase in child-centered parenting styles. The parent-child relationship may be affected negatively by the acculturation process as children tend to acculturate at a faster rate. Children may more readily adopt the values and norms of the dominant culture, which could conflict with ideals and beliefs held by their parents. These clashing views may cause unique challenges when parenting, which can lead to additional stress on the couple relationship. These examples suggest that the importance of management and effective resolution of conflict is essential for couple stability and child well-being. Programs targeting Hispanic couples and families should ensure that the curriculum used is adapted in such a way that this connection is explored.

Biculturalism

Biculturalism recognizes the non-linear co-existence of an ethnic-self in the dominant culture and 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 biculturalistic position endorses the belief that minority or new arrival groups can achieve balance living in the United States by honoring their culture while also adapting to function in the mainstream U.S. culture. Total assimilation to the U.S. culture is not the goal in a bicultural model.

Biculturalism, or feeling acculturated while in the United States but also functioning comfortably while in their native country, may be an aspiration for some couples, but for other couples biculturalism may not be the goal. 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 seasonal workers, their stay in the United States may be perceived, by themselves and/or others in the community, as transitory or periodical, which may impact their motivation to adapt to the culture. It is important for practitioners to understand that not all couples going through the acculturation process have the same objectives and that adaptations to curricula should consider their different goals.

Relationship Dynamics

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. These stressors undoubtedly play a role in the dynamics of the couple relationship, and attention should be given to the manner in which a Hispanic couple manages them. For example, recently immigrated Hispanics may be torn between maintaining the routines and traditions of their country of origin and embracing those of the dominant society. Likewise, tension may manifest when the family is comprised of both non-U.S. and U.S. born Hispanics. When the children in a family are U.S. born while their parents and/or extended family are non-U.S. born, conflicts may arise if they experience pressure to adhere to customs that seem to contradict those of their peers. This scenario may also be true for couples with different cultural backgrounds or for those who experience the acculturation process differently. Whether related to parenting or differing acculturation levels, the pressure to function in two cultures may create stress on a relationship, affecting how a couple interacts with one another. It is important for curricula adaptations to discuss how a couple's cultural values influence their response to said stressors and how this, in turn, may affect the family unit.

Another challenge faced by Hispanics living in the United States that may affect relationship dynamics is related to employment. For recent immigrants, the process of language acquisition and/or employment restrictions may result in accepting positions at a lower professional level, or working multiple jobs to adequately provide for their families. Furthermore, the wife may find that she must work outside the home to supplement her husband's income, whereas this may not have been necessary in her country of origin. In some cases, a woman may actually earn more than her spouse which, for a traditional couple, in which the husband's role is that of provider, may be viewed as his inability to fulfill familial responsibilities, leading to dissension in the relationship. When addressing relationship dynamics with Hispanic couples, curricula should be adapted to assess whether the couple has access to family and community resources and if cohesiveness and connectedness exists within the family and greater community. These factors may impact the dynamics of the couple relationship and may provide support to the couple as they confront challenges and barriers of interacting within two cultures simultaneously.



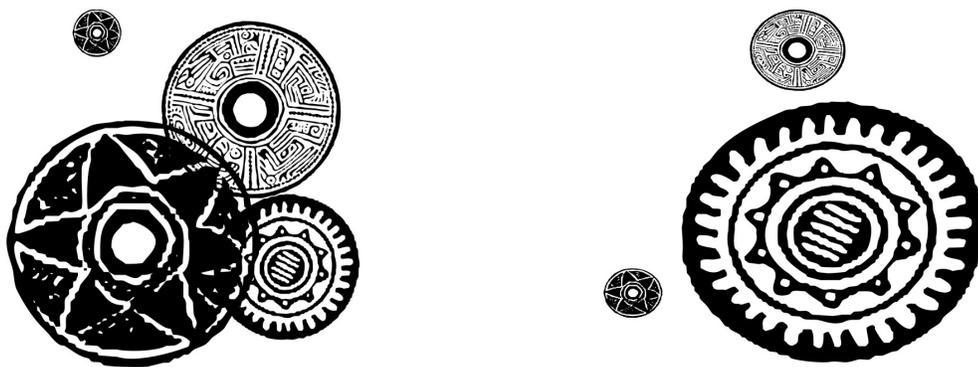


It is unknown if the current U.S. mainstream's focus on couple relationships may be detrimental for Hispanic families. Little research is available to determine how the couple dyad affects the other parts of the family system within Latino families. What is known, however, is that Hispanics place tremendous value on family (including the extended family), and curricula adaptations may be necessary to incorporate this value with respect to exploring family structure, communication, and decision making. These factors and how they relate to Latino couples may differ from couples of the dominant culture.

With respect to the family, most marriage education curricula present the couple dyad as an independent entity that is one part of a larger system. This view of the couple implies that communication and decision making between partners happens apart from the rest of the family, having little direct impact on the family system. This may not be true for Latino couples. Given the limited research in this area, practitioners should be careful not to compel couples to acculturate by adopting the dominant culture's way of viewing marriage, couples, and family. Caution must be taken to determine if the existing marriage education curricula may alienate an already disenfranchised population by imposing values, communication styles, and relationship dynamics that are not relevant. Practitioners should recognize that the population they are working with has significant knowledge about their values, how the couple and extended family interact and what contributes to a healthy relationship. Practitioners should view this as a strength and incorporate this knowledge into curricula adaptation as well as into how it is presented. Facilitators should avoid "teaching" as experts but should present the curriculum content in a way that allows couples to decide for themselves what will work best for their relationship and family.

SUMMARY

When providing marriage and relationship education to Hispanic couples, practitioners must be aware of a multitude of cultural components that influence how couples will respond to a curriculum, or if the curriculum will even be effective as a learning device. Adaptations must be made on a variety of issues to ensure that the concepts and ideas presented in a curriculum are relevant and valuable to Hispanics. Practitioners should apply the lessons learned that are outlined in this brief when adapting curricula and should consider other factors that may be distinct to their target population. The more specific a curriculum is to the Hispanic couples to whom it is presented, the more likely it is that the couples will perceive the information and skills as worthwhile and beneficial to their own relationship.





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