

# **Effects of Acculturative Stress on the Hispanic Family**

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# **The Effects of Acculturative Stress on the Hispanic Family**

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## **Introduction**

Much has been written about the increasing rates of divorce in the United States over the past 40 years. However, most research has focused on the effects of divorce on middle-class White American families. While there has been an increase in research on marital instability among Black American families (McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi & Wilson, 2000), there is much less information about evolving family structures among Hispanics (Vega, 1990; Oropesa & Landale, 2004). Further, there is a dearth of information on the divorce rates among Hispanics and what effect they might be having on children.

Because the Mexican American subgroup is the largest of the various ethnic groups categorized as Hispanic and about which there is the most written, this chapter will focus primarily on Mexican Americans, but where appropriate information will be extended to other Hispanic groups.

An important consideration in this chapter will be such issues as familism, gender roles, immigration and acculturation, religion, socioeconomic status and the role that each of these plays in the Hispanic family. Further, we will utilize a theoretical framework that capitalizes on acculturative stress and coping in our analysis of the marital bond in Hispanic families. Oropesa and Landale (2004) in their assessment of the future of marriage among Hispanics note that migration is stressful and risky, and requires flexibility in responsibilities and roles for immigrants to experience success in their new

environment. This coupled with the greater freedom enjoyed by women in the United States may result in changes in the role that marriage has traditionally played in Hispanic culture.

Hispanic men and women experience many of the same general stressors as any one else regardless of ethnicity or race; however, there is a class of stressors associated with immigration and acculturation that needs to be taken into consideration when discussing the Hispanic family (Cervantes, Padilla, & Salgado de Snyder, 1991; Flores, Tschann, Marin, & Panotja, 2004). Finally, this chapter will deviate from other works on the Hispanic family in a very significant way. Most of the literature on the Hispanic family has focused on the theme that the family or “*la familia*” is sacred in the Hispanic culture. This literature capitalizes on the strong familial bonds between family members extending over multiple generations and the sacrifices that family members make for each other (Contreras, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 1996; Zambrana, 1995). The literature on “*la familia*” is replete with positive stereotypes of the Hispanic family and often these positive images are contrasted with family patterns found among other ethnic groups (Falicov, 1982; Williams, 1990). In this chapter we take the position that the Hispanic family is not monolithic and that these families, like all families, encounter daily stressors that often culminate in broken relationships and divorce. More importantly, we agree with Oropesa and Landale (2004) that acculturative stress and exposure to American culture will erode the traditional values associated with marriage among Hispanics and their descendants.

## **Acculturation Stress and Coping**

Stress is a normal occurrence in a person's life. In fact, there are many reasons why stress can be a good thing. Stress can function as a motivator to change our behavior if something is not going as well as we would hope. For example, if an individual finds his job to be unsatisfying or if he has a strong difference of opinion from that of his supervisor, he might find going to work stressful and consequently seek a new position or even consider a change in occupation. If the person feels that s/he is making a good decision about a career shift or a job change, then this would be a good example of stress serving as a positive influence in a person's life. However, when we speak of stress in our life we typically think about stress as something negative that causes us undue anxiety. This type of stress can occur from many sources. A sampling of typical stressors that we encounter in the stress literature are: interpersonal difficulties with family members such as parents, siblings, spouses, children; problems with peers, co-workers, or even strangers; financial obligations and/or inability to meet basic necessities such as food, shelter, and clothing; environmental conditions such as pollutants, excessive noise, over crowded living conditions; and stress associated with personal poor health or of people we are close to. No one is immune from these types of stressors. Fortunately some individuals have more social support systems in place (e.g., family and friends, religion, access to public social services) or personal resources (e.g., self-esteem) to enable them to more effectively cope with these stressors.

Another major class of stressors that researchers and mental health clinicians have begun to study has to do with acculturation and the adaptation process that immigrants and their offspring experience following migration to a new country and culture (e.g.,

Berry, 1994; Cervantes et al., 1991; Flores et al., 2004). In the general stress and coping literature (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) there is seldom mention of how acculturation related stressors that are common with immigrants add a layer of stress that is not experienced by the general population. For example, in a scale developed for assessing acculturative stress among immigrants from Latin America, Cervantes et al. (1991) found that immigrants reported the following items as particularly stressful:

- Due to poor English, people treated me badly.
- I felt guilty leaving behind family/friends in my home country.
- I felt like I would never regain the status/respect I had in my home country.
- I have felt unaccepted by Americans due to my [Latino] culture.
- I am discriminated against because of my race or background.

In addition to these items, another cluster of items emerged through factor analysis that reflected cultural and family conflict that occurs following immigration. These stressors are related to differential rates of acculturation between males and females because of greater autonomy enjoyed by woman in this country compared to women in more traditional cultures. Among the stress items identified by Cervantes et al. are:

- My personal goals conflicted with my family's goals.
- Some family members have become too individualistic.
- I noticed that religion is less important to me than before.
- Due to my acculturation, I've had arguments with my family.
- Family members have considered divorce for marital problems.

A final class of stressors that were identified through factor analysis and that relate directly to the topic of this chapter – marriage and divorce – are items specific to marital

conflict among Hispanic immigrants and their descendents who may still be experiencing acculturative stress. Before turning to these items, it is important to emphasize that married Hispanic couples experience the full range of psychosocial stressors that all married couples irrespective of ethnicity or culture experience (e.g., conflicts in relationship dynamics, financial difficulties, etc.). However, acculturative stressors may impact Hispanic married couples in unique ways that make coping more difficult because the usual cultural and social supports (e.g., extended family, Catholic Church) that are available to couples in the home country may not be readily available in the adopted country. Thus, the added emotional burden of acculturative stress on less acculturated Hispanics may significantly disrupt their family life and further fracture their connection with the home culture.

Hispanic married couples that differ in their rate of acculturation may find that their changing values and lifestyles are at odds with each other. Some of the pressures that Hispanic couples encounter as they make the transition to life in the United States are reflected in the following stress items reported by Cervantes et al.:

- My spouse and I disagree on which language to speak at home.
- My spouse expected me to be more traditional in our relationship.
- My spouse hasn't been adapting to the American way of life.
- It's hard to see why my spouse wants to be more Americanized.
- My spouse and I find it hard to combine Hispanic and American culture.
- My spouse and I disagree on the importance of religion in the family.

Little research exists on how exactly acculturative stress impacts the life of Hispanics as they become assimilated into the American mainstream. In a study of 140

newly married Mexican women who immigrated to the United States after the age of 14, Salgado de Snyder (1987) found a significant correlation between acculturative stress and depressive symptomatology (as measured by the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D)). Additionally, acculturative stress by itself significantly predicted 16% of the variance in depressive symptomatology. However, the ways in which Hispanics can be resilient to the negative consequences of stress in their lives generally, and more specifically in their marital relationships is in need of investigation. What is apparent is that acculturative stress may influence how Hispanics view divorce and single parenthood as a viable option in the United States. In Latin America the view that marriage “is forever” is changing and divorce is becoming more acceptable; nonetheless, divorce is still generally frowned upon and not always readily granted by the state. Further, the concept of “no fault” divorce, while not uniquely American, is much less common in more traditional countries. In other words, divorce has not entered into the cultural fabric of the Latin American family structure in the same way that it has in this country. With approximately 50% of all marriages ending in divorce in this country, divorce is not a surprise nor is it viewed as a tragedy for the family when it happens. In Latin America though, divorce is still viewed by most people as a negative stigma for the extended family and it creates additional stress for both sides of the family. As immigration from Latin America continues and as Hispanics acculturate to American culture, it appears that divorce is another behavioral (i.e., coping) outcome that emerges with acculturation to the values and norms of American culture (Oropesa & Lansdale, 2004).



## **Cultural and Historical Context of Relationship Stress**

### Demographic Information on Hispanics

In the 1990 census, Hispanics<sup>1</sup> numbered 22.4 million (Stroup and Pollock, 1999). In the 2000 census, the number of Hispanics grew to 35.3 million, or 12.5 percent of the population (U. S. Bureau of the Census, March 2001). Mexican Americans numbered 21 million, or 7.3 percent of the American population. The Mexican origin population is by far the largest of the Hispanic groups with approximately 21 million, followed by 3.41 million Puerto Ricans, and 1.24 Cuban Americans. In recent years, there have also been sizable increases of Hispanic immigrants from Central and South America. In proportion to their number, it is the new Latinos for whom the figures are most changed. These new Hispanics have increased in number by 2.4 million between 1990 and 2000.

Conservatively, 335,000 additional Dominicans and Salvadorans have settled in the United States between 1990 and 2000 bringing the total up to 1.42 million. Add to this another 91,000 Columbians who have entered after 1990 and this group's population is approximately 471,000. Other large groups include approximately 372,000 Guatemalans and 218,000 Hondurans who call the United States home. Three groups are quickly approaching the three quarters of a million mark – these groups are Ecuadorians, Peruvians, and Hondurans. Finally, the 2000 census counted another 670,000 new Latinos from a total of 9 other Latin American countries (U.S. Bureau of the Census, March, 2001).

These groups all share a common language – Spanish, and a value system that encompasses specific gender roles and interpersonal relationships. Nonetheless, there are

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<sup>1</sup> Since most national statistics are given in terms of the percentage of Hispanics in the total American population, we will use the term Hispanic rather than Latino. Also, if particular authors use specific subgroup designations such as Mexican American, that is the term we use in the chapter.

important differences between Hispanic subgroups which one might expect considering that each group has a distinct colonial history to Spain. Part of the uniqueness across groups also stems from the fact that the countries differ in their geography, political and social institutions, their own respective immigration histories to the U.S., and in their relationship with their European and indigenous roots. Despite their differences, there are enough similarities to engage in a discussion of the role of the family in the context of Hispanic culture, the pressures of minority status and acculturative stress, and family disruption and the effects of this on children.

Forty three percent of Hispanics reside in the West and 33% in the Southern part of the U.S. The total U.S population is concentrated in the West (36%), but is more evenly distributed across the other regions than is the Hispanic population. In the West, Hispanics represent as much as 18% of the total population while in the South they represent about 12% of the population. The ten states with the largest Hispanic populations include: California [11 million], Texas [6.7 million], New York, Florida, New Jersey, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Washington, and Illinois. These data show that about 50% of all Hispanics are concentrated in two states – California and Texas. However, the average growth in the top ten states (33%) was outpaced by the growth of Hispanics in states that were not traditionally populated by Hispanics. Census data show that growth rates quadrupled in the last decade in North Carolina, Arkansas, Georgia, and Tennessee, while this rate tripled in states such as South Carolina, Alabama, and Kentucky. Other states that evidenced a large growth of Hispanics include Nevada, Nebraska, and Minnesota. Collectively, these population statistics indicate that Hispanics are increasingly found in areas that differ from their previous geographic preferences, and

consequently are transforming geographic areas that had not previously had large Hispanic presences. Moreover, Hispanics represent the largest minority group in all but New York, New Jersey, and Illinois.

The regional preferences of Hispanic groups in 2000 indicate that most Cubans live in the South (74%), the majority of Puerto Ricans live in the Northeast (61%), and most Mexicans live in the West (55%). Contrary to some stereotypes, the overwhelming majority (91%) of Hispanics live in urban areas and the proportion of urban dwellers has remained unchanged since 1990.

Current rates of divorce for Hispanics have remained similar to rates between 1960 and 1980. In the 2000 census, 7.4% of Hispanics age fifteen years and older were divorced. This compares to a national average of 9.7%, and the “non-Hispanic White” rate of 10.1%. Conversely, the marital separation only rate for this group of Hispanics was 3.6% compared to the national separation rate of 2.2%, and the “non-Hispanic White” rate of 1.4% (Kreider and Simmons, 2003). Thus, Hispanics are below the national norm for divorce, but above it for separation. Bean and Tienda (1987) corroborated this finding when they reported that when separation statistics are included in marital disruption, differences between non-Hispanic whites and Hispanics disappear. Teachman, Tedrow, & Crowder (2000) reported that Hispanics are following national trends in both marriage and divorce rates. For Hispanic women aged 40-44, divorce rates rose from 20% to 27% between 1980 and 1990, and as of the 2000 census the overall rate for Hispanic females who were once married and are divorced or separated is 21.5%. Thus, Hispanic females have caught up with White non-Hispanic counterparts and the national average of 21.1% for all divorced or separated families (Teachman et al., 2000).

These percentages do not take remarriages into account, so the total percentage of people who have ever been divorced or separated is higher than the stated rates.

Based on these statistical data, we can assert safely that, for a large portion of the Hispanic population, the stereotype of having stronger familial ties than the rest of the American population is not well founded. The rates for separation and divorce among Hispanics indicate that many couples are under undue psychological stress and that one negative consequence is separation and/or divorce. Another less positive view is that Hispanics are acculturating to the dominant family norms of American culture, since their divorce and separation rates straddle the national averages. Other forces at work that are known to be correlated to marital stress and family instability are low socioeconomic status, lower levels of educational attainment, and earlier entrance into marriage (Wang & Amato, 2000).

#### Historic Perspective of Hispanics' Rates of Divorce

Although Hispanic families, and in particular Mexican American families, have historically had lower rates of divorce than other groups, divorce is not uncommon in the Mexican American family. An early call for the need for research on divorce among Hispanics was put forth by Wagner (1993) who argued that research on Hispanics was fixated on the notion of *la familia* as a stable and enduring institution that was the cornerstone of Hispanic life. Accordingly, research efforts were dedicated to the intact nuclear and extended family, rather than on factors that might disrupt family structure and functioning despite a caring and supportive extended family. Further, Wagner believed that the effects of marital discord and divorce needed to address all family members: father, mother, children, and extended family members because how the family

as a collective and individually coped with stress and marital discord is possibly different for Hispanics than it is for families of other ethnic groups. In addition, the rapid increase of the Hispanic population in the last three decades and the fact that this group is now the largest ethnic group in the United States makes the study of this population all the more important.

A common stereotype of Hispanic culture is that it has clearly defined gender roles for different members of the family (Ginorio, Guitierrez, Cauce, & Acosta, 1995). The father has a dominant, bread-winner role, and the mother has a subordinate, child-bearer role. This stereotype is another reason that Mexican Americans are seen as having stable families. Since married couples are expected to have little tension in the marriage caused by gender role conflict, these families are not expected to have high divorce rates. For instance, Neff, Gilbert, & Hoppe (1991) in their work with Mexican American families in the Southwest state,

...while marital instability (defined as the sum of remarried, divorced, and separated) among ever married women in the Southwest increased between 1960-80 from 23% to 31% for Anglos and from 38% to 43% for Blacks, marital instability among Mexican Americans during that period increased only from 19% to 21%. ( p.76)

However, as noted above, more recent census information (see Oropesa & Landale, 2004) contradicts the Neff et al. (1991) conclusion. Thus, the stereotypes of having stronger familial ties than other American groups and clearly defined gender roles, if in fact true, do not serve as protective factors shielding Hispanics from marital distress and divorce. In fact, it is likely that Hispanics, as they

acculturate to the dominant norms and values of American society, also adjust their stance on divorce and avail themselves of the legal protections through no fault divorce law offered anyone else about the freedom to choose to remain married or not.

### Hispanics and Catholicism

Catholicism plays a significant role in the lives of people throughout Latin America, and by extension among Hispanics in the United States. There is evidence that religion and spirituality play a protective role in moderating the effects of stress in people's lives. Studies have also shown the importance that religiosity plays in the life of Hispanics, especially for women. Thus, it makes sense to examine the role of the Catholic Church and its relevance to divorce among Hispanics. Since a large portion of the Hispanic population is at least nominally Roman Catholic, it is important to examine the influence that religion has on the family life of Hispanics. In Catholicism, marriage is a sacrament, thus divorce is not accepted in the Catholic faith (Jenks and Woolever, 1999, p.46). In fact, Catholics who marry in the Church, but who later want to divorce must undergo the long process of seeking an annulment of the marriage. The process involved in obtaining an annulment is complicated and is not "fault-free" as we see today in family law. Jenks and Woolever (1999) describe the process for seeking an annulment as follows:

Typically, the divorced person who is seeking an annulment makes some contact with his/her parish priest. Usually after some discussion, the person is directed to the marriage tribunal of his or her archdiocese. The tribunal then gathers information about the people involved in the

marriage and the marriage itself... As part of this process, the petitioner is asked to provide the names of witnesses who can provide information about the partners and their marriage as requested by the tribunal. If it is determined that the petition for an annulment has merit, a “judge” is assigned the case... the judge may also ask that psychological evaluations be conducted... a “defender of the bond” is also presented with the arguments... Once this is complete, the judge renders his verdict... If an annulment is granted, it is automatically appealed and reviewed. When the original decision is upheld by the appeal board... the process is complete. (p.48)

The annulment is a declaration that the marriage was never valid. Further, if the annulment is granted, both former spouses are considered to be in good standing in the Church and they are free to remarry, even in the Church if they so choose. The annulment process is a long, involved one. It seems that both the attitude of the Church and the difficulty of the annulment process would dissuade many couples from seeking an official annulment from the Church. This, of course, would only be applicable to the segment of the population that believed an official annulment was necessary. Since a large percentage of the Hispanic population is only nominally Catholic, this may not apply to all. Also, the process intimidates many people because it entails contact with clergy about personal matters that they may feel uncomfortable disclosing to a priest. The process, while not costly in the monetary sense, does involve a psychological cost (e.g., stress and anxiety) because of the layers of religious bureaucracy involved and a

long period of uncertainty of whether the annulment will be granted whereas in no fault divorce the outcome is certain.

The literature on Catholicism and Hispanics is minimal, especially on the question of divorce. Thus, we do not expect to see useful information on the role of the Church until a major study is conducted. As a measure of the scarcity of literature, the Jenks and Woolever (1999) study is the first ever written on Catholic annulments and the study had only a small sample of Hispanic respondents. In the study, 213 Catholics throughout the country were surveyed. The sample consisted of mostly White middle-class respondents, and the number of annulled, divorced Catholics was about the same as the number of non-annulled, divorced Catholics. The small number of Hispanic Americans in the study represented 5.6 % of the annulled Catholics, and 2.5 % of the non-annulled, divorced Catholics. The larger percentage of Hispanics in the annulled group may reflect their stronger desire to seek official annulment from the Church, but a small sample and sampling concerns limit any firm conclusions that can be drawn from this study. An interesting finding from the study was that current monthly attendance at worship services and the average number of hours spent each month with church groups were the only two variables that were significantly correlated with higher rates of annulment for the total sample.

It seems that the requirement for Catholics to seek annulment may deter Catholics from divorce, since these people would likely desire to fulfill the Catholic requirement that their marriage be annulled. In addition, they may delay longer in seeking an annulment than they would a “no fault” divorce, because the Church first fosters the idea of reconciliation. In fact, “Whereas nationally the average length of the divorced



person's first marriage is approximately 11 years, the average duration here is between fifteen and sixteen years" (Jenks and Woolever, 1999, p.54). No information is provided about the duration of marriage among Hispanics prior to divorce and seeking an annulment.

It is also important to note the rapid increase in the number of annulments granted by the American Roman Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council. Prior to the Second Vatican Council the regulations guiding policy on annulments were stricter than they are now following the changes made by the bishops at the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. The Church now recognizes many psychological reasons that justify an annulment, whereas, before Vatican II, only insanity, fraud, and impotence were recognized as legitimate bases for annulment. "Within a twenty-year period, from 1968 to 1988, grants for annulments rose from 368 to approximately 50,000 nationwide ... also ... a majority (80%) of these annulment petitions are granted" (Jenks and Woolever, 1999, p.46). The current number of American annulments is 60,000, which accounts for 77% of annulments given worldwide.

In sum, it seems that the Church's influence on the matter of divorce is waning at least in the United States. Hispanic divorce rates are increasing beyond the rates of non-Hispanic whites, and policy shifts within the Catholic Church have resulted in extremely high numbers of annulments relative to the numbers allowed prior to the Second Vatican Council. In seeking annulments, Hispanic Americans may also be approaching rates similar to the general American Catholic population.

In addition to religiosity when we discuss divorce among Hispanics we also have to consider generational differences, poverty, low average level of education, and age of

first marriage. There are now a large number of studies that have examined the relationship between generational level (i.e., immigrant generation versus later American born) and acculturation among Hispanics (Keefe & Padilla, 1987; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Let's turn now to an examination of generation of respondents in the context of marital stability.

#### Acculturation and Relationship Distress

A major confounding variable in research comparing diverse ethnic groups is acculturation. Although we discussed acculturative stress in an earlier section of this chapter more discussion is in order. Acculturation refers to the degree to which an individual has adopted the beliefs, values, and norms of behavior of the dominant culture. For example, an early study (Tharp, Meadow, Lennhoff, & Satterfield, 1968) found that Mexican American wives relatively high in acculturation (as measured by language preference) subscribed to marital roles that were more egalitarian in nature than those of relatively less acculturated Mexican American wives who held on to the belief that the male was the decision maker in the relationship. In a later study, Vega, Kolody, and Valle (1988) hypothesized that marginal acculturation may function as an independent stressor because it causes the less acculturated spouse to feel less capable of managing her/his new cultural environment and forces her/him to be dependent on their more acculturated spouse. Feelings of personal isolation and alienation may ensue which create marital conflict. In their study, Vega et al. found support for their hypothesis with a sample of 550 Mexican American immigrant women.

Less acculturated women reported increased marital stress, self-denigration, and the loss of the ability to negotiate as a response to marital conflict.

In contrast, other studies have suggested that marital distress is linked to higher, rather than lower, levels of acculturation. In a study comparing Mexican American couples born in Mexico with Mexican heritage persons born in the United States, Casas and Ortiz (1985) identified higher marital satisfaction in the former group and concluded that “the more acculturated U.S.-born couples may be more exposed to the stressors inherent in the redefining of traditional husband/wife roles” (p. 1027). For example, Mexican American couples relatively high in acculturation have been shown to make significantly more joint decisions for purchases than less acculturated couples (O’Guinn, Imperia, & MacAdams, 1987; Webster, 1994), but in so doing they also experience more distress possibly because of differences in acculturation levels. In a study of 151 Mexican American husbands and wives, Flores et al. (2004) found that more acculturated couples reported significantly more marital conflict than those couples who identified strongly as Mexican and who were more likely to be immigrants. The study probed specific levels of both acculturation and inter-spousal conflict. Flores et al. concluded that higher levels of acculturation reflected more direct expressions of power issues between husbands and wives resulting in greater conflict and potential marital dissolution.

In a study that compared Mexican American and non-Hispanic White couples on marital satisfaction, Negy and Snyder (1997) found no differences on marital satisfaction between non-Hispanic White males and Mexican American males regardless of level of

acculturation. There were no significant differences between non-Hispanic husbands and wives on marital satisfaction. However, the more acculturated Mexican American wives expressed greater marital distress on two dimensions: time together and sexual dissatisfaction. Here time together is an expression of time shared in leisure activity and sexual dissatisfaction reflects displeasure with the frequency and quality of intercourse. A conclusion that can be drawn from these findings is that acculturation and any accompanying distress due to acculturation has a greater impact on the woman and her role as wife.

A different approach to the question of marital cohesion and distress focuses on changes in economic dependency between the husband and wife (e.g., Teachman, Tedrow, and Crowder, 2000; Oropesa & Landale, 2004). The median income for Hispanic men declined from \$18,800 in 1980 to \$16,200 in 1997, and as more Hispanic women enter the labor force, economic independence may be propelling divorce rates (Teachman et al., 2000). It may be that the higher distress among highly acculturated Mexican American couples in the Casas and Ortiz (1985) study reflects increased stress associated with pressures to redefine their marital roles, expectations, and adjustment while also trying to remain loyal to their traditional family background.

As Mexican Americans acculturate they come into direct contact with an American individualist ethos that some researchers hypothesize is the factor behind the American “culture of divorce” (Oropesa & Landale, 2004). This American ethos conflicts with Mexican traditional values of family unity, but it is likely that more acculturated Mexican Americans, especially woman, are pulled more in the direction of the values of

their adopted country and come to see divorce as a viable option to marital discord. Clearly, much more research on the relationship of acculturation and acculturative stress to marital satisfaction, and the differential impact on Hispanic men and women, is needed. Acculturation does alter a person's relationship to members of her/his family; however, little is known about how respective family members cope with these changes when they impact interpersonal dynamics between husbands and wives and their children.

#### Generational Differences and Marital Stability

Because the Hispanic population consists of immigrants and their descendents, it is important to disaggregate data by generational levels to understand the effects of acculturation. The significance of this is that with other populations such as non-Hispanic whites and African Americans, generational differences are often of little relevance when considering an issue like divorce. However, when intergroup comparisons are made about marriage and divorce rates across non-Hispanic whites, African Americans, and Hispanics it is very important to be able to specify whether the Hispanics are first generation immigrants or later generation Hispanics and whether or not they resemble non-Hispanic whites in terms of family-related values.

In a study of single mothers in San Jose, California generational differences were found to influence social support networks among Mexican Americans. According to Schaffer and Wagner (1996), "It was striking that the generational differences were statistically significant in both the proportion of kin and the number of friends, which were precisely the two variables for which ethnicity was not a significant predictor"

(p.84). First-generation Mexican American women had fewer relatives living close to them and the greatest number of non-relatives in their support group. The second-generation Mexican American women had high family involvement, as expected. Interestingly, the results for third-generation Mexican American women showed "... a bicultural adaptation pattern in which kin are not eliminated from the network, but rather friends are added" (Schaffer & Wagner, 1996, p.84).

Schaffer and Wagner (1996) show that generational differences can be important when considering women's social support networks, and if we believe that such support is important in how women cope with divorce, then it is evident that later generation Hispanic women would fare better than their first generation immigrant counterparts. More research is needed to determine whether this hypothesis is supported by the data.

At a more macro-level Oropesa and Landale (2004), in their analysis of census data, see a bleaker picture for Hispanics in terms of SES variables that have ramifications for understanding marital stability among this population. These authors hold that

If past is prologue, the future of marriage among Hispanics is likely to be shaped by the social and economic trajectories of the second and third generations. If the education and skill levels of these generations are similar to those of their parents, they will not be well positioned to support marriages and families in the future, especially because later generations will not have the countries of origin of their parents and grandparents as a frame of reference. Although the parents of second- and third-generation Hispanics typically have a strong prenuptial orientation, and although U.S. immigration policy favors the admission of immigrants who are married, there is little reason to expect that marriage will

strengthen as an institution under the weight of Hispanicization and the larger economic and cultural processes currently underway in U.S. society. (p. 917)

### **Effects of Divorce among Hispanics**

#### Effects of Divorce on Hispanic Men

Findings regarding the effects of gender on divorce distress and adjustment are inconsistent (Wang & Amato, 2000). The effects of divorce on Hispanic males are important since men cope differently with the stressors associated with marital instability and divorce (Flores et al., 2004). Latin culture is male oriented and machismo still reigns supreme in Latin America. What this means is that males hold power in the family and their pronouncements with respect to such things as the woman's role in the marriage, children, and household responsibility are generally followed. However, this view of the "macho" husband and father is breaking down and studies report that with acculturation there is more joint decision making in Hispanic families (e.g., Ginorio, et al, 1995). What is not well understood though is how Hispanic males are coping with these changing family patterns and whether they are threatened by their spouses' new found "sexual and marital" liberation. It might be that Hispanic males who traditionally are socialized to be "machos" in their relationships with women might have major difficulties in coping with marital separation and divorce when the wife indicates that she wants to terminate the relationship and is supported in this decision by her family and by "no fault" divorce laws in this country.

There are important questions as well having to do with differences in income and the amount of time spent with non-custodial children after divorce by fathers. Because a greater number of Hispanic families fall below the federal poverty guidelines, when a

couple does separate and divorce, there are many Hispanic children growing up without their non-custodial fathers (Battle, 2002). Further, although the figures are difficult to gather, it appears that many divorced fathers, because of their already low wages, are unable to make regular and appropriate child care payments to the mother. As a consequence, Hispanic fathers may be considerably negligent in both the financial and emotional care of their children.

In a study of 556 Hispanics from a base of General Social Survey respondents, males suffered less economically than females (Stroup and Pollock, 1999). According to Stroup and Pollock, Hispanic women suffered a loss of 24% in their income level compared with no significant loss in income for males following divorce. Clearly, the economic consequences of divorce are worse for Hispanic females than for males. Importantly, this effect was shown to be significant across different socioeconomic strata. In the highest level, Professional/Technical, no significant difference was shown for income differentials between men and women. However, in the lower four categories: Executive/Administrative/Sales, Crafts, Operatives, and Unskilled Labor, a significant income difference was found between men and women in each category. “In the lower four SES categories, the ratio of mean income of divorced to mean income of married is .81 or lower, indicating a loss of 19% or greater” (Stroup and Pollock, 1999 p.156). Even when controlling for socioeconomic status, females suffer a large economic loss, unless they have high levels of education and opportunity for income to overcome the effects. In the lowest category, Unskilled Labor, where a significant loss is most difficult to endure due to income levels that are already low, a loss of 25% was found in the data.



In the case of Hispanic men, Stroup and Pollock (1999) reported that for the 371 Hispanic males in their sample no difference was found between married men's income and divorced men's mean income. In fact, the data showed that there was not a gap between the two mean incomes. That is, the ratio was essentially equal to one. More importantly, Hispanic males with greater educational attainment showed an increase in their income ratio following divorce in comparison to comparable married Hispanic males (Stroup and Pollock, 1999). No information is available unfortunately that informs us if these divorced middle class Hispanic males paid child support. More research is needed to understand the emotional and financial burdens carried by divorced Hispanic fathers, because we know that a single mother with financial hardship suffers undue stress and humiliation because of poverty.

Importantly, this study does not control for the length of time since the divorce. For the non-Hispanic white population, income levels usually begin to show an increase for women beginning after about two years post-divorce (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Thus, more research is needed about post-divorce income for both Hispanic men and women to determine whether the same pattern of income recovery for Hispanic women holds as it does for non-Hispanic white women.

Another post-divorce consideration has to do with Hispanic fathers' contact with children following divorce. Gray (1989) found no significant difference between fathers' involvement with children in two types of post-divorce families: those who have two Hispanic natural parents, and those who have two non-Hispanic natural parents. Fathers' involvement was measured in the study by father-child contact in the number of hours spent with children, legal representation, and custody requests. One significant

difference between Hispanic and non-Hispanic males is that in Hispanic families mothers were more likely to have sole custody of their children, whereas in the case of non-Hispanic families' joint custody of children was the norm. However, fathers in both ethnic groups did not differ in their involvement with children.

Interestingly, in the case of intermarried families (where only the father is Hispanic), the father's level of participation was higher than for fathers in non-Hispanic families (Gray, 1989). Intermarried families with a Hispanic father were found to score higher on "measures of father-child contact, custody requests (reflecting higher father involvement), legal representation of the father, divorce filings by the father, and the father's preference for custody" (Gray, 1989 p.117). In sum, Hispanic fathers manifest a higher interest in their children after the divorce if they are of a different ethnicity than their wife. This may, however, be due to a self-selection bias, since fathers may be more likely to submit questionnaires if they are more involved with their children. Another important consideration that requires research has to do with Hispanic males involved in interethnic marriages. One presumption is that intermarried Hispanic men are more acculturated and of a higher socioeconomic status and this may explain why they are more willing to exert time, money, and effort in maintaining contact with their children than are lower SES Hispanic males married to Hispanic women, or to non-Hispanic males of similar SES standing. A related question for which there is little research has to do with whether intermarried couples experience particular kinds of cultural conflicts that contribute to marital discord and divorce.

## Effects of Divorce on Hispanic Women

As indicated above, Hispanic women suffer greater economic loss following divorce than do their former male partners. This is similar to trends in the general population that show greater economic loss for females after divorce (Amato, 2000). However, a study of 232 single mothers from inner city San Jose, California found that Hispanic mothers experienced a less dramatic loss in income than did non-Hispanic white mothers (Wagner, 1993).

Although these findings conflict with those reported earlier by the GSS study (Stroup and Pollock, 1999), there are various factors that are different in the two studies. The Stroup and Pollock study had a larger (150 divorced and 406 married) sample of Hispanic women. Further, the sample was more representative of the U. S. population because it was based on a stratified, national probability sample of women. On the other hand, Wagner's study focused on 135 Mexican American single mothers and 97 non-Hispanic single mothers living in San Jose. The GSS study spanned the years 1972-1994, whereas Wagner's study was a one-time view of the economic status of two groups of single mothers. In addition to the stratified national sample, the GSS study only assessed women who had been married, but were at the time of data collection divorced. On the other hand, Wagner's study included single women with children regardless of whether the women had never married, were divorced, separated, or widowed. Furthermore, the study offers a unique perspective into the factors confronting single mothers after divorce.

Wagner found that, in the population he studied, Mexican American single mothers had multiple disadvantages that should have predicted lower income after

divorce. The multiple disadvantages included single mothers who were younger, who had more children, and who had completed fewer years of school. Despite these disadvantages, Hispanic women were able to restore their income to what it had been before becoming single parents. In comparison, this was not the case with the non-Hispanic white women. Wagner (1993) concludes “In spite of having higher average education and job skills, Anglo women were unable to achieve higher income levels than the Mexican Americans” (p.121).

The demographics of the Mexican American and Anglo women in the Wagner study are important in interpreting the results. Mexican American women in the study had more children than their White women counterparts. Over 40% of the Mexican American women were pregnant at the time of the interview compared with less than one-third of the Anglo women (Wagner, 1993). The majority of women were unemployed at the time of the divorce, with (surprisingly) Anglo women having a statistically significant higher rate of unemployment. However, 57% of the Mexican Americans reported having no job skills, while only 27% of Anglos reported having none. Almost half of the women in both ethnic groups received Aid to Families with Dependent Children during their first year after becoming single mothers. Also, 43% of the Mexican Americans in the study relied primarily on earned income, compared with only 29% of Anglos. The Mexican Americans also relied more on family members, especially their own parents for economic and other resource support. On the other hand, Anglo women were more likely to rely on the father of their children for support.

Surprisingly, divorce or separation caused a “leveling effect” between the two groups. The non-Hispanic women experienced a large drop in income while the Mexican

American women did not have a significant change in income. In other words, any differences that might have existed in income prior to divorce were eliminated with the divorce regardless of differences in educational level between the women (Wagner, 1993). Thus, despite greater employability because of their higher level of education the non-Hispanic women did not achieve a higher level of post-divorce earnings than did the less skilled women. Divorced women with children seem to fall victim to their circumstances as single mothers even if they do not struggle with discrimination and possess high levels of education and more job related skills. In fact, non-Hispanic women suffered the greatest losses, with over half of them losing \$10,000 or more in annual income, compared with only 17% of the Mexican American women. However, in the first year, some women actually gained income. This was particularly true of Mexican American women with more education, of whom 16% gained income, in comparison with only 2.5% of the Anglo women with comparable levels of education.

The results of Wagner's study show us that despite cultural and SES differences, Mexican American single mothers cope better with their status as single mothers. This finding is surprising, but more research with larger samples is needed to test the robustness of Wagner's findings. We can speculate that women who endure poverty, minority status and discrimination, and possibly even the cycle of coming from a single parent home themselves have a more intact social support system as well as internal resources (e.g., persistence and hope) to cope positively with their own status as single mothers. Studies that focus on the resilience of Hispanic single mothers and their support systems and strategies for coping with the stress and economic hardship of caring for their dependent children are in order.

Although Mexican Americans as a group by necessity have more experience with economic hardship (Battle, 2002), this does not mean the transition into single parenthood is easy. As Wagner (1993) reveals, it is important to study the stresses unique to Mexican American women. Mexican Americans reported fewer than average stressors in their lives as well as differences in the kinds of stress that were more prevalent. For non-Hispanic women, feeling inadequate and overwhelmed, as well as feeling economically burdened was more prevalent than for Mexican Americans. Only two types of stressors were reported by more than half of the Mexican American women, these were “Having to share a residence” and “Feeling overwhelmed by daily responsibilities,” respectively. The non-Hispanic women, on the other hand, ranked “Having to share a residence” as the tenth most prevalent type of stress.

The different types of stressors experienced by women in the two groups and how they ranked them is important for social workers, psychologists, teachers, and other social service personnel serving low income single women and their children. Social service agencies assisting single women and children need to adjust their services to meet their clients varying needs depending on culture and ethnicity, pre and post-divorce income levels, and availability of support from family and friends. More community surveys of the type carried out by Wagner in San Jose, California are needed with Hispanic single mothers.

#### Effects of Divorce on Hispanic Children and Adolescents

Reviews of the effects of divorce on non-Hispanic white children and adolescents are available (e.g., Amato, 2000; Hetherington & Kelly, 2001; Kelly, 2000). These syntheses of the research literature conclude that the psychological effects seen in

children are generally present before the divorce, and thus not caused by the divorce. Further, syntheses of the research literature indicate that whatever effects there may be on non-Hispanic white children due to divorce, the symptoms are not long lasting and generally dissipate within the first two years following parental divorce. However, research with Hispanic children and the effects of divorce is not as abundant. One way to investigate the impact of divorce on adolescents is to consider performance and engagement in contexts outside of the home, especially in school. For example, how much does family instability contribute to academic achievement and/or school dropout rates for Hispanic students?

In a study of 8,483 students at eight San Francisco area high schools, Fraleigh (1990) found that Hispanic parents' educational attainment was much lower than for parents in other ethnic groups. Also Hispanic students' combined GPA was lower than any other group except Blacks. However, whether Hispanic families consisted of one or both parents had no effect on student GPAs. Regardless of family stability, Hispanic students overall did poorly in school. According to Fraleigh (1990),

compared to Asians and Whites, the Black and Hispanic groups show substantially less variation in grades across family types. While family processes may indeed be operative in explaining the depressed levels of achievement among Black and Hispanic adolescents, the salient factor appears not to be family structure per se. (p.286)

It seems that other forces, such as perceived discrimination or low socioeconomic status make such a drastic difference in the lives of Hispanic American adolescents that

marital conflict and divorce of parents does not make enough of a difference to contribute to the already low academic attainment of these students.

The patterns of parental education are different, amongst the types of families, for non-Hispanic whites and Hispanics. Parental education was positively correlated with familial stability for non-Hispanic white parents. That is, the more education those non-Hispanic white parents reported the more likely they were to be living in an intact relationship with a spouse (Fraleigh, 1990). However, a very different picture emerged with the Hispanic sample. According to Fraleigh (1990)

The Hispanic subsample is characterized not only by substantially lower levels of parental education overall, but also by a relative lack of differentiation amongst all but the mother-stepfather category. Indeed, except for the higher level of education among mother-stepfather families, the differences amongst the various Hispanic configurations are too small to be statistically significant. (p. 157)

This means that Hispanic children do not have an advantage in terms of educational capital if they live in an intact family that is also poor. Importantly, the GPAs of Hispanic students reflect the lower levels of parental education and socioeconomic conditions and not the status of the family as intact and stable or unstable and guided by a single parent. Fraleigh concludes that the lower academic attainment of African American and Hispanic students, "... would [make it] appear that other structural constraints, such as institutionalized racism or varying subcultural values, may be operating independently of family structure to limit the achievement of Blacks and Hispanics" (p. 162). Although the sample in Fraleigh's study is large it is limited in



scope to the San Francisco area, so additional studies that represent the larger Hispanic population are needed.

Beyond academic performance, there is some evidence suggesting that Hispanic youth are less vulnerable to the adverse psychological effects of family discord, separation, and divorce than are non-Hispanic White children (Amato & Keith, 1991). Little empirical data are available, but a theory of “embeddedness” has emerged. Essentially, some family researchers believe that, even within the American context, children who are embedded in extended family networks are less affected by the stresses of divorce and separation. The extended family provides protection from the negative psychosocial effects of parental conflict (McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, & Wilson, 2000). Furthermore, research shows that Hispanic immigrants are the most likely of all ethnic groups to reside in extended family households (Glick, Bean, & Van Hook 1997). Thus, if embeddedness is a protective factor, Hispanic youth should fare better than children from other ethnic groups who for various reasons demonstrate lower familial embeddedness.

Additionally, in keeping with other research that focuses on parsing the effects of familial discord (both prior to and following divorce) on the psychosocial adjustment of children and adolescents (e.g., Heatherington & Kelly 2002), similar longitudinal research is necessary with Hispanic families. Currently, there is no reason to believe that the coping responses of Hispanic youth due directly to the divorce of their parents (and not to confounding socioeconomic factors) will be different qualitatively or of longer duration than their non-Hispanic White counterparts.

Also important is the question of how effectively the extended family operates for later generation Hispanic parents and their offspring before and after marital dissolution. While notions of familial “embeddedness” may be plausible in the first and even second generation Hispanic family, the impact of acculturation on family lifestyle by the third generation as noted by Oropesa and Landale (2004) may mean that reliance on an extended family for support is not possible.

### **Conclusion**

The effects of divorce on Hispanic families differ in important ways from those of non-Hispanic white families. As the Hispanic population continues to grow, so too does the need to study how marriage as an institution is faring among Hispanic immigrants and their later generation descendants. We have shown that Hispanics are not immune from divorce and that literature that focuses on *la familia* as an enduring cultural mainstay is not totally accurate. Because Hispanics on average have less education, fewer job skills, and consequently higher rates of poverty, it is not unreasonable to assume that they may be less successful in the long term in coping positively with multiple stressors.

For Hispanics, the pressures to acculturate may set into motion a variety of stressors associated with changes in language, gender roles, and traditional family values that may result in increased levels of marital conflict and subsequent divorce. The differential effects of acculturation and acculturative stress on Hispanic men and women indicate that women are more dissatisfied with marriage than Hispanic married males (Negy & Snyder, 1997). Although speculative at this time, it may be that Hispanic women have come to recognize divorce as a coping response that is available to them.

Further, without the negative stigma that was once attached to divorce, Hispanics, and in particular Hispanic women, may see divorce as a viable coping response to marital conflict. Thus, while acculturative stress may augment marital discord, acculturation itself may provide the impetus for a Hispanic person to see divorce as a way to end an unhappy situation.

The evolving system of no fault divorce, coupled with the waning influence of the Catholic Church and the extended family among those of Hispanic descent presents an interesting paradox for Hispanics. On the one hand, acculturative stress places immigrants and less acculturated later generation Hispanics at greater risk for yet more psychological hardships as they assimilate into the American culture. Thus, rather than gaining protective factors to cope successfully with life's difficulties, Hispanics may in fact be shedding valuable protective resources. On the other hand, acculturation into a society where divorce is available may also have a liberating effect for a person(s) trapped in an unhappy marriage. This paradoxical outcome on marriage due to acculturation is fertile ground for research.

This chapter presents a fresh and perhaps more realistic view of the Hispanic family. Research is beginning to show that the assumed pillars of the Hispanic family (namely, defined gender roles, intergenerational interdependence, and traditional values of the "sacred" family) do not occlude the negative forces of acculturative stress, family conflict, and a culture of divorce that supports marital dissolution through its no fault laws. The harsh realities of poverty, low parental education, and perceived discrimination make research on acculturation and its effects on the Hispanic family

challenging; however, the demystification of the stalwart family unit is a necessary step towards a more accurate picture of Hispanic families in America.

The research, practice, and policy implications of changing family structure among Hispanic Americans are immense. Hispanics are now the largest ethnic group in America and their numbers are expected to continue to grow for at least the next 30 to 50 years. The Hispanic population is marked by extreme heterogeneity in terms of country of origin, generational differences, geographic residence, assimilation patterns, etc. Accordingly, it is important for researchers, mental health professionals, and policy makers to be knowledgeable of the types of stressors that Hispanic men and women face during their assimilation into American society. Importantly too is how these stressors can alter family structure resulting in single parenthood and the re-deployment of traditional resources in support of non-traditional coping responses (Wagner, 1993). If stressors that are highly correlated with marital conflict can be prevented through education and intervention type services (e.g., family and marriage counseling) then this should be of high priority. If prevention is not possible or not available then it is essential that intervention programs be available in our schools, places of work, and communities that offer services in culturally appropriate ways to the needs of Hispanics of all ages that are experiencing family-related stress.

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