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LATINOS AND MUTUAL SUPPORT GROUPS: A Case for Considering Culture

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The literature on recognized Latino cultural values and their effect on mental health interventions with Latinos is reviewed, and experiences in implementing school-based mutual support groups for Latino parents are examined. Recommendations are made for incorporating cultural values in support group interventions with Latinos to promote increased participation. Implications for research are discussed.

Latinos have one of the lowest utilization rates of traditional mental health services such as outpatient psychotherapy, and have also been shown to underutilize less traditional primary prevention programs *(Birkel & Reppucci, 1983; Lochman & Brown, 1980; Powell, 1984; Rogler, Malgady, & Rodriguez, 1989)*. Mutual support, or self-help, groups have had difficulty recruiting individuals who are not middle-class, Anglo-American, or female *(Borkman, 1990)*, and it is possible that Latino underutilization stems from the frequent incompatibility of psychological services with Latino cultural values and characteristics.

LATINO CULTURAL VALUES

Researchers have identified certain cultural values and ideals as integral to a traditional Latino individual's sense of self and personal and cultural pride *(Abad, Ramos, & Boyce, 1974; Delgado, 1981; Gutiérrez, Ortega, & Suarez, 1990; Marín & VanOss Marín, 1991; Triandis, Marín, Lisansky, & Betancourt, 1984; Valle & Vega, 1980)*. The following discussion of some of these values considers Latinos in the aggregate. It should be emphasized, however, that important regional, historical, political, and socioeconomic differences characterize Latino ethnic subgroups and individuals. These differences, along with acculturation levels, may influence the extent to which a Latino individual is influenced by these values. Additionally, in view of the complex and dynamic nature of any culture, especially among immigrant groups, the discussion does not assume that Latino culture is static or open to easy categorization.

The cultural value of *simpatía*, which emphasizes the need for behavior that promotes smooth and pleasant social relationships, has been found to be stronger among Latinos than Anglo-Americans *(Triandis et al., 1984)*. According to Triandis et al. *(1984)*, a person who is *simpàtico*

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> ...shows certain levels of conformity and an ability to share in others' feelings, behaves with dignity and respect toward others, and seems to strive for harmony in interpersonal relations. This latter characteristic implies a general avoidance of interpersonal conflict...*(p. 1363)*

This concern for avoiding negative behavior in interpersonal relationships may be based on the values of *respeto* (personal respect) and *dignidad* (worthiness). It may also relate to the high regard for collective values among many Latinos, which leads to a preference for nurturing, loving, intimate, and respectful relationships.

Additionally, Latino culture has been characterized as high in a dimension that has been labeled "power distance" *(Hofstede, 1980)*. Power distance is defined as the extent to which a society supports the existing power differentials between certain groups or individuals by promoting deference and respect toward powerful others (e.g., the wealthy, the aged, those in prestigious professions). Many Latinos, like others in high power-distance cultures, tend to

> ...value conformity and obedience and support autocratic and authoritarian attitudes from those in charge of organizations or institutions. *(Marín & VanOss Marín, 1991, p. 15)*

Delgado *(1981)* discussed the related cultural trait of lineality, which stresses the role of authority in the solution of problems. Latino relationships are characteristically lineal and are thus influenced by status within a hierarchical structure.

Many Latinos also place great emphasis on the value of *familism*, which involves

> ...strong identification with and attachment to nuclear and extended families, and strong feelings of loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity among members of the same family. *(Marín & VanOss Marín, 1991, p. 13)*

Similarly, Latino cultural values of *confianza* (mutual generosity) and *personalismo* (relating to and trusting people rather than institutions) typically lead to dense extrafamilial social support networks that meet both expressive and instrumental needs *(Valle & Vega, 1980)*. Interdependence, symmetry, reciprocity, and cooperation are expected and valued among these support networks.

Incorporation in Mental Health Services

Recommendations for more appropriate mental health services for Latinos have underscored the importance of incorporating specific Latino values and ideals *(Abad et al., 1974; Gutiérrez et al., 1990; Keefe & Casas, 1980; Powell, 1987)*. Such incorporation would involve more structured, active, and directive interventions and greater self-disclosure by counselors in order to create more reciprocal relationships with clients. Inclusion of the entire family and indigenous support systems have also been stressed *(Sena-Rivera, 1980)*.

Research has shown that the effectiveness of an intervention is enhanced by sensitivity to cultural characteristics *(Marín, 1993)*. For example, the use of "cuentos" (folktales) led to reduced anxiety in group psychotherapy with Puerto Rican children *(Constantino, Malgady, & Rogler, 1986)*, and assertiveness training may be better received among Latinas when cultural values discouraging assertiveness and context were considered *(Wood & Mallinckrodt, 1993)*.

Very little empirical research has specifically addressed strategies for mutual support group interventions. However, in a study by Robbins and colleagues *(1993)*, a self-help course in the care of Lupus was enhanced by considering such culturally determined beliefs as the importance of family roles and the interdependency of family members, rather than individual needs.

MUTUAL SUPPORT GROUPS AND LATINO CULTURE

Consideration of cultural values was found crucial in elementary school-based mutual support groups for Latino parents. The groups were designed by the present authors to provide parents the opportunity

for social support and mutual aid, enhanced school involvement, and personal empowerment *(Simoni, 1993; Simoni & Adelman, 1993)*. The intervention, adapted from procedures developed at the California Self-Help Center *(1985)*, encompasses: *a)* personal and affordable methods of member recruitment; *b)* a six-week group training period; and *c)* off-site consultation. During the training period, a group starter teaches mutual support, basic ground rules concerning time limits and confidentiality, techniques of giving advice, the rotating roles of group facilitator and timekeeper, and a four-part meeting format (i.e., announcements, check-in, group discussion, and wrap-up). From the first meeting, members convene as a group and begin to establish autonomy from the starter, who does not return after the sixth meeting unless requested. A manual outlining the intervention in detail is available *(Simoni, 1992)*.

Six groups were implemented in three schools, half in English and half in Spanish. Two groups did not recruit sufficient membership to coalesce, three were successfully established and continued to meet on their own until the end of the school year (five to eight weeks in duration), and one Spanish-language group flourished. Four years after its inception, this group still meets weekly and has added a monthly night meeting for working parents. The group has instituted English classes for parents and has organized a corps of volunteers who assist in cleaning the school and monitoring lunch and recreation periods. The group also formed the basis of a federal grant awarded to the school.

On the basis of experience with these support groups, together with findings reported in the relevant literature, suggestions can be made for improving the efficacy of mutual support group interventions. The following discussion focuses on voluntary school-based groups for low-income Latino parents with limited education and little or no proficiency in English who are recent immigrants to the U.S. The recommendations may not apply to other populations of Latinos.

Community Assessment

Given the diversity of Latino populations, group starters should be knowledgeable about the particular subgroup of the community they are targeting. Face-to-face focus groups with potential group members and telephone interviews with individuals thought to be key informants can reveal data on language abilities, acculturation level, and adherence to traditional Latino values *(Robbins et al., 1993)*. Additionally, an informal survey of expert health professionals and consultation with local religious and political leaders *(Gutiérrez et al., 1990)* can provide data on the environmental and social issues facing a particular Latino subgroup and can assure that the intervention is in line with community needs *(Gutiérrez et al., 1990)*. Moreover, support from community leaders may be instrumental to the success of the intervention.

Recruitment

An official letter from the school principal may enhance the visibility of the group and provide the sanction of authority. However, in our experience, personalized, one-on-one invitations from people who have a rapport with the parents are most effective in recruiting new members and most in line with the cultural value of *personalismo*. This finding should be encouraging to those attempting to recruit Latinos into community interventions since they need not incur the cost of photocopying and mailing flyers.

The invitations should be consistent with the cultural values and outcome expectations of potential group members. For example, few Latino mothers in our sample expected primarily social support from the groups; they were more interested in specific information about parenting and the school, and usually preferred to receive it from an identified "expert." Culturally sensitive recruitment flyers, therefore, might better appeal to the value of *familism* and

responsibility to children than to focus exclusively on individual social support. The invitations should be addressed to fathers, mothers, and other adults in the home (e.g., extended family members) who may be involved in child-rearing.

Group Leadership

In one of our most successful interventions, parents substituted a hierarchy of elected officers for the suggested method of rotating leadership. This change supports Delgado's *(1981)* assumptions about the value placed by Latinos on lineality; they may expect an elected leader to be wise, knowledgeable, skillful, and able to provide solutions to the group's problems. In this intervention, however, the group leader did not undermine the process of mutual aid by solving problems for the group but served as a moderator and seemed to promote *simpatía* in the group. As one mother remarked* during the interview: "In the beginning, there was a lot of conflict but since having a president and vice-president, we have more organization and things are calm." Another commented, "I like the structure. I think it helps control conflict and organize the group."

Group starters can offer parents the choice of several alternative forms of leadership for the group. However, it is important to resist any attempts by group members to relinquish their own autonomy. For instance, when members of one group insisted that the bilingual Latina assistant continue to meet with them, she acquiesced but eventually limited her role to that of liaison between the monolingual English-speaking school administrators and Spanish-speaking parents, then left the group completely. After the group had been meeting for about a year, a teacher at the school suggested it merge with the PTA. Because they had been encouraged to lead and to empower themselves from the start, group members were confident enough to resist this loss of independence.

Group Starters

Although group starters should ideally be from the same cultural background as the targeted population, professionals who are bilingual and bicultural are not easy to find. It may be more crucial to find individuals with connections and commitment to the community, plus good interpersonal skills. Many who are experienced in applied work may, however, eventually balk at the restrictions and demands of a mutual support intervention. They may, for example, find themselves perceived as leaders by Latino group members and may take on this role; this can lead to difficulty in sharing or giving up power, both of which are essential to the process of group empowerment.

Group Content

Social support in the groups may not resemble the early and open exchange of highly personal information that is often seen in groups of middle-class Anglo-American women. In line with the cultural value of familism, recent Latino immigrants may exercise greater discretion in disclosure of family information for fear of bringing shame to the family. Mothers often entered our groups to get information on parenting and their children's school. As the groups progressed, however, discussions become more personal and they were able to benefit from the other aspects of mutual aid.

Group Process

Reciprocity. Mothers in our groups voiced a desire to both give and receive advice. This was consistent with Miranda's *(1980)* findings that it is difficult for Latinos to accept assistance or service unless they can give something in return. The opportunity for reciprocity among this group of peers was apparently an important factor in the comfort level of participating parents, and is worth considering in any intervention with Latinos. Most important, this opportunity to help others enhances per-

*Direct quotations have been taken from interviews with group members.

sonal empowerment in a mutual support group. Riessman *(1965)* has labeled this process, in which individuals benefit themselves by helping others, the "helper-therapy" principle.

Aura of expertise. Most group members indicated that what they liked most about the group were the instructional sessions conducted by outside "experts." As one mother stated: "We are more interested in the group sessions when professionals advise us than when we advise ourselves, because they are knowledgeable." This preference is consistent with the Latino cultural emphasis on power distance and lineality *(Delgado, 1981)* but such deference to authority and failure to value experiential knowledge seems at first to contradict the desire for reciprocity. It is possible that the mothers valued reciprocity with respect to their own knowledge and in relation to their peers, but saw an "expert" opinion as superior. As they are empowered through the process of running their own group, appreciation of their own and each others' expertise may increase.

Group conflict. Group members reported disliking conflict among themselves most. This finding is consistent with reports that Latinos are more likely than non-Latinos to value harmonious social relationships, in accordance with the cultural value of *simpatía (Triandis et al., 1984)*.It is advisable for group starters to warn that individual differences of opinion are inevitable and encourage group members to devise ways of handling them.

Differential participation. Group starters should be prepared for varying degrees of participation by members. Those who prefer not to engage in group discussion should be allowed this option. As one mother confided to a group observer, "I've been coming to this group for over a year, and I have never said anything. I just listen. And I learn."

Group diversity. Goals and activities may vary widely, and group initiative should be encouraged. For example, a parent group approached the school principal about opening a checking account for money earned by fund raising; encouraging and assisting them to open the account is a way of facilitating their empowerment. Latinos who have immigrated recently may need tangible assistance such as child care, clothing, or food. For example, when a 42-year-old widower with eight children joined the group after recently immigrating from Mexico, group members were more than empathic; within a few days, they had provided clothes, food, and financial assistance. For another family in distress, the group raffled a donated basket of groceries and offered the proceeds to the family.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

Recruiting and retaining Latino individuals in mutual support groups often involves more than simple translation or superficial adaptation of an intervention *(Marín, 1993)*. Designing culturally sensitive and effective interventions for this population entails development and use of standardized instruments for the assessment of its specific cultural ideals and values *(Betancourt & López, 1993)*, a necessary first step in exploring the effects of values on the success of interventions. However, since Latinos are not an homogenous group, it is necessary to to identify the specific needs and preferences of the various subgroups of Latinos. Although there may be parallel experiences across subgroups based on their shared status as members of ethnic minorities, values will vary based on such variables as language, class, country of origin, and level of acculturation. This limits the extent to which findings from one population will generalize to other subgroups.

A high level of acculturation should not be assumed to entail abandonment of the culture of origin. Bicultural competency (the ability to manage effectively in both mainstream and ethnic minority communities) may have been attained. Assessment of acculturation, therefore, should consider the degree of adherence to traditional cultural values and practices.

Experimental designs to assess the most effective methods of recruiting and retaining various subgroups of Latinos in mutual support group interventions can contribute both to similar assessments of other minority populations and to other kinds of interventions than mutual support. The delineation of moderating or mediating effects of cultural components may help account for variability in health outcomes or program evaluations and might help clarify inconsistencies across previous investigations. Ultimately, considering and embracing cultural values, rather than overlooking or effacing them, hold greater promise for improving interventions.

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