

Latino and Latin American Families

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In this special issue of *The Journal of Latino-Latin American Studies*, we enrich our understanding of the issues that particularly affect Latino/Latin American families in the United States. How do these families face barriers and yet come out with improved lives? The topics of the six intriguing papers in this issue appear on the surface to vary dramatically from one another, but a common thread is woven throughout. We briefly describe how the papers fit into the overall theme here, and provide individual detail on each article below.

Throughout time and across societies, it is a fundamental job of parents to keep their children and families safe. All parents face issues such as protecting from physical harm, providing food and safe shelter, and ensuring that children get a good education to assure future opportunities. In the case of many Latino families in the United States, this task may be complicated even further by fear of deportation and/or family separation and potential accompanying loss of parents, economic stresses exacerbated by undocumented or mixed statuses, loss of culture and traditions, and communication gaps caused by dramatic differences in the backgrounds of parents and children. First generation parents bring with them not only the richness of their cultural backgrounds, but also an understanding of the United States as a country with risks in addition to riches. They may fear they have little to offer their children in this new environment, and their

experiences in the United States may reinforce that fear. Families that are not new to the United States are not immune from many of the same economic and social inequalities that influence the safety and wellbeing of their families. These issues, coupled with oftentimes unreceptive and unsupportive environments, create challenging situations for many Latino families. The overarching theme that emerges from this set of papers is how parents strive to provide their children and families with safe and nurturing environments in spite of difficult structural barriers and shifting conditions.

The first two papers focus on broader structural limitations and how these are realized in families. The first article by Leisy J. Abrego, argues that every family member is affected in Latino families with members who have undocumented or temporarily protected status, and explores how these families experience both tension and solidarity in response to the immigration structure. The second article by Seline Szkupinski Quiroga, Jennifer E. Glick, and Dulce M. Medina, places the wellbeing of Latino families within the context of both an economic downturn and a time of political strain and describes the ways that they handle this structural uncertainty and community hostility.

The next two papers focus on intergenerational communications in Latino families, and how moving from one culture to another creates difficulties and problems in communicating safe behavior. Eve Veliz-Moran studies variations in adolescent disclosure among Latino adolescents, helping us understand the conditions that promote open communications. Katie Hartmann, Rocio Rivadeneyra, and Maura I. Toro-Morn also focus on adolescent daughters in the context of

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first generation immigrant mothers and second-generation daughters and explore how daughters and their mothers communicate about sexuality. Both reflect the ways that parents try to protect their children, and what the children believe they need.

The final two papers further our understanding of two important social issues affecting families. The first, by Edna A. Viruell-Fuentes and Flavia C. D. Andradade, considers the role of social support in mental health symptoms between immigrant and non-immigrant Latinos. The final paper by Oscar Jiménez-Castellanos, Alberto M. Ochoa, and Edward M. Olivos provides a model for parental engagement in school communities.

“Illegality as a Source of Solidarity and Tension in Latino Families”

At a time when the National debate has become even more heated over the subject of immigration, Leisy J. Abrego of University of California presents a timely examination of tension and solidarity in Latino families when one or several members of a family are undocumented. Over a 10-year period, families who have mixed status were interviewed in the Los Angeles area. In this work, Abrego describes the complex family situations created by various facets of illegality. This reveals itself in numerous ways including long-term intergenerational impacts such as long separations resulting from immigration laws. Abrego’s nuanced discussion of undocumented and mixed status families is quite informative. Tension is experienced because of structural limitations with respect to immigration laws and also sensed by children through fear of abandonment and sibling rivalry. One way of overcoming some of these tensions is through the development of social networks that result in a sense of solidarity and the security perceived from such networks.

“Finding a Way to Get By: Latino Household Economic Strategies in a Time of Economic and Political Strain”

Seline Szkupinski Quiroga, Jennifer E. Glick, and Dulce M. Medina of Arizona State University report about the impact of the economic downturn of 2007-2009 on Latino families and the types of strategies that they employed in coping with financial distress. The types and number of coping mechanisms that were used depended on the level of strain and localized responses to immigration policy. Narrative comments focused on three traditional strategies: 1) altering the household labor supply; 2) limiting consumption; and 3) altering the quantity of human capital in the household by actions such as pooling resources, often with kin. While each of these strategies is useful and adaptive, they come with costs. Anti-immigrant policies can stifle increasing the household labor supply. Consumption limitations may put the family at risk in other ways, and tensions may arise with combined households and resource exchanges. Households that were surveyed noted that different members used multiple strategies concurrently. Within the policy context, the economic downturn hurts, but according to these researchers, the “local sociopolitical context also exacerbates economic hardship for many respondent families. The ability of Latino families to effectively deploy the various household economic strategies is affected by the anti-immigration policy context in which enforcement efforts are heightened and discrimination flourishes” (p. 33).

“Variations in Adolescent Disclosure Among Latinas”

Eve Veliz-Moran of Providence College conducts an exploratory study of beliefs and attitudes of adolescent Latinas’ disclosure to parents in the realms of family relationships, morality, and religion. Latina adolescents were found to be more likely to confide in mothers than fathers. A climate for disclosure required a feeling of closeness and father’s long work hours limited that potential. A

common theme among participants was a desire to have a closer, more open relationship with parents that would in turn facilitate a more open communication about important occurrences in their lives. Socioeconomic status affected disclosure with Latinas from lower income families feeling closer to their mothers. Another theme, religion, increased some disclosures, unless adolescents felt their beliefs were offensive to their mothers. The study overall suggests a strong family orientation among these young Latinas and a desire for close parental relationships.

“A Study of Mexican Immigrant Mothers and Adolescent Daughters in the Heartland: ‘Mi mamá nada más me dice que me cuide mucho’ (My mom just tells me to take care of myself a lot)”

Katie Hartmann, Rocio Rivadeneyra, and Maura I. Toro-Morn explore how immigrant Mexican mothers and US-born or raised daughters in the Midwest communicate about sex. The researchers find two important socialization values, *cuidate* (take care of yourself) and *seguir adelante* (get ahead in life) during the research. Mothers used *cuidate* to detail everything from menstrual hygiene to safe sex but the daughters felt that this form of communication was abstract. This form of vague communication provided a source of both frustration and anger for the daughters. Another important aspect of this research is how the two cultures, Mexican immigrants and their daughters, navigate both cultural and generational differences. Mothers felt they were much more open than their daughters perceived them to be. Mothers used their own mother as reference for communication and were relatively candid in comparison; daughters used their peers, school, and media to compare to. Because of the difficulty in communications, daughters sought information from other trusted sources, including other relatives.

“Testing Immigrant Social Ties Explanations for Latino Health Paradoxes: The Case of Social Support and Depression Symptoms”

Testing the social ties hypothesis for Latino health outcomes, Edna A. Viruell-Fuentes and Flavia C. D. Andradade of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign compare depression symptoms of immigrant and U.S. born Latinos. The impact of both positive social support and negative interactions with spouses/partners, friends/relatives, and children were considered when comparing the two populations. The researchers tested whether social ties, considering both positive and negative inputs, explained known differences in depression symptoms between the two groups. US-born Latinos have higher levels of social support but also higher levels of “negative hassles,” and these negative forces contributed to higher depressive symptoms. This effect applied only regarding the negative impacts of friends/relatives, and was not present when the sample was restricted only to married couples.

“Operationalizing Transformative Parent Engagement in Latino School Communities: A Case Study”

Oscar Jiménez-Castellanos of Arizona State University, Alberto M. Ochoa of San Diego State University, and Edward M. Olivos of University of Oregon use a case study to illustrate parent agency by introducing a community school based-reform to Latino and other ethnic parent engagement in their children’s schooling. They aspire toward providing a vision for how parents can be transformative change agents not only for their children but also for schools. The authors explain their transformative parent engagement practices as consisting of five levels: connectedness; inclusion and belongingness; decision-making; participatory action research; and macro civic engagement, all guided by democratic schooling principles. This study provides an informative lesson about good intentions. Even in a school district that applied

resources toward this program and expressed a desire to reform, progress was difficult. While the model emphasized democratic schooling principles, only parents and school-level personnel were trained to use them. In application, the higher-level leadership used a top-down approach. Because of this, parents expressed anger at providing input but not being

valued by the schools. Their desire to be involved meaningfully in their children's educations undoubtedly fueled their frustrations with the only partial implementation of democratic schooling principles. The authors suggest further efforts in promoting democratic schooling at all levels, including school district administrations.