Understanding the Cultural Values of Latino Adoptive Families in Southern New England

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Abstract

With attention to ethnic perceptions of family composition, this study presents the findings of qualitative research on Latino adoptive families from a city in southern New England. Perspectives from anthropology relating to cultural constructions of family are explored, as the personal histories and activities of these Latino families are examined. This research also evaluates Latino families' exposure to and experiences with the adoption process, both formally and informally. Within this investigation, the term family signifies single individuals or couples of Latino heritage participating in adoption. This definition includes Latino families that have already legalized the adoptions of their children, families that are in the pre-adoption stages of the homestudy and training sessions, and families participating in foster care who are considering transitioning to adoption. Furthermore, the word Latino can be defined as individuals that self-identify as Dominican or Puerto Rican. Qualitative data from 6 open ended interviews reveal that because Latino familial structures are constantly manipulated, positive and open perceptions of and experiences with transracial adoption are developed in southern New England.

Introduction

Previous research indicates that the Latino community maintains a variety of perceptions regarding how families are structured, the most common being an extremely tight-knit system of nuclear and extended family members. This family oriented view is observed to be greatly influenced by conservative values, such as machismo, relatively negative perceptions of infertility, and a strong desire to perpetuate bloodlines. Despite the importance of maintaining strong emotional and reciprocal ties to family, research has also revealed that Latino familial structures can consist of members not related by blood, through such practices as informal adoption or compadrazgo.

Past investigations examining Latino perceptions of adoption have developed working definitions of Latino adoptive families, but only to include couples that are participating in the pre-adoption stages of the process. In addition, the rapidly growing Latino population in the Northeast will have much to reveal about broader national trends, as the arrival and immigration and acculturation experiences. These changes include flexible views of fertility in the United States have focused on Central Americans and Mexicans living in urban areas of the eastern United States, meaning that little consideration has been given to Latinos of Caribbean descent from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico.

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Familial Trust and Support

Although the process of acculturation can cause changes in external aspects of Latino families, such as all members of the family adopting an Americanized and individualistic mindset, internal aspects of family life, such as solidarity, can remain unchanged (Bean, 2000). This appreciation for traditional Latino values yet a sense of control over the manipulation of these familial norms was demonstrated throughout the interview narratives. In particular, many participants acknowledged that they must interact with formal U.S. institutions in order to build their families through adoption. Therefore, the need to rework various Latino cultural values, such as familism, in order to pursue such an alternative.

According to this rephrased interpretation of familism, the strong desire to build families and maintain cohesion became more important to these Latino mothers than upholding the central value of having biological children and raising them to contribute to intergenerational stability. In addition, many of the women expressed being incredibly grateful for the strong support systems present their immediate and extended families, as they relied on them heavily during the adoption process to help with child care and to provide emotional support when the experience became difficult. Interestingly, all of the participants were open to their adopted children maintaining direct contact with their biological families. Bringing an open adoption system could create a new and more extensive familial network for these Latino adoptive families, further emphasizing the fact these participants' main desire is to see their families grow and develop, regardless of the form of this expansion.

Results and Discussion

Latino familial values related to adoption in southern New England are manipulated based on immigration and acculturation experiences. These changes include flexible views of motherhood, the importance of familial dedication and support, and modified perceptions of the U.S. adoption process. Overall, because Latino configurations of family are continuously transforming, positive and open perceptions of and experiences with transracial adoption are developed in southern New England.

Dedication to Motherhood

Almost all of the interview participants in this study are single mothers who have either completed the legalizations of their adopted children or are in the process of the homestudy and training sessions. Therefore, the concept of fertility was discussed frequently throughout their narratives as a way to explain the development of their individual families. Although multiple women expressed the shame, negativity, and devaluing of being infertile in the Latino community, these women were also able to enact a sense of control over these conservative cultural views of motherhood.

Specifically, these Latina women generalized the concept of motherhood by disregarding the specific way in which the role of mother was achieved and simply explaining how being a mother provided them with great pride and importance. Rather than allow infertility, limiting gender norms, or single parenthood to stigmatize them, these women demonstrated a sense of agency that allowed them to actively participate in building their families. These Latina women were able to appreciate yet critical of their traditional Latino culture by evaluating and then negotiating particular gender norms to work for them as acculturated women living in the U.S.

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Conclusions

With a steadily growing population of Latinos in the United States, there has been an unfortunate lack of research conducted on Latino perceptions of formal adoption, particularly on the East coast. This demographic could potentially be an important and valuable resource for child welfare agencies, especially as this qualitative research suggests that through flexible manipulations of long established Latino familial values, Latino adoptive parents are able to view adoption as a beautiful, practical, and legitimate alternative to family formation in the Latino community. Future research must also recognize that single Latina mothers may be a viable resource for foster or adoptable children in the U.S. Overall, more research is needed to explore these dynamics of interdependence and agency among single Latina women.

References