

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

Julie M. Guest
Boston College

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 incorporation of Caribbean migrants to new areas will reshape social and political relations. However, most of the studies on Latino perceptions of adoption, familial construction, and fertility in the United States have focused on Central Americans and Mexicans living in urban and rural communities in the West. No current studies exist on Latinos 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.

Overall, it is clear that a wide array of cultural measures have been overlooked, particularly in terms of how Latinos develop nuanced understandings of formal adoption based on experiences of immigration, grief associated with infertility, and dealing with possible cultural barriers before and after adoption. Considering what factors motivate Latinos to pursue adoption and maintain permanency will help to increase the pool of prospective Latino adoptive parents who can provide permanent homes for children.

Methods

Six separate Latino families participating in different stages of the adoption process were recruited. The participants were interviewed individually at times and places convenient to them, usually in their homes in southern New England.

Utilizing a qualitative research design, the interviews followed a semi-structured format, were face-to-face, consisted of open ended questions, and lasted about two hours.

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 devastation 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 explained 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 be 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.

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, they recognized the need to rework various Latino cultural values, such as *familismo*, in order to pursue such an alternative.

According to this rephrased interpretation of *familismo*, the strong desire to build families and maintain cohesion became more important to these Latina 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. Embracing 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.

Foster Care and Adoption: Part of the Same Process

Much of the past literature on child welfare presents foster care and adoption as two completely separate practices of family building. However, within this participant sample, foster care and adoption were connected to these Latino adoptive parents' familiarity with informal adoption methods, allowing them to view these two practices as part of the same, complex process of family construction.

These Latino adoptive families are manipulating and moving within the U.S. formal adoption system in a fascinating way. Specifically, these participants are using both their immigration experiences and interpretations of U.S. cultural norms as structured knowledge to help them re-establish themselves in a new place. These acculturated Latino families seem to have an understanding that because they live in the United States, there are certain rules related to American cultural constructions of family that they must follow, including the concept of legally acknowledging the addition of children into their families. However, they are still able to actively maintain their cultural norm of informal adoption by reworking it to fit into the U.S. foster care system. Specifically, many of the Latino participants did not directly pursue adoption in the beginning. Instead, many of them began the process of building their families through foster care and then eventually adopted their foster children after years of caring for them. These Latino families understood the concept of foster care to be similar to informal adoption, as it is a process that does not officially document children as being added to a family. As a result, they were still able to adhere to U.S. laws that dictate that they must interact with formal institutions if they choose foster care or adoption as a way to build their families.

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

- Bean, F., Swicegood, C. G., & Berg, R. "Mexican-origin fertility: New patterns and interpretations". *Social Science Quarterly*. 81(1): 2000, 404-420.

