

# **Fatherhood and the Latino Community: The Need for Culturally-Relevant Programming**

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The purpose of this paper is two-fold: (1) to describe the role of fathers throughout history within the U.S. with a special emphasis on providing a brief understanding of fatherhood within the Latino community; and (2) to explore the currently available parenting programs for fathers in general as well as Latino fathers specifically.

## ***Historical Perspectives of Fatherhood in the U.S.***

In 2001, Wade Mackey published a large cross-cultural study to examine the behavior of fathers from 23 cultures and sub-cultures across the world. The impressive efforts of his team of researchers led to the conclusion that men were found to spend time with their children, in the absence of women, in large quantities. Mackey further concluded that the observed father-child interactions were similar to those of mother-child behaviors, thus providing evidence for an “independent man-to-child affiliative bond.”<sup>1</sup>

Rohner et al. also argues for the cross-cultural existence of a similar concept of parental acceptance versus rejection, or “father love.”<sup>2</sup> While the knowledge of a natural cross-cultural presence of a father-to-child bond is encouraging, this knowledge fails to inform us about the ways in which this bond is acted out within the relationship. The behaviors, roles, or internal processes of the fathers themselves remain unseen. This sort of insight, although necessary to form a more complete image of contemporary fatherhood, is difficult to capture due to the socially constructed nature of our perceptions of ideal fatherhood. Rather, one must turn first to social history to better understand what constitutes “good” or “bad” fathering.

For the purposes of this paper, the socio-historical literature reviewed will remain specific to perceptions of fatherhood within the U.S. Fatherhood ideals within the U.S. have fluctuated over the centuries. In one of her more recent publications, Elizabeth Pleck traced the historical development of what she called the “good-dad, bad-dad complex” throughout U.S. history, beginning with the colonial period.<sup>3</sup>

## **Fatherhood in the Nineteenth Century**

Pleck traced the origins of the concept of the “good father” back to the White Protestant families that made up a majority of the British colonies settling in the U.S. The Protestant Reformation occurring at that time encouraged both parental authority and involvement, with specific emphases on prayer and reading Scripture. This was further enhanced by the Protestant belief of God as “The Father” who gives authority to earthly fathers to be the spiritual and physical heads of their families.

The expected involvement of fathers in the colonial period was quite different from the day-to-day care sometimes expected of contemporary fathers. They were, however, expected to be observers of the details in the child care routine. Historians have evidence from letters and journals of colonial fathers detailing breastfeeding and weaning habits, symptoms of child sickness, requests for infant care advice, and even records of bowel movements. Colonial fathers were also expected to be involved throughout the child’s lifespan, providing discipline, education, and career or apprenticeship needs. In sum, the prototypic colonial father sought balance between loving affection

and the strict discipline that was reminiscent of the nations' lingering feelings towards a tyrannical England.

Pleck traveled further down her historical road to describe the nineteenth century "good father" in more detail. The Industrial Revolution was blossoming at the beginning of the nineteenth century with the addition of railroad and steam technology that would have consequences for the roles of mothers and fathers that linger strongly today. In an earlier article, E. H. Pleck and J. H. Pleck argued that the severe split between mothers and fathers roles and the decline in parental involvement occurred during this period. E. H. Pleck captures this sentiment well:

The ideals of the time dictated that men and women should inhabit separate spheres. The female sphere was said to be that of home and family, and the husband's and father's that of business and politics. In general, the assumption was that as the father came to concentrate almost exclusively on earning a living, he became increasingly removed from involvement with home and family and relegated to roles of disciplinarian, financial decision maker, and occupational guide for older sons. (Pleck, p. 37)<sup>3</sup>

Towards the middle of the 19th century, with these roles beginning to take hold, the ideal father's most important function outside of financial provision was that of playmate for his children. After a long day of demanding work, men were encouraged to allow their more emotionally expressive and creative sides to come out in play. Masculine play was also seen as good for children; however, the limited nature of after-work play reinforced fathers' roles as secondary caregivers.

As during the colonial period, religious values came into play during the nineteenth century, with the appearance of Evangelical religious revivals throughout this time. Christian men were pulled to be breadwinners by secular society but were equally pressured by Evangelical values to remain involved with their families. Protestant ministers exhorted men to devote more time to their families than to their businesses. Fathers were especially encouraged to be influential in the areas of education, moral teaching, and career advice.

As the end of the nineteenth century approached, the U.S. was becoming more secularized, and the appeals from Evangelical Christianity were beginning to wear thin amongst fathers. Increasing biological knowledge about reproduction and paternity began to focus on male virility and masculinity. Emphasis on masculine "toughness" was further inspired throughout the presidency of Teddy Roosevelt and the Spanish-Cuban-Philippines War, leaving many fathers with an increased desire to spend more time with their sons so as to provide the sons with masculine role models. Mothers began to be perceived as having too much power, especially as societal angst increased over women's changing roles. As the 19th century was ending, large amounts of time spent between mothers and sons was seen as increasingly damaging, and father involvement was needed to "toughen them up."

## **Fatherhood in the Twentieth Century**

By the 20th century, emphasis on father involvement was balanced between a need to counteract maternal over-involvement and a desire to provide companionship. For the first time in U.S. recorded history, fathers were encouraged and expected to provide education to their sons about sex. For daughters, men were expected to function as a role model of masculinity so that their daughters might learn about men and whom they might marry. Fathers were also expected to

function through participation and education about sports such as basketball and baseball or other clubs and leagues, such as the Boy Scouts and 4-H organizations.

With the start of World War II and the increased acceptance of Freudian psychology within the United States, fears abounded of boys turning “sissy” by overprotective mothers. As an example, Pleck writes:

The failure of many young men to pass army physicals during World War II led to charges that overly solicitous mothers and absent fathers made sons soft, weak, or too cowardly to fight. (p. 40)<sup>3</sup>

To counteract the fear that mothers could ultimately make their sons homosexual, fathers were exhorted to “make decisions, punish their children, act with authority, and teach sons the facts of life” (Pleck, p. 41). For some men, this push resulted in displays of “hypermasculinity” commonly seen in the 1950s and resulted in increased concerns over juvenile delinquency.<sup>3</sup>

### **“New Father” Model**

During the 1950s women were also asking for increased father involvement, but for the more practical reason of needing help with raising young children spaced closely together. This request for increased father involvement did not begin to rise as a request for equality of child-care responsibilities between men and women until the 1970s. It is during this decade that social historians point to the rise of the “new father” or “co-parent” who was equally responsible for childrearing. In the 1980s, social researchers such as Lamb would categorize child-care or father involvement into the components of “engagement,” “accessibility,” and “responsibility” in order to quantify the time fathers spend with their children.<sup>4</sup> This “new father” was expected not only to play with his children, but to work as an equal participant within the home – a shift that continues into current times.

## ***Fatherhood in the Latino Community***

As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, the father-child bonds is a cross-cultural phenomenon, and fathers within many different ethnic groups and from different cultural backgrounds share several similar qualities. It is, however, also important to note that some characteristics and values of fathers will vary depending upon their cultural identity. In this section of this paper, we provide a brief description of the prevalence of Latino families within the U.S. as well as a description of particular issues important to many Latino families. As with any issues of identity, diversity is expected even among specific cultural groups. These statements are not intended to be generalized to all families or individuals of Hispanic origin but are simply offered as significant cultural values that should be considered in order to best understand the experience of some fathers.

### **Understanding Latino Families within the United States**

For the purposes of clarification, it is important to have a working definition of the term “Latino.” The term “Latino” reflects the origin of the population in Latin America. While there are significant differences amongst the differing Latino nationalities, the countries of origin considered to be Latin American include North America, Central America, the Caribbean, South America, and Spain.

The United States is home to a large Latino population comprising over 20 cultural backgrounds, languages, values, and customs. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that the Latino population will

encompass roughly a quarter of the U.S. population by the year 2050.<sup>5</sup> It is also estimated that there are over 15 million children of Latino descent under the age of 18 living in the U.S., with the largest concentration in the states of Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas.

Several difficulties often plague Latino families such as discrimination, immigration concerns, low-income, the acculturation process, ethnic identity development, gender roles, and learning English as a second language. Many differences among Latino families are often related to circumstances surrounding their migration. Moving from one country to another requires a process of cultural transition that affects several generations. For those Latino families who do not have legal rights in the countries they reside, the legal ramifications can influence employment stability, mobility, right to schooling, basic medical care, right to due process, and the ability to plan for the future. Services for Latino families that fail to address these complex issues will be limited in the effectiveness of their efforts. While it is outside the scope of this paper to discuss all of these concerns in more detail, family structure, issues of acculturation, and gender differences will be highlighted below.

### ***Latino Family Structure***

In general, the family structure for Latinos is one that values community over the individual. Family membership and a sense of belonging are very important. The typical Latino family is often described as having strong familial ties and intense relationships. Authority is usually given to the husband, parents, males, and the elderly. Husbands/Fathers are expected to provide financially for the family, to protect, to be hard-working, fearless, emotionally detached, dominant, and courageous. Wives are expected to be submissive, supportive, nurturing, and self-sacrificing. Often times, wives are the ones who take care of the family, manage household responsibilities, and are the communicators between the family and the surrounding community. Children are expected to be submissive and are also expected to not challenge the father's rules.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Acculturation and Identity Development***

Working with Latino families requires an understanding of different worldviews that may impact how individuals communicate with professionals as well as their own children, and how these worldviews shape expectations for development. Greenfield's collectivism–individualism model provides a framework by which to understand one's own perspective and that of the individual families we serve.<sup>7-9</sup> Those with an individualistic perspective value competition and focus on individual achievements, while those with a collectivistic perspective place a higher premium on interdependence and community, prioritizing the goals of the group over those of the individual. In general, mainstream Americans tend to fall on the individualistic side of the continuum, while Latinos typically trend toward a collectivistic outlook. However, it must be borne in mind that conflicts between the individualistic and the collectivistic views may arise, and Latinos often must balance these competing and contradictory worldviews, in part assimilating, and in part remaining true to their heritage. Naturally, the degree to which an individual family favors one or the other side of the continuum will depend on a wide variety of factors, including acculturation level, generational status, level of education, and socioeconomic status.

Broadly defined, acculturation is the process through which immigrants and their children acquire the values, behavioral norms, and attitudes of the larger society. While this adaptation can spark tensions within families or negatively affect identity and self esteem (e.g., giving up one's culture to fit in), there are statistically significant positive benefits to a family achieving a high degree of acculturation. For example, research suggests that Latinos who are more acculturated are more likely

to access preventive services. Likewise, acculturated families are more likely to have a more positive perception of their health than their less acculturated peers.<sup>10</sup> Acculturation also has an impact on social support, anxiety and loss of control, depression and suicidal ideation, and alcohol and drug abuse.<sup>11-14</sup> In this way, acculturation level is an important consideration when planning and providing appropriate culturally sensitive services.

### ***Gender Differences: Machismo/Marianismo***

A man's proper role, at least in the language used in much of Mexico, is to be *macho*, and the ideal of the woman was to be like Mary, the mother of God. The *machismo/marianismo* dyad has never been a realistic metaphor for the relationship between men and women in the family, and in particular, the concept of machismo has been badly distorted as understood in U.S. popular culture. There is historico-cultural truth behind these concepts, however; although patriarchal, they are not as demeaning to either sex as one would infer from the popular stereotype.

The term *macho* has never been universal in Latin culture, and care should be advised when using it; in some places every male would have been offended to be referred to as *my macho*. In Mexico, however, the word has historically had more positive connotations. A man who was *macho* was one who engendered respect, and not incidentally, also respect for his family; closely allied to that respect was a sense of dignity and often a forcefulness of personality. Therefore, to be *very much a man* is to have a forceful, dignified presence, a strong (though not unreasonable) will and sense of purpose, reliability, and courage. These qualities are used in support of, protection of, and defense of the family—this is the ideal.<sup>15</sup>

The woman/mother, inhabiting a more private sphere, does not need to undergo these humiliations; her ideal—*marianismo*—is to be like Mary, the ultimate source of nurturance and moral authority in the family, free from the need to engage in moral compromises necessary to ensure the family's survival. This is not the role of a weakling. On the contrary, the mother is the moral and practical rock upon which the family is built—she is the source of value.<sup>16</sup> Again, *marianismo* and *machismo* are cultural ideals, not rational expectations to be lived in daily life. And rarely, outside of Mexico, would the terms, as opposed to the underlying concepts, ever be used in an approving context.

### ***Paucity of Evidence-Based Parenting Programs for Fathers***

Research on fatherhood has enjoyed some increase over the past few decades, perhaps because of societal pressures placing more importance on father involvement.<sup>2, 17-19</sup> Unfortunately, when compared with research on mothers, fathers are dramatically underrepresented in the psychological literature.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, much of the research obtained about fathers is collected from mothers or children, rather than the fathers themselves.<sup>2, 17</sup>

One study, conducted by Fleming and Tobin, examined a random sample of 23 popular child-rearing books to explore how fathers' roles were portrayed.<sup>21</sup> Their results indicated that of the 56,379 total paragraphs analyzed within the books, only 4.2% referred to fathers. Furthermore, 30.7% of the time, when fathers were depicted, it was in a negative fashion. The authors stated, "we were left with the impression that mothers' role with the child was depicted as obligatory and primary, whereas fathers' role was voluntary and negotiable" (p. 20).<sup>21</sup> Thus, it appears that fathers are not only underrepresented in the psychological literature but in the popular literature as well.

## **Summary of Currently Available Evidence-Based Parenting Programs**

Michigan State University, in conjunction with several other universities across the U.S., set out to evaluate the currently available evidence-based parenting curriculum available and in use. These researchers identified 70 programs that all met requirements of being research-based, evidence-based, and designed for a specific target group.<sup>22</sup> Of these programs, three specifically mentioned fathers as part of their intended target population, although these programs were not designed solely for fathers.

### ***Need for Evidence-Based Approaches in the Latino Community***

As mentioned previously, very few evidence-based parenting programs specifically target fathers; even fewer target Latino families. Of the 70 programs mentioned in the above study, only one of them was purposefully designed for families within the Hispanic culture. Some of the programs had been translated into Spanish, although these did not change the curriculum to suit Latino culture.

Armenta recommends the following implementation guidelines when working with Latino families.<sup>23</sup> Several factors appear to increase participation and retention rates, including: courses offered close to home for five to seven weeks, childcare during sessions, transportation to sessions, cultural match of therapist/teacher to participant, and husbands' involvement or encouragement. Another study of interventions for Hispanic couples recommended a consideration of the following factors: family orientation, advocacy services, assessment of immigration experience and level of acculturation, father involvement, use of relevant examples, and engagement with warmth and amiability.<sup>24</sup>

## **Summary of Currently Available Parenting Programs for Latino Families**

The one parenting program specifically listed for use with Latino families is called *Los Ninos Bien Educados Program*. This is a skills-based program designed to be implemented in a group format within 12 three-hour sessions. While the curriculum has been culturally adapted, the original program was written in English and the skills are based on limited research with a majority population sample. Furthermore, this curriculum is designed for both parents (mothers and fathers) and does not specifically target fathers.

## ***Summary and Conclusions***

What it means to be a father in the U.S. has been changing dramatically over the last several decades. Fatherhood itself is a complex role that is influenced by several factors including personality characteristics, previous experiences, and culture. The research on fatherhood, although on the rise, continues to dwindle in comparison to that of mothers, and this is even more true of research on Latino fathers and their families. Because of this gap in the research, evidence-based parenting programming is severely sparse and most of the presently available resources do not focus on fathers or the Latino culture. In order to best meet the needs of Latino families, more research needs to be undertaken on a large scale to inform culturally relevant programming.

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