

# Cultural Competence in the Assessment of Poor Mexican Families in the Rural Southeastern United States

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Increasing numbers of poor Mexican immigrant families are settling in the rural southeastern United States. Most of these families are from isolated agrarian communities in Mexico and are headed by unskilled laborers or displaced farm workers with little education. Child welfare workers and other service providers in rural communities may be poorly prepared to address the needs of this population. This article provides an overview of the cultural, social, and family dynamics of first generation, working class Mexicans to promote cultural competency among helping professionals. An ecological perspective is used to examine the strengths that poor Mexicans bring from their culture of origin, stresses of the migratory experience and ongoing adaptation, shifts that may occur in family structure and functioning, disruptions in the family life cycle, the role of social supports in family adaptation, and effect of institutional discrimination on family well-being. Suggestions also are made for essential components of adequate in-service education.

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One of the most significant demographic changes in the United States in recent years is the dramatic growth in the numbers of Latinos migrating to rural communities (Fluharty, 2002). This trend is particularly pronounced in the southeastern United States, where the Latino population quadrupled during the past decade in predominantly rural states such as Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee (Marotta & Garcia, 2003). A large majority this population is of Mexican descent (Schmid, 2003), have lived in the United States for less than five years (Marotta & Garcia, 2003), and entered the country illegally (Lacey, 2004).

Mexican immigrants settling in the southeastern United States tend to be unskilled laborers or displaced farm workers. Most arrive directly to rural areas in the Deep South from isolated agricultural communities, having never resided in metropolitan areas in Mexico nor lingered in border towns (Lacey, 2004). New arrivals most often are young, speak little English, and have little formal education (Roosa, Morgan-Lopez, Cree, & Specter, 2002). Typically, families make staggered transitions, with the husband arriving first to find work and the wife and children following in about a year (Garcia, 2001).

As compared to their urban counterparts, poor Mexicans immigrating to rural communities usually face greater obstacles to economic advancement, including stronger resistance from long-time residents to their presence (Fluharty, 2002; Neal & Bohon, 2003). Lower hourly wages, higher unemployment, substandard housing, lack of transportation, and restricted access to basic services place many Mexican immigrants in rural areas at higher risk for a range of problems (Fluharty, 2002). In addition, rural service providers may be poorly equipped to span cultural differences between poor Mexican clients and themselves, and they may fail to identify and engage this population's strengths.

Service providers in rural communities need to acquire the essential knowledge and attitudes to make culturally competent

assessments for appropriate interventions with poor Mexican immigrant families. To facilitate cultural competence, this article provides an overview of the cultural, social, and family dynamics of first generation, working class Mexicans residing in the rural southeastern United States. An ecological perspective is used to highlight the systemic barriers Mexican families face in their pursuit of improved life circumstances, but also family strengths and resiliencies associated with traditional Mexican culture.

The author's interest in this population stems from four years in an antipoverty program designed to improve educational, health, and economic outcomes for poor rural communities in south central Mexico. After returning to the United States, curiosity of the adjustments newly arrived Mexican immigrants go through in rural communities prompted a literature review. As much as possible, this article draws on sources about first generation, working class Mexicans immigrants in the rural southeastern United States. Not all, however, incorporated all features simultaneously, and some included Mexicans in a broader study of Latino or other first generation ethnic populations.

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## **The Eco-Transition**

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### *The Migratory Experience*

The migratory experience is a prime example of an "eco-transition" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hess & Howard, 1981), representing a major life crisis that contains opportunities and risks for poor Mexican immigrants. Escaping extremely impoverished environments, poor Mexicans migrate to the rural southeastern United States with a desire to work hard and improve their life circumstances. For those entering the country illegally, border crossings are dangerous, especially for women who may be robbed or sexually assaulted in the process (Solis, 2003). The language barrier, an unfamiliar culture, climactic changes, and multiple losses of routine and social

supports all can contribute to stress levels. If the father preceded the family in the migratory process, the family system has to undergo another reorganization once they reunite in the United States (Garcia, 2001).

The stress of the transition period and the culture shock that follows can cause interpersonal and personal difficulties for family members. In general, members risk developing depression, pervasive anxiety, and loss of control. Members who experienced trauma in the journey may suffer symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Smart & Smart, 1995).

The possibility of pre-existing pathology also may interact with the personal crisis of the eco-transition (Falicov, 1998). When interviewing a recently arrived Mexican immigrant in crisis, the social worker should "be prepared for a longer and more indirect way of gathering vital information...Indirectness helps the client maintain control over the interview until the worker can be better be evaluated for his or her competence and level of kindness" (Garza, 2004, p. 107). Zayas (1992) suggested that social workers are more likely to gain the trust of the newly arrived Mexican immigrant family when exercising a "sensitive curiosity about the immigration experience and its precursors" (p. 306).

### *Ongoing Adaptation*

Even when the acute crisis phase of the migratory transition passes, the pressures of adaptation continue. The newly arrived family struggles with learning English and coping with disruptions in the family life cycle. Family Members also must cope with anxiety-provoking interactions in shopping, paying bills, and confusing encounters with schools, courts, health clinics, and hospitals. They often experience high levels of stress as they attempt to master these tasks with few resources and a limited understanding of the mainstream culture (Fontes, 2002; Garcia, 2001). Undocumented residents also live with the unremitting fear of deportation (Smart & Smart, 1995).

In assessing newly arrived immigrant families, service providers need to be aware that high levels of stress and depression are ongoing. Other risks include continued feelings of being uprooted, lowered self-esteem, and identity confusion (Garcia, 2001; Smart & Smart, 1995).

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### **The Mexican Culture and Family Resiliency**

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Although the demands of acculturation often cause a great deal of stress, sociohistorical features of the origin culture appear to protect many families from these pressures. Protective mechanisms are rooted in the value of the Mexican family as a strong, collective entity, especially in its traditions, its ritual celebrations, and the feelings of self-worth the family affords its members (Buriel, 1984).

In traditional Mexican culture, the family generally is regarded as the survival net for its members, who internalize a strong sense of duty to one another and across generations. The foundation of this cultural orientation is the value of *la familia* and the principle of *familismo*. *Familismo* is expressed through close connections with immediate and extended family members. Family relations are characterized by warmth, respect, and trust. This orientation of values is the result of centuries of adapting to social, economic, and political contexts in which the family was embedded in Mexico (Baca Zinn, 1999; Becerra, 1998).

Mexican-origin immigrant families may bring with them "successful models for living"; they can enrich American society by providing alternatives of relating within families and protecting each other (Valdes, 1996, p. 203). Based on her study of first generation Mexican adolescents and their families, Harker (2001) concluded that this group "brings with them...important familial and communal mechanisms through which they protect and strengthen the psychological well-being of their young" (p. 987). These culturally embedded strengths of Mexican im-

migrant families are reflected in outcomes that favor Mexico-born immigrants over subsequent generations of Mexican Americans.

For example, more children of Mexican born parents live in intact families (Jensen, 2001), and first generation couples have lower rates of domestic violence than their United States-born counterparts (Aldaronda, Kaufman, & Jasinski, 2002; Lown & Vega 2003). Mexico-borns have lower alcohol and drug use than Mexican Americans (Alderete, Vega, Kolody & Aquilar-Gaxiola, 2003; Canino, 2003). First generation Mexicans also have lower rates of depression and phobias, as well as less than half the lifetime prevalence rates of all psychiatric disorders than subsequent generations (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2001). Infants of Mexican born mothers have better health outcomes, which are attributable, in part, to very low rates of alcohol consumption and smoking among women born in Mexico (Padilla, Boardman, Hummer & Espitia, 2002).

Abandoning the old culture and acculturating too rapidly has been associated with drug use and psychological problems (U.S., 2001). Biculturalism is seen as a more acceptable, healthier alternative to acculturation; families can retain their ethnic identity—like language and traditional rituals—while learning the new language and customs (Holleran & Waller, 2003).

This information suggests that culturally competent family assessments should include an examination on how much newly arrived families retain ties to their origin culture, including observing informal but very important Mexican family traditions and more formal ritualistic celebrations such as *Día del Muerto* (Day of the Dead). This event occurs in early November, when loved ones who have passed away are remembered with flowers and food. Some families may stress and focus on survival so much that observing special occasions is not possible (Garcia, 2001).

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## Inside the Family System

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This section addresses some structural, functional, and life cycle dynamics of family life in working class, first generation Mexican families. Social workers can use this information as a starting place for inquiries; it is not meant to be taken as normative standards. Social workers should remember that diversity exists within all families, regardless of cultural background.

### *Family Organization and Gender Relations*

Traditionally in Mexico, family life has been organized by a patriarchal arrangement. Under patriarchy, males and the elderly hold the greatest power and the most respect. The male gender construction, or *machismo*, represents the leadership position in which the father protects and provides for the family members, uses just authority, and respects the role of wife and children (Becerra, 1998).

Machismo also is associated with domination and asserting one's will over others. Women are socialized to be submissive to male authority and devoted to home, husband, and children (Becerra, 1998). The strength of this arrangement has been weakened to some extent by industrialization and the greater numbers of women who have entered the workforce in Mexico (Cauce & Domenech-Rodriguez, 2002).

Immigration usually shifts power relations and gender role behaviors away from male dominance and toward more equalitarian relationships and shared decisionmaking (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Williams, 1990). One study suggested that Mexican fathers in low-income families with both parents employed are more involved in childcare and housework, especially when wives make higher wages (Coltrane, Parke, & Adams, 2004). Other research indicated that working class, first generation Mexican couples engage in fairly high levels of coparenting, mutual sup-

port, and shared decisionmaking (Caldera, Fitzpatrick, & Wampler, 2002).

These adaptive responses are a source of strength for families as they shift patterns to function well as a family in the new environment. Nonetheless, adjustment to the new culture may occur at different paces and create disharmony among family members.

### *Changing Family Structure and Risk Factors*

Changes in family structure do not come without risks. Although most first generation, working class Mexican families appear to safely negotiate changes without major internal upheaval, some families have more difficulty. Marital tensions may emerge as financial need forces wives who have never been employed into the workforce. While women may gain confidence and a sense of competence, husbands can struggle with intermittent unemployment and feel that their role as protector and provider is slipping away (Falicov, 1998).

In these periods of adjustment, couples may be at greater risk for increased social drinking and relationship conflict (Zayas, 1992). Murdaugh, Hunt, Sowell, & Santana (2004) examined the frequency and type of domestic violence among Latinas in a rural corridor of the southeastern United States and concluded that domestic violence is a major health problem for this population. In addition, immigrant women living in rural areas are less likely to report sustained abuse than their urban counterparts (Lown & Vega, 2003). Undocumented Mexican men who abuse can be deported on arrest, which would break up the family unit and deprive the remaining members of a critical financial resource—realities that can make the assaulted wife reluctant to seek outside assistance (Aldarondo et al., 2002).

Aldarondo, Kaufman, and Jasinski's (2002) study of domestic violence in Mexican immigrant couples found that physical assault is a tactic of conflict resolution imposed on wives by dominating husbands; thus, relationship conflict is the strongest indi-

cator of risk for wife assault. Outside employment of the wife is another factor strongly associated with domestic violence in immigrant Mexican families (Murdaugh, Hunt, Sowell, & Santana, 2004), while unemployment among first generation Mexican men doubles the chances of wife assault (Cunradi, Caetano, & Schafer, 2002). Alcohol and drug use by Mexican men is another factor that contributes to partner assault (Murdaugh et al., 2004; Van Hightower, Gorton, & Lee DeMoss, 2000), as well as growing up in a household where domestic violence was commonly witnessed (Aldarondo et al., 2002).

Taken together, these findings can help service providers structure assessments that identify first generation immigrant women at risk for domestic violence. Because Mexican immigrants tend to underutilize healthcare settings, service providers should not rely solely on screening programs in public health clinics and emergency rooms; they need to develop bilingual public information campaigns and educational programs in schools, churches, community centers, and the workplace about risk factors and where women can receive assistance (Lown & Vega, 2003).

Practitioners have been cautioned to avoid encouraging newly arrived immigrant Mexican women in violent marital situations to be more assertive unless supportive networks are in place (Falicov, 1998). The wives who successfully negotiated more equalitarian relationships in Williams' (1990) ethnographic study did so through a series of small incremental steps rather than drastic changes.

### *Parenting*

Mexican parents tend to have close, loving relationships with their children. Young children are highly valued and sometimes indulged (Fontes, 2002). Working class Mexican immigrant families tend to expect their children to accept the family as the central focus of their lives (Zayas & Solari, 1994) and contribute to the family's welfare (Barron-McKeagney, 2002). Children also are expected to exhibit the qualities of *buena educacion* (good educa-

tion), which includes family loyalty, respect for elders, obedience to parental and extended family authority, an ability to get along with others, and conformity to the rules (Fontes, 2002).

When Mexican children don't follow their parents' orders, parents may respond harshly, especially when the family is out in public. These situations can cause reports to child protection authorities (Fontes, 2001). In these circumstances, child protection workers must distinguish between a single episode of physical discipline gone awry from an established pattern of intentional abuse.

Statistically, the incidence of child abuse and neglect in low income, first generation Mexican immigrant families is unknown. Newly arrived Mexican parents may be vulnerable to charges of neglect stemming from their lack of understanding of U.S. child rearing norms and laws. New arrivals may leave children unattended in cars, put babies on laps while riding in the car, leave small children at home in the care of a preteen sibling, or fail to have children immunized. In these cases, social workers need to help parents understand the rules and laws of the new culture (Fontes, 2001).

When assessing Mexican families for child maltreatment, workers need to consider the interactive effects of culture, poverty, social stress, and individual psychology before assigning an outcome of "dysfunctional family" (Fontes, 2002). Often families require a change in their material and social conditions so that parenting will be less stressful. Nonetheless, Fontes (2002) believed that if Mexican families are using corporal punishment, they should be helped to eliminate this option from their child-rearing techniques, feeling that this idea "can be presented in ways that build on Latino family strengths such as loyalty, cohesiveness, and respect" (p. 36).

### *Responsibilities of Children*

Children frequently learn a new language more rapidly than adults and, as a result, first generation, Mexican immigrant parents may depend on a very young child to act as a translator in business and

community interactions. To cultural outsiders, the child serving as the parent's translator can appear to undermine the parent's authority. From the perspective of the parents, the children are simply using their talents to assist the family (Orellana, 2003). As noted by Suleiman (2003), however, allowing children to serve as translators in child abuse and neglect investigations is an ethical problem and constitutes a civil rights violation.

In addition to acting as translators, preteen children in working class, Mexican immigrant families also can have responsibilities in caring for younger siblings and in some housework. Most of the children in Orellana's (2003) study tended younger siblings and did some cooking and cleaning. Rather than viewing these situations as instances where families are "parentifying" a child, these activities can be regarded as opportunities for children to learn skills that can be used in other areas of life (Orellana, 2003).

### *Family Life Cycle and Intergenerational Conflict*

The life cycle of the Mexican immigrant family must be examined in the context of the cultural value of *familismo*, parental authority, and extended family. In addition, the pressures of migration and the family's need to accommodate to the new environment while maintaining organization and structure have to be considered.

Space does not allow a detailed examination of each phase of the family life cycle. Regardless, some cultural and environmental influences on normative development tasks can be briefly explored.

If parents with preschool and school age children take a relaxed attitude toward life cycle events in first generation, Mexican households, their children may become poorly prepared for first-time occasions such as entering kindergarten or first grade. On the other hand, the migratory experience and acculturation stress may create excessive anxiety in parents about their children being turned over to school, and school enrollment may be delayed. Also, parents may become overprotective or over-involved,

cutting children off from important socializing experiences with peers (Falicov, 1998).

Generational tensions may arise as Mexican immigrant preteens begin to experience conflict between parental expectations and authority figures outside the home or on television (Fontes, 2002). Conflicts also emerge as children acculturate faster than their parents, adhering to social norms and behaviors associated with the dominant culture (Garcia, 2001). Emphasis on the traditional value of *respeto*, however, may mean that older children are not encouraged to voice their opinions or disagree with parents; they may be unable to articulate what is troubling them and what is going on in their lives. Depression and suicidal tendencies may result (Falicov, 1998).

In working with Mexican families experiencing these types of generational conflicts, family workers should not encourage the child to become verbally assertive without appropriate groundwork. Many Mexican children have a strong prohibition against making negative statements to parents in situations outside the family context—first generation parents may view this action as insulting or undermining their authority. Social workers are encouraged first to create an alliance with the family system, which is characterized by a respectful attitude toward the parents' authority while acknowledging the stress of intergenerational conflict. This nonconfrontational approach allows parents to understand their children's dilemma without feeling that their authority is being undermined. In this manner, the worker gains the trust of the family so that parents can gradually allow children to express a range of negative and positive effects or behaviors without feeling disrespected (Zayas & Solari, 1994).

Once aware of the significance of intergenerational problems for children, most Mexican families are able to face issues squarely and use family resources to help resolve the problem. In the absence of extended family members who listen to the issues and provide advice, service providers need to provide information,

education, and opportunities for family members to compromise without the parents appearing to lose respect. Consequently, service providers can help families find ways to modify the expression and observance of *respecto* so both parents and children are satisfied with the outcome (Falicov, 1998).

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### **The Mezzo System**

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The *mezzo* environment—consisting of formal and informal networks, supports, and resources in the immediate community and neighborhood—can encourage or impede adaptation for newly arrived Mexican immigrants residing in rural communities. The first generation, Mexican immigrant family's ties to social supports and community-based services are significant factors in promoting family resiliency. For example, the use of community resources by first generation, immigrant families has shown to reduce family conflict, lower teen pregnancies, and improve educational outcomes (McCubbin, Futrell, Thompson, & Thompson, 1995). Immigrant communities with strong social networks are better able to minimize the negative effects of poverty (Denner, Kirby, Coyle, & Brindis, 2003). Thus, investigation of this ecosystem is an important aspect of overall family assessment.

#### **Formal Supports**

Rural communities can be especially challenging to the newly arrived family's adaptation. Regardless of ethnicity, families in rural areas tend to be poorer and have less access to critical resources, such as health insurance and healthcare. Rural communities also tend to offer fewer nonprofit, nongovernmental sponsored services (Fluharty, 2002).

A "distressed safety network" of rural community health centers and migrant health centers is attempting to meet the physical and mental healthcare needs of a growing number of immigrant families (DHHS, 2001). Unfortunately, the Personal

Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 severely limited access by noncitizens to federal and state benefits. The act denies any public assistance, including food stamps, to undocumented Mexicans with the exception of emergency Medicaid and maternal and child health and nutrition programs, although legal and illegal immigrants may pay local, state, and federal taxes (Romero, 2003). Lack of transportation in rural areas often is a barrier to accessing existing community-based services.

Suleiman (2003) addressed the language barrier and other limitations that social service organizations face in meeting the needs of Spanish-speaking immigrant families, including Mexicans. These challenges, difficult enough for public agencies in urban centers, can overwhelm child welfare departments in rural settings. The end result is that prevention services may not be extended to undocumented families, and child protection services may remove children as a first resort without delivering appropriate prior interventions. Furthermore, children may be placed in non-Spanish speaking households because some rural communities are not doing enough to recruit Spanish speaking foster families (Ruff, 2004; Services Providers of Harnett County, 2004).

Harsh service realities are forcing rural service providers to seek creative solutions for unmet mental health, general health, and social needs of undocumented poor Mexican families. Social justice concerns and organizational skills place social workers in an advantageous position to strengthen existing services and encourage nonprofit service centers to meet needs that traditional agencies cannot.

### *Informal Networks*

Informal networks are vital sources for integrating immigrant families into U.S. society and the working class in the rural southeast (Baca Zinn & Wells, 2000). Many poor Mexican families migrate to rural areas where they have friends and relatives already established. Extended family and friends can be strong protec-

tive factors against financial insecurity and isolation in rural locations (Aguilera & Massey, 2003).

New arrivals often adapt to limited resources by living together, pooling earnings, and sharing expenses with extended families and close friends. Poor immigrant families may share a single room with seven or eight people, or sleep three or four people to a double bed. These alternative lifestyles do not reflect family disorganization or deviancy, but adaptive solutions to harsh environmental realities (Baca Zinn & Wells, 2000).

Part of family assessment is determining how rooted the Mexican immigrant family is in the ethnic community. The family worker needs to ask questions about social ties and mutual obligations, which can reveal sources of strengths and assets that can be used creatively in the service delivery process. Linking the newly arrived immigrant family to potential networks and activities in the ethnic community is an appropriate strategy if social supports are weak or missing. Reducing isolation and providing outreach for vital services is critical for poor immigrant families who have no means of transportation or who lack knowledge of existing community resources.

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## **The Macro Environment**

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Awareness of the effect of macro level dynamics on poor, first generation Mexican families is a necessary component of culturally competent assessments and interventions in social work practice. Mendez-Negrete (2000) encouraged social workers to move beyond a functionally oriented, cultural understanding of the poor Mexican immigrant family by incorporating social structural explanations. This content includes the values, interests, and power of dominant groups in society that shape the images and life realities of less powerful racial and ethnic minorities. Galambos (2003) noted that this dominant "larger societal perspective in turn influences the experiences between culturally diverse groups and social work-

ers" in ways of which service providers may be unaware, but results in negative and oppressive consequences (p. 6).

Baca Zinn (1999) argued that institutional discrimination is racial in nature and not ethnic. Writing on Mexican American families from a social structural perspective, Baca Zinn explained how all families are constructed out of race, class, and gender systems that are structurally unequal. Racial and class inequalities place families in different social locations that reflect power and privilege imbalances. Lower socioeconomic status and Mexican minority status are structural categories associated with life conditions that tend to isolate the individual from macro level resources beyond family and neighborhood. Inequitable social structural arrangements disadvantage poor, working class Mexican immigrants in critical areas such as education, income, and employment (Cauce & Domencech-Rodriguez, 2002; White & Rodgers, 2000); healthcare (Berk, Schur, Chavez, & Frankel, 2000); and welfare and social services (Romero, 2003).

Research shows that as English skills improve and immigrants spend more time in the United States, their awareness of institutional discrimination increases. A sense of thwarted social mobility and marginalization may replace the newly arrived immigrant family's hope for a better future (Finch, Kolody, & Vega, 2000). Marginalization may lead to internalized oppression as negative images and messages of the dominant culture are incorporated (Weber, 2001).

A strong economy, more supportive social policies, and stronger antidiscrimination laws are macro level protectants that can increase Mexican immigrants' access to needed resources and opportunities. Community economic development programs (Corcoran & Nichols-Casebolt, 2004) and service centers that provide advocacy, information, referral, and legal services (Segura, 2004) are macro and *mezzo* level resources that can help reduce the disadvantages of the social location of poor, working class Mexican immigrant families in rural areas.

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## Conclusion

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All of the components in the ecological systems perspective examined in this article are mutually interacting and responsive to changes and shifts. As Corcoran and Nichols-Casebolt (2004) made clear in their examination of risks and protective factors influencing human development, risks experienced on one systemic level of the social environment can be offset by protective factors on other levels. Nonetheless, the negative effect of discrimination and marginalization will increase the numbers of poor Mexicans in the child welfare system, despite the strength of their social and familial supports.

In rural counties where increasing numbers of poor Mexican immigrants are locating, child welfare workers need be prepared to provide culturally competent assessments and interventions. Appropriate in-service training should consider three essential components:

- Service providers should provide information on the stresses and dangers of the eco-transition and ongoing adaptation, as well as the nature of the traditional culture and the resiliencies and strengths that most poor Mexican families bring to the new social environment. Case studies that incorporate these features can be more effective than lecture alone.
- Information should incorporate the interaction of multiple ecosystemic factors on family well-being, including the intersection of the social structures of race, class, and gender. This understanding will help workers grasp the pressures of poor Mexican families and the interventions required at various ecosystem levels to address these problems.
- Information on bicultural interventions and prevention services, such as those suggested by Barron-McKeagney, Woody, and D'Souza (2002), can assist workers with planning services that are constructive and strengthening for poor Mexican clients.

Taken together, these components promote culturally competent family assessments and interventions based on understanding, appreciating, and respecting the internal dynamics of first generation Mexican immigrant families and the legitimacy of their cultural values and beliefs. Such a perspective moves the social worker beyond the tendency to view unfamiliar family forms as deviant or dysfunctional and frees them to discern the strengths that poor Mexican families possess—strengths that they can creatively incorporate into the service process.

Child welfare units in some rural county departments of social services in the southeastern United States appear to be struggling to provide not only culturally competent services for poor Mexican families, but also services that are legally in keeping with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which requires removing the language barrier in the service delivery process. Under Title VI, child welfare service providers are mandated to provide not only translators or bilingual workers, but also prevention services in Spanish, Spanish speaking foster homes, psychosocial assessments conducted in Spanish, and identification of Spanish speaking relatives as potential caretakers (Suleiman, 2003).

More needs to be known about how child welfare units in rural areas of the southeast—especially those in very poor counties—are addressing these mandates, as well as what perceived obstacles they encounter in carrying out the regulations. Advocates both inside and outside of these organizations are needed to explore, evaluate, and advance the fulfillment of these requirements. Coalitions with state level departments of social services, other local service providers, and state level Latino advocacy organizations may be required to promote the development of culturally and legally appropriate services for an ever-growing population.

Human services, especially child welfare services, need to be promoted for and on behalf of poor, first generation Mexican families in the rural southeastern United States. And social workers should be the forerunners in advocating an adequate range of culturally competent services to this targeted population. ♦

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