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 TITLE The Hispanic Family: The Decade of Change.  
 PUB DATE 2 Nov 90  
 NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Wisconsin Conference on the Hispanic Family (7th, Milwaukee, WI, November 2, 1990).  
 PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
 DESCRIPTORS Anglo Americans; \*Culture Conflict; Extended Family; Family Attitudes; Family Life; Family Problems; \*Family Role; \*Hispanic Americans; Minority Groups; \*Population Trends; Social Change; \*Social Indicators; Social Values; \*Sociocultural Patterns; Traditionalism

## ABSTRACT

This speech covers a broad range of issues surrounding the Hispanic American family and the changes it has undergone in the last 10 years. Some of the challenges that past and current society presents to minority groups are cited, and a discussion of family reviews its importance and the meaning of the concept "family" for successful identity. The Latino family is extended and all embracing, including all generations and all categories of relatives, the baptismal and marital godparents, adopted siblings, and others even outside the family itself. An exploration of the confusion and disarray that results when traditional family values in the Hispanic American community come into conflict with the majority white culture covers the decline in cross-generational relations, declining respect for elders, clashes between individualism and sharing, and distrust of educational institutions. A comparison of Latino and Anglo values highlights the incompatibility of the two systems. It is pointed out that the erosion of Latino families in the United States cannot be separated from the general condition of society, and that high levels of poverty, increasing divorce rates, and the fact that the concept of the nuclear family is no longer the norm in the U.S. affect the traditional, tight-knit family even more. A final section discusses the following optimistic indicators and trends: (1) the demographic indicators that soon minority groups will comprise the "minority majority"; (2) new models for reconstructing the family; and (3) efforts directed toward community development. (JB)

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**THE HISPANIC FAMILY:  
THE DECADE OF CHANGE**

**Presented at the 7th Annual Wisconsin Conference  
on the Hispanic Family**

**Milwaukee, WI**

**Abdin Noboa Rios, Ph.D.**

**November 2, 1990**

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## THE HISPANIC FAMILY: THE DECADE OF CHANGE

### What People Say:

Ask the average person which is more important, making money or being devoted to one's family, and virtually everyone will answer family without hesitation. But watch how they live.

Ask the average person which means more, the approval of strangers or the affection of people. Obviously, nothing means more than family and close friends. Yet, how many of us have embarrassed our children for fear of what neighbors or strangers might think?

### What Society Does:

If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound? If a person lives and dies and no one notices, was that person really alive? If a people pass through society, make no mark and leave no trace, did they ever exist?

I recently read about a species of butterfly called "the moth with no mouth." It is a type of caterpillar that once it lays its eggs it changes into a moth that has no digestive system, so that it starves to death in a few hours. Nature has designed this moth to reproduce, lay eggs, and pass on the life of the species... Are we like that?

Which is the better question: What is society doing to us? Or, What are we doing to ourselves? Inasmuch as no person is an island, what we do must make a difference. But the flip side is also true. What is done to us, must also have a profound effect.

In reading about the struggles of oppressed groups throughout the centuries, the repetitiveness of racism in history is alarming. At the same time, the resiliency of groups to overcome and combat these forces is extraordinary. The human spirit is strong.

What is striking and sometimes scary about American history is that minority groups all have common antecedents: The U.S. came to them, they did not come to the U.S. This group was unwillingly brought or encroached upon, kicking and screaming. Those that voluntarily came to the States have a different historical experience.

STOP: Flashback with me on the history of Native Americans; the negro slave trade; in 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo; in 1898, the ceding of Puerto Rico as booty from the Spanish-American War. Now, compare the progress of these groups today.

There seem to be two paths for entry into American society. One way is for whites and another is for people of color.

## The Role of the Family:

In talking about the family, we must focus on *where* we are and on *who* we are. Families play an important role where we ask ourselves: how were we nurtured? And who will accept and love us unconditionally? As we look to our communities and its future, where does it lie? Unquestionably, it is anchored to our families.

In reflecting on the background of greatness among our heroes and leaders, we are struck by the strength of the institutions for success: the home, the school, and the church. To the extent that they continue, they certainly no longer perform for today's generation the way they did in our generation. Because these institutions have changed, our families have also been changed.

Again, in reflecting on *who* we are, it becomes evident that what is done to us deeply affects and shapes our destiny unless we, in turn, forge our own *destino*. A strong family life is never an accident, but always an achievement by those who share it and live it (J. Bossard).

As the history of our people is examined, we see many things that have been done to us by way of our families. How are we responding? Our sense of self, pride, deepest beliefs, even our rebelliousness, hinges on our family background. Take that away from us and our souls are lost, our identity is shattered, and our future is shortchanged. Without the family, there is no sense of belongingness. Break the family and you will have broken our sense of solidarity and of community among us.

## La Familia Latina:

Traditionally, the concept of "la familia" is sacred. (*la madre es sagrada*.) The family embraces all that we represent--all generations and all categories of relatives, including grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. The Latino family also includes *comadres* and *compadres*, the baptismal and marital godparents.

Further adding to the family, our reproduction rates are considerably higher than for whites. Our siblings, include adopted brothers, hijos de crianza, also greatly add to the number. As a result, many of our family members cannot all live together, in one household. Also, our connections beyond the nuclear family are extensive and equally special. A sense of "comunidad" is a sense of "familia."

## Families in Conflict:

In marked contrast to the Anglo preoccupation with youth and the importance of the youth peer group, Latino elders are always expected to be accorded respect, and young adults are expected to help with the running of the household, including economic assistance--sometimes to the detriment of youngsters trying to stay in school.

Our future is linked to the strength of our families. Our resilience starts there. Our home is our bulwark. Experience has established two important facts about the function of families: first, the foundation of the structure of human personality is laid down in early childhood; and second, the chief engineer in charge of this construction is the family (M.F. Nimkoff).

For many Latinos in the U.S., family confusion, disarray, and stress can result when traditional values come into conflict with the majority culture. EX: In a culture in which youth is virtually worshiped, respect for elders declines. The concept of 'me-ism' is not valued by us. The tendency of non-Latinos to socialize more with peers than across generations also takes its toll on the unity, mutual dependency, and sharing of the Latino family.

Other aspects which unify Latino culture can lead to problems for Hispanics eager to identify with Anglo culture. EX: The Latino emphasis on interdependence and cooperation is contrary to the mainstream preference of competition and individual achievement.

The issue of individualism versus group effort is conflicting. The importance of individuals contributing to the family's well-being often makes work an economic necessity for many Latino youth. It can also be a means of gaining respect and self-esteem. As one student notes: "If I had dropped out (to father a child) or buy a car, I'd be a big man. But when I came home with my Ph.D., my friends acted like they didn't know me."

The educational experience can provide another source of value conflicts. Often, Latinos perceive the school as a foreign institution, unaware of and insensitive to Latino culture and community. The problem is accompanied by a growing imbalance in the ethnic makeup of school staff. Ironically, while more Latino children are entering the early grades, more Hispanic teachers are leaving the teaching profession.

A variety of factors, in short, combine to produce conflicts between traditional and contemporary values. Latinos often find themselves caught between incompatible value systems. These values are in conflict! Let's compare the following:

#### A Contrast of Values:

<u>Latino</u>	<u>Anglo</u>
Harmony with nature	Mastery over nature
Work for present needs	Work to get ahead
Time is always with us	Clock-watching
Humility	Win first prize whenever possible
Win once, but let others also win	Win all the time
Experience	Academic teaching/scientific
Age and wisdom	Youth, innovation
Follow the old ways	Climb the ladder of success
Share wealth	Save for you and for the future
The value of something is not its price	You only get what you pay for
Don't criticize your people	A critic is a good analyst
Subjectivity	Objectivity/non-emotional/rational
Trust	Suspiciousness
Cooperation	Competition
Sharing	Individualism

Anonymity  
Other-oriented  
Cooperation/interdependence  
Togetherness  
Mi palabra  
Sacredness and principles  
Family and community

Individuality/personal achievement  
Self-reliant  
Competitiveness/independence  
Separateness  
Legal contracts  
Expediency and personal gain  
Organization, systems, law and order

### **Erosion of La Familia:**

We cannot separate issues in isolation. Family erosion is tied to the society in which we live. Several interdependent factors are currently being documented about the condition of Latinos in the U.S.

- o the out-of-proportion burden of poverty suffered
- o the preponderance of female-headed households
- o the population boom and the decade of the Hispano
- o the particular plight of Hispanic males

While the poverty rate for whites is about 11%, it exceeds 30% for Latinos, and is even higher for Chicanos and the Puertorrique os. While the interaction with parents among Latino children is as poor as for whites, communication with fathers is less than seven minutes a day. As the concept of the nuclear family is no longer the norm in the U.S., economic pressures and higher divorce rates among Latino families have affected our traditional, tight-knit family even more. A major advantage is that our extended families pitch in. While nannies are not common, *abuelitas* are. This matriarchy plays a significant role in keeping the Latino tradition alive.

Despite poor census counts, we now have more information about the youngest and fastest growing minority population in the country.

Compared to white children, Latinos are:

more likely to

- o watch more TV
- o spend less time on schoolwork
- o hold jobs as teenagers
- o abuse alcohol and other drugs

twice as likely to

- o die in the first year of life
- o live in substandard housing
- o have no parent employed
- o drop out of school

three times as likely to

- o live in a female-headed household
- o be in foster care
- o be incarcerated or under parole

four times as likely to

- o be murdered before one year of age or as a teenager
- o be in a correctional institution between 15 to 19 years of age

five times as likely to

- o be dependent on welfare and food stamps

six times more rapidly

- o increasing its population growth than whites

### Where's the Evidence for Optimism?

Optimism comes from several sources: a) demographic, b) viable models toward Latino family reconstruction, and c) community building. A group's destiny is not in its learning or the amount of information it acquires, but in its character. The *heart of culture* is the *culture of the heart* (Talley).

#### A. Demographic Reality

The population pyramid of this country has now shifted. It has changed in both size and shape. It is slowly resembling a rectangle, with an ever decreasing base. This means that 1) the general population is getting older, 2) there are more elderly persons at the top than ever before, and 3) the percentage of young populations of new workers is greatly decreasing.

Together with African Americans, and other immigrants, together we will constitute two-thirds of the entering work force population as we move toward the dawn of the 21st century. Minorities are becoming the "minority majority" and the foundation of the U.S. population pyramid. Today, the 25 largest cities in the U.S. have "minority majorities" in their school systems. Segregation has also increased. Among Hispanics, the twenty cities with the largest Latino populations contain 85% of all Hispanics in the U.S.

To ignore our needs now is to ignore the future survival of this country's economic well-being. Ironically, the base of the U.S. future is the least trained and least attended group in the country. Providing assistance to Latinos is no longer a nice, moral thing to do. It is the future of America itself. Racism must yield to the reality of survival or we shall all be the losers. This has never occurred in American history. Herein lies my hope. Our call for action *will* be heard, if only because there is no other choice.

## B. *The Reconstruction of the Family*

Jerry Tello in California has come up with a beautiful model for family reconstruction.

Sense of self--> values/beliefs/world view--> decision making--> attitudes--> behavior

The model looks at the root causes, not just the outward manifestation of behavior. It is strongly based on what people believe, not just what they do. The model focuses on the roots, not the symptoms. We have much to learn in applying its principles. [Demonstrate by example.]

## C. *Community Building*

We are a people in great stress because of our history. And as it gets worse for us, it will certainly get worse for all others.

The model of "el NO" takes into account where our community is at--the level of *conocimiento* (knowledge). This is oftentimes the level where apathy or helplessness has made it seem that nothing is possible, that little can be done. "I can't do it because...I don't know how; I've never done it before," etc.

The model describes the progression to a level of *confianza* (trust). It then moves to a developmental level of self-confidence. From this level, it helps the community perceive that it can in fact to (*poder/empowerment*).

This set of manifestations moves in a cyclical manner. At each cycle, the circle of experience and self-confidence becomes ever wider and stronger.

### Summary:

These concepts can help develop a strong sense of innate understanding and acceptance of our capabilities, and sense of historical, ethnic and personal pride. Every day should be Latino history day. We need to produce the power to legally grant us freedom and confidence to claim first-class citizenship. Our parents and our extended family at school, at home, and at our churches must more than make up for societal shortcomings by granting us a first-class sense of identity and ethnic pride.

If we expect and demand it, we will become the change agents of tomorrow. The answer is in our hands. *Somos el futuro*. We are all change agents in the making and in the doing. Let's make the most of it.