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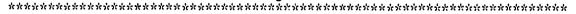   Environment

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Culture-Specific Variables that May Affect Employment Outcomes

for Mexican-American Youth with Disabilities

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Running Head: CULTURAL VARIABLES

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to review variables specific to the Mexican-American culture that might influence work-related behavior and outcomes for youths with disabilities from this population. Areas covered from selected literature include parental/family network, cultural view of disability, religious influences, acculturation levels, language issues, education and employment relationships, substance abuse, folk illnesses, and specific cultural concepts such as *machismo*, *marianismo*, and *familism*. Also reviewed is some of the limited (and possibly inconsistent) research on outcomes in supported and work-related employment for Latino youths with disabilities. These studies appear to show that these youths do as well or as better than their counterparts from other ethnicities.

Culture-Specific Variables that May Affect Employment Outcomes for Mexican-American Youth with Disabilities

For many individuals from this country's indigenous and ethnic minority populations, aspirations related to employment and economic stability have gone unfulfilled or fallen far short of preconceived goals (Kronick, 1992; McKee, 1989; Parrillo, 1991). While there seems to be little disagreement that this state of inequality exists, there appears to be much disagreement on how to allay it (Leung, 1993).

The demographics continue to change rapidly in the United States, and the rate and extent of this change has come as a surprise to most Americans (Leung, 1993). During the decade of the 1980s, half of all immigrants world wide (8.6 million people) settled in the U.S. White males account for a currently declining segment of the overall population, at 37 % of the total. It is estimated that by the year 2,000, 80 to 85% of the work force will be made up of women, minorities, and immigrants (Loden & Rosener, 1991, Price, 1992, Romo, 1984). Minority workers in the 16-24 age group will account for an increasingly larger segment of the future labor force (Escutia, 1986). Indeed, the fastest growing cultural minority age cohort (Escutia, 1986; Schinke, Moncher, Palleja, Zayas, & Schilling, 1988) in the United States is Latino adolescents.

It is commonly estimated that by the turn of the century, Los Angeles will be the largest Spanish-speaking city in the world. (Currently, Mexico City has that distinction.) By 1989, 40 % of all people in Los Angeles were foreign born, 49.9% spoke a language other than English in the home, and of that group 35.5 % spoke Spanish (Miles, 1992). Within certain large geographic areas--especially in the southwest-- the Latino people make up an enormous part of the minimum-wage workforce, yet upward mobility seems to be coming very slowly, if it exists at all. Yet Miles (1992) reminds us that legal and illegal immigrants, refugees, and amnesty recipients are major contributors to an

array of problems associated with adult illiteracy. (There are 27 million illiterate and 20-40 million marginally literate youths and adults in this country.)

Many of these problems directly affect work, such as diminished opportunities to secure work; diminished opportunities for on-the-job training; lowering of pay scale and benefits; slow wage growth; proliferation of the underground economy; expansion of low-wage industries and diminishment of higher-wage industries; homelessness; drains on health, human, and educational services; and diversion of funds (often in communities that can least afford to provide them) from programs used to upgrade human resource capabilities to programs of remedial education, training, and language.

Youth from ethnic minority populations have difficulties equalizing their opportunities in education, employment, housing, social skills, and in the general economy, as do youth with disabilities. Youth from ethnic minority populations who also have a disability face even *more* difficult times. Supported employment is one way to help people with disabilities from all cultural backgrounds equalize their opportunities. Supported employment is the provision of on-going support services for individuals with disabilities who need these services in order to remain employed. The goal of supported employment is competitive employment. Competitive employment is defined as "work that produces valued goods or services at a minimum wage or more, and in a setting that includes nonhandicapped workers and provides opportunities for advancement" (Rusch, 1986, p. 5).

Mainstream American society values work highly. For example, our self-esteem, self-concept, and social/economic status often are job-related. However, in other cultures, this may not be the case. In this paper, we will discuss and evaluate the research that has examined those culturally based variables that may affect successful competitive and supported employment for Latino youth with disabilities as they transition into adult life. Much of this discussion has parallels with Latino youth *without* disabilities who are

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experiencing culturally-related problems. Current understanding of Latino cultural factors, such as *familism, machismo,* and *marianismo* also will be presented.

General Issues

Cultural variables that may affect the opportunity for success in supported and competitive employment of Latino youth with disabilities have not been investigated in depth. Thus, only a few studies show and/or review minority-related issues and outcomes in supported employment and youth training programs (Ekstrom, Freeberg, & Rock, 1987; LaLonde & Maynard, 1987; McDonald, 1991; Wilson, O'Reilly, & Rusch, 1991).

Literature relating in general to the topic of transition for culturally-diverse youth is also scarce. Kronick (1992) explained this paucity of information as a simple problem of omission, stating that culturally-based concerns have been left out of the overall evolution of transition as a field of research, in lieu of other matters considered more important or more popular at the time. Numerous authors (Atkins, 1992; Garcia & Pugh, 1992; Kronick, 1992) have called for an emphasis on research in multi-cultural issues in transition, due to the demographic changes that are sweeping the United States, with related projected changes in the workforce by the turn of the century. It is no longer enough to view disability from a medical perspective (Krefting & Groce, 1992) or a vocational one. Other issues, such as cultural concerns, may be equally important and should, therefore, be incorporated into the overall planning scheme for the individual.

Latino Issues That May Influence Transition Outcomes

Language Barriers

Language-related issues and language barriers are an area of real concern for professionals when dealing with Latino families of youth with disabilities. Often, youthful members of the family can speak English, but not the parents and older family members (McDonald, 1991). Kronick (1992) called for more minority counselors, teachers, and professionals (Spanish-speaking in this case) to work with minority clients

and families. Similarly, Kronick (1992) and Trevino (1991) considered it important that professionals who work with minority populations express a willingness to learn their language. According to Kronick (1992), this seems to be especially true in the case of Mexican Americans, who appear to appreciate even a rudimentary attempt by Anglos to learn their language. McDonald (1991) stressed the need for competent and loyal translators to work with professionals.

Latino View of Disability

The amount, extent, and types of illnesses and injuries found among the Latino population are greatly affected by the jobs they generally perform and the associated working conditions (Trevino, 1991). Living conditions, world view, and cultural influences also have a profound influence (Maestas & Erickson, 1992; Trevino, 1991). Thus,"...it is the societal reaction to the disability that is most problematic" (Krefting and Groce, 1992, p. 4).

Perceptions of disability are influenced by aspects that are culturally internal to Latinos such as the role of men and women and the specifics of the Spanish language and its inherently emotional nature (Cuellar & Arnold, 1988). Cuellar and Arnold (1988), Maestas and Erickson (1992), Trevino (1991), and Leung (1993) found that *curanderismo* (folk illness) plays an important role in the Mexican-American view of disability, as does the role of the *curandero* (the folk healer). Consequently, beliefs in curanderismos such as "ojo" (evil eye), "susto" (magical fright), "empacho" (surfeit), "caida de mollera" (fallen fontanel), and myriad other examples need to be considered and respected when working with Latinos, who may or may not embrace these beliefs (often depending upon the level of acculturation) if some of these individuals are to achieve a true state of wellness and work productivity.

Acculturation Level

The level of acculturation and the acculturation process itself can have a profound influence upon a Mexican-American individual's adjustment, recovery, and

rehabilitation from illness and injury (Cuellar & Arnold, 1988), and, therefore, affect work performance accordingly. Related areas include: length of time the family has been in the U.S., discrimination and prejudice from non-Latino individuals, migrant vs. non-migrant lifestyie, level of stress involved in the acculturation process for the individual and family, level of English language proficiency, family-friends network, family values, as well as personal characteristics, such as self-assurance, interpersonal adequacy, socialization, responsibility, intellectual efficiency, and achievement potential (Cuellar & Arnold, 1988).

Role of Religion

Latino people are predominantly Catholic, and their religion plays a central role in their lives. Maestas and Erickson (1992) pointed out that Catholic parents may be more accepting of children with disabilities than parents who are non-Catholic. Mexicans and Mexican-Americans often view disability as fate, punishment for sins that may have been committed, lack of harmony with the environment, or God's will. Whatever the reason given for a disability, stoic acceptance tends to be the norm (Leung, 1993; Maestas & Erickson, 1992). Leung (1993) suggested that religious aspects have not been given enough consideration in the rehabilitation process of Mexican-Americans.

Education-Employment Linkage

Mexican-Americans comprise the majority of all Latinos in the U.S. (Maestas & Erickson, 1992; Trevino, 1991); yet, they are the least educated (Trevino, 1991). For example, Latinos are the nation's youngest major subpopulation and Mexican-American youths have the highest secondary school dropout rate (Escutia, 1986). Further, Latino dropouts tend to be concentrated in the inner cities where unskilled labor opportunities are declining. Hence, they are seriously at risk socially and economically (Second Chance, 1988).

Lack of transition success for youths from culturally diverse groups may be educationally related. Ekstrom et al. (1987) believe that limited education and poor

reading skills negatively impact outcomes, and called for improved reading capabilities for ethnically-diverse youths involved in supported and youth employment programs in order to maximize success. Kronick (1992) gave evidence via the studies of Duran (1983), Cardoza and Rueda (1986), and Cargile and Woods (1988), that lack of success in, and exposure to the types of classes requisite for university preparedness (e.g., three or more years of natural sciences, social studies, and mathematics, and four years of English) may be a causative factor in lack of transition success for many students from ethnic minorities who may otherwise be appropriate for this level of academic work.

Armstrong (1992), however, placed much of the burden of responsibility on educators, rehabilitationists, and other professionals who have not been properly trained to work effectively with people of diverse cultures, genders, ages, socioeconomic backgrounds, and religions. Armstrong went on to state that changes are taking place in social work, education, and U.S. public health and nursing, but in few other professions. Miles (1992) pointed to the erosion of public support for education of minorities, especially in states such as California, where the numbers of public school seats currently filled by illegal immigrants are increasingly being recognized.

Latino parents place a high value on education for their children, often risking exposure of illegal alien status to enroll them in school (Romo, 1984). Thus, McKee (1989) reported that Mexican American barrio resident parents are extremely concerned that their children receive an education as the main means of equalizing their opportunities for good jobs.

Parental and Family Involvement

It is generally agreed that professionals cannot adequately understand a student's behavior until they understand the family influences on that behavior. However, McDonald (1991) noted that working with parents and families of ethnically diverse clients with disabilities can be problematic because they are often very close knit and distrustful of outsiders and professionals (McDonald, 1991; Price, 1992). Particularly,

under the circumstances of unrelenting economic disparity, many ethnic-minority peoples withdraw inwardly, seeking "solace and security among their own and adopt an increasingly insular view of the world" (Price, 1992, p. 212). As a result, gaining trust is an important factor and usually a lengthy process. Sometimes the families have low expectations for their family member with the disability (McDonald, 1991), and commonly, families are not willing to take risks related to their child.

Yet the close-knit quality of the Hispanic family offers an essential adaptability to its members. Thus, "The family is said to be the most valued institution in Mexican and Mexican-American society" (Maestas and Erickson, 1992, p. 5). Single individuals often find it impossible to survive outside the umbrella of the family because of the way members help and support each other. Resultantly, the family as a unit has more viability. This type of family is not the nuclear unit more common in the white culture, but an extended family that often includes "fringe" relatives such as godparents. Hence, interaction with a large number of family and friends is the norm (Maestas & Erickson, 1992; Trevino, 1991). Schinke et al. (1988) found that the family-friend-community network has been underresearched, underestimated, and underused as an intervention resource. Leung (1993) stated that family processes have not received enough emphasis in the research literature.

The cultural concept of *familism* appears to have the potential to greatly influence Latino youths and their behavior in the world of work, especially in the case of youths with disabilities. Familism places the family ahead of individual interests. For example, children often are expected to contribute to the overall income of the household. As a result of this view, the concept of the family becomes *idealized*, inspiring the greatest sacrifices and also the largest deprivations (Ingoldsby, 1991). Family obligations, value orientations, and influence all affect patterns of Latino labor-force participation and non participation. For example, it is preferable for a Latino woman not to work if she is

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married, especially if she has children. This value has caused many Latino women to work from within the home in occupations such as piecework (Parillo, 1991).

Research purports that of all labor-placement methods used by American employers, none has been as pervasive or effective as the informal familial ethnic network, that highly influences employment and occupational choice (Parillo, 1991). The principal response of individual family members to this influence is that they will work harder and longer hours and endure more hardships than many other cultural groups in order to maintain income (Kronick, 1992; Parillo, 1991). According to Maestas and Erickson (1992), this cultural norm has also kept the majority of Latino people with disabilities out of institutions. As a further illustration, these authors gave the example that children with mental retardation are called "enfermitos" *little sick ones*. ("Itos" is a diminutive which relates to love and responsibility.)

Machismo and Other Cultural Concepts

Latino youths, especially males, are a high- risk group for substance abuse (Austin & Gilbert, 1989; Schinke et al., 1988; Trevino, 1991). Reasons may relate to environmental and cultural factors. Austin and Gilbert (1989) noted that Latino youths are exposed to environmental conditions that may predispose them to alcohol-related problems, such as low education, lack of health care, poverty, and a predominantly urban life style. However, they stressed that the relationship between environmental factors and substance abuse for Mexican-Americans is complex and that research results are mixed in terms of what the major issues may be.

Machismo, essentially a male concept, requires overt expressions of masculinity, aggressiveness, physical power, and strength. Consequently, challenges of any type should be dealt with physically, using weapons or fists (Ingoldsby, 1991). Indeed, research has pointed out that to be authentically macho, one must be totally fearless and be capable of drinking huge amounts of alcohol, while still being able to maintain a

sober mien. Austin and Gilbert (1989) stated that family modeling of alcohol use is a factor in the high rates of substance problems among Latino youths.

The concept of machismo is also one of hypersexuality. Less-than-able-bodied men in these two areas (strength and virility) are ridiculed (Ingoldsby, 1991). As a result of these views, women are looked upon as sexual objects to be conquered, and married men are expected to have a mistress in addition to their wife, as well as engage in other brief, but numerous liaisons. Ingoldsby explained that machismo is an outgrowth of a tradition of lack of affection shown to sons by fathers in Latino households and to job insecurity, so often found in Latino households of lower economic status, where machismo is found to higher degree.

Schinke et al. (1988) suggested stressing cultural constructs such as *dignidad* (individual self-worth), *respeto* (a value of rituals and ceremonies to guide interpersonal interactions), *caridad* (a priority of assisting, supporting, and tangibly aiding other Latino people), and developing *confianza* (close, trusting relationships) and *personalismo* (warm, face-to-face interpersonal style) in intervention strategies to help curb substance abuse among Latino youths.

Newton, Elliott, and Meyer (1988) recommended a structured work environment for workers with alcohol-related problems. Areas that may negatively impact work performance for this group are lack of supervision, work stress and job demands, role or job ambiguity and poor definitions of acceptable performance, weather/seasonality of job, and highly mobile or geographically isolated jobs. Indeed, these characteristics of the employment site can facilitate substance abuse. By comparison, characteristics that may first have attracted the employee can deter substance abuse, including company rewards, benefits, and role satisfaction. Given these facts, the question arises whether supported employment (which generally possesses a high degree of structure) and youth employment programs may benefit from even more structure when dealing with Mexican-American youths.

The cultural concept of *Marianismo*, which views women as almost *semi-divine*, and places them on a morally and spiritually higher plane than men, supports both the concepts of machismo and familism. Thus, it speaks to the highly respected mother-image of familism and the need and desire to be protected by a strong, powerful, dominating machismo male. At the same time, however, it contradicts that element of machismo which views women as sex objects (Ingoldsby, 1991).

Current Research Findings on Employment of Latinos with Disabilities

Limitations of Research

The few studies that have attempted to address minority-youth employment concerns may not be accurate representations (Ekstrom et al., 1987; LaLonde & Maynard, 1987; Wilson et al., 1991). For example, the population sample used is often too small. Ekstrom et al. (1987) and Wilson et al. (1991) called for larger sample size, and LaLonde and Maynard (1987) noted also that some studies use non experimental methods, and have suggested that researchers pursue more systematic, methodological analyses that empirically test the validity and reliability of data. LaLonde and Maynard (1987) suggested that pre-training earnings (if any) be incorporated into the research to avoid inaccuracies when looking at issues such as post-training versus pre-training job success. Ekstrom et al. (1987) pointed to an overrepresentation of short-term programs in research studies, suggesting that longer-running programs be studied as well. Further, some studies have been conducted during times of economic recession, making the findings less generalizable to times of economic growth or stability. Often, entire ranges of demonstration models were compared with each other, rather than by type. Ekstrom et al. (1987) recommended that exemplary programs be used when conducting research.

Results

Findings relating to Latino supported employment and youth work programs may need to be viewed with caution, given the evaluation research (Ekstrom et al., 1987; LaLonde & Maynard, 1987; Wilson et al., 1991) suggesting possible study

inconsistencies. Minority clients made higher wages per hour than non minority program participants (Ekstrom et al., 1987; Wilson, O'Reilly, & Rusch, 1991). Latino supported employees made higher per hour wages than all other program participants, including other minorities, and worked more hours per month (Wilson et al., 1991). Further, minority-status employees were younger (Ekstrom et al., 1987; Wilson et al., 1991) and had higher IQs (Wilson et al., 1991).

Employment programs appear to aid minority clients, especially blacks and women (Ekstrom et al., 1987). However, Escutia (1986) and research reviewed in ERIC/CUE Digest, Second Chance, (1988) found that the Job Training Partnership Act's programs achieved mixed results. Generally, they failed to aid Latino clients because the programs have difficulty in attracting youth, are low-cost, short-term, over-restrictive, and suffer from budget cuts, underfunding, and other problems. But, minority-status employees may not need as much pre-employment assistance as whites. Wilson et al. (1991) found that these groups participated far less in pre-employment programs such as developmental training, regular workshop placement, and work adjustment training than whites. Males worked less than females, but were employed for longer periods (Ekstrom et al., 1987). The majority of minority, non minority, and Latino clients in supported employment programs have a diagnosis of mental retardation (Ekstrom et al., 1987; LaLonde & Maynard, 1987; Wilson et al., 1991).

Programs that appear to work well and aid Latino youth include (a) work study programs, (b) youth programs for recent dropouts, (c) immigrant programs, (d) programs for parents, (e) programs for adults with families, (f) government programs, (g) job ladder programs, (h) public works programs, (i) entrepreneurship programs, and (j) job improvement programs (Second Chance, 1988; Kronick, 1992).

Conclusions

It appears that certain Latino cultural variables have the potential to affect employment situations for Latino youths with disabilities. For example, acculturation levels, religious

factors, and language all appear to play major roles. *Familism* requires strict adherence to family rules and obligations from an early age, with the primary emphasis on being a working, contributing member of the extended family unit. This is not always possible for a youth with a disability, making effective supported employment all the more vital in the case of Latino youth with disabilities. However, the strong family and community orientation within the Latino culture is a rich support and intervention network currently untapped by professionals.

The concept of *machismo is* one that a Latino youth with a disability can hardly expect to achieve, with loss or lowering of self-esteem the possible result. The related problem of substance abuse, however, which is part of the machismo "package" may influence Latino youths both with and without disabilities. *Machismo* also appears to relate to family modeling of alcohol abuse for males. The concept of *marianismo*, in which a woman is elevated to superior moral and spiritual status, combined with the machismo need to overprotect her, might result in female youths with disabilities being sheltered to such an extent that achieving the independence so vital for people with disabilities might never occur. This may especially be true given the lengthy dependence of children encouraged in Latino households (Gartner, Lipsky-Kerzner & Turnbull, 1991). The Latino belief in protecting and caring for individuals with disabilities within the home should be given major consideration by professionals dealing with Latino youth with disabilities who may or may not be involved in supported employment programs.

Unfortunately, studies of Latino and minority participation in youth and supported work programs are sparse. The few that exist appear to show that Latino youth with disabilities excel above all others in these programs in all criteria used. Miles (1992) discussed the overwhelming acceptance and trust of non-disabled Latino workers over African-American workers by Anglos in California as an enigma, stating, "Maybe it is the Catholicism...or something in the Latin personality" (p. 54). This finding may also

relate to the Latino cultural norm of familism and a willingness to work harder, longer hours, and at tasks other individuals would not consider doing. However, the resultant downside is that pay scales drop, job competition increases, and unemployment rates go up for unskilled white and African-American workers. Miles (1992) stated further that whites in the United States appear to view Latinos, even those who are foreign, as native and safe and to regard African-Americans who are native, as foreign and unsafe. In summary, he wondered whether Latinos have acquired a better reputation than they deserve and African-Americans a worse reputation than deserved.

However, some evidence suggests that results from work-related studies of minority youths *with* disabilities may not be accurate due to design and control flaws. Clearly, therefore, more studies of these types are needed, using satisfactory controls, before more conclusive inferences can be made. Also needed are studies that look at the role of cultural constructs in employment patterns and outcomes. Because Latinos have higher pregnancy and birth rates than whites or African-Americans, and when this fact is viewed with their high student drop-out pattern, Escutia (1986) believes that they will suffer disproportionate negative consequences if adequate employment training services are not made available to them.

Recommendations

Recommendations for improvement in service delivery for Mexican-American youth, both with and without disabilities, are extensive. They include assessing the client's primary language preference utilizing lay interpreters (Cuellar & Arnold, 1988), and, culturally-appropriate (in Spanish when needed) tests, information, and materials (Cuellar & Arnold, 1988; Kronick, 1992; Trevino, 1991); encouraging parent involvement (Atkins, 1992; Kronick, 1992); showing respect for and knowledge of the Mexican culture (Cuellar & Arnold, 1988; Kronick, 1992; Trevino, 1991); encouraging strong involvement from local minority business and including ethnic minorities on advisory boards (Atkins, 1992); utilization of cultural pride and awareness programming, which Cuellar

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and Arnold (1988) term "ethnotherapy"; being aware of the level of acculturation of the particular client and related family (Cuellar & Arnold, 1988; Trevino, 1991); innovatively using existing resources such as churches, cultural and leisure-focused groups like the YMCA (Atkins, 1992); building rapport with clients and their families (Trevino, 1991); including the curandero and folk healing practices (when appropriate) in the overall service plan for Mexican Americans with disabilities (Cuellar & Arnold, 1988; Maestas & Erickson, 1992; Trevino, 1991); learning Spanish even if only to a small degree (Kronick, 1992; Trevino, 1991); improving identification procedures to distinguish those students who need special education services from those who are experiencing culturally based problems (Kronick, 1992); establishing transition tracking procedures (Kronick, 1992); offering flexible hours for appointments; locating service programs in non intimidating buildings accessible by public transportation and offering assistance with transportation problems (Atkins, 1992; Trevino, 1991); taking culturally based sex-role differences into consideration during assessment and treatment (Cuellar & Arnold, 1988); adding anthropological components to practitioner education programs (Armstrong, 1992) and involving anthropologists in disability research and concerns (Krefting & Groce, 1992); developing new service delivery models (Leung, 1993); and researching further the area of transition for Latinos and other cultural minorities.

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