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Acculturative Stress: Latino Immigrants and the Counseling Profession

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The conceptualization of psychological acculturation was borrowed from a sociological and anthropological construct describing changes in cultural, ethnic, and racial groups that result from their interaction (Social Science Research Council, 1954). The article by Smart and Smart (1995 [this issue]) appears to be encouraging the acculturation process between Latino immigrants and the counseling profession. In this way, their article serves a sociological function of attempting to promote more effective interactions between Latino immigrants and counselors. There is the potential for this interaction to be mutually beneficial, as Latino immigrants could benefit from receiving more effective psychological services and the counseling profession could benefit from an increased client population. In addition, there are direct benefits to the authors, this respondent, and the journal for writing, commenting on, and publishing this article; it is hoped that the target population (Latino immigrants) profits as much as or more than the psychology profession from this and similar academic efforts.

Social scientists investigating the acculturative process have tended to focus on the cultural or ethnic minority groups. However, the original concept of acculturation referred to changes in both ethnic minority and nonminority groups. Berry (1993), in particular, has encouraged researchers to focus on ethnic majority as well as minority groups:

We cannot hope to understand the situation of an "ethnic minority" in a plural society unless we also understand the "ethnic majority," and their mutual relationships. Such an exclusive focus on the ethnic minorities gives us only part of what we need to know, and perhaps reinforces the implicit view that it is "they" who need fixing rather than "us." (p. 279)

In other words, the tendency to focus on the problems of ethnic minorities seems to serve a function that is similar to the focus on the identified patient in a dysfunctional family system. In both cases, the attribution of problems as being either within the identified patient or within ethnic minority communities can serve the defensive function of avoiding more critical systemic issues. In dysfunctional familial relationships, the systemic issues need to be

addressed in order for substantive changes to be made. This same principle appears to be equally important when attempting to increase the productivity of the relationships between Latino immigrants and psychological counselors.

Smart and Smart's (1995) stated intention was to define or describe the "experience" or "reality" of Latino immigrants for counselors. It is always a difficult and sensitive issue to characterize the experiences of persons from another cultural group. However, the information presented by Smart and Smart should be readily understood by members of the counseling profession because they applied psychological theories to the dynamics of Latino immigrants acculturating to U.S. cultures and populations. These frameworks offer ways for counseling practitioners and researchers to begin conceptualizing some of the issues facing Latino immigrants. Obviously, the applicability of these frameworks for Latino immigrants needs to be evaluated with research conducted on this population. For example, a nationally representative epidemiological study found that Mexican immigrants had lower levels of somatic complaints relative to U.S.-born Mexican Americans and lower or equivalent levels of somatic complaints relative to Anglo-Americans, but the Mexican immigrants did have higher reported levels of anxiety than Anglo-Americans (Codina & Roberts, 1987). Similarly, Cohen (1979) has found that Latino immigrants appear to have adjusted to the United States with relatively few health problems. Other research has found that Latino immigrants respond to acculturative stress with considerable cognitive and behavioral flexibility by developing, for example, "new life-styles and coping strategies" (Ramirez, 1987, p. 194). It would have been helpful if Smart and Smart had integrated more of the research conducted specifically on Latino immigrants to evaluate the applicability of the conceptualizations of the effects of acculturative stress for Latino immigrants.

The sections on role entrapment, counselor-client relations, and role models in Smart and Smart's (1995) article should be particularly helpful to practitioners and researchers. These sections specifically focused on the relationship between Latino immigrants and members of the U.S. population (e.g., employers and counselors) and thereby provided valuable information about sources of conflict and difficulty in the acculturative process between Latino and non-Latino communities. Smart and Smart characterized aspects of the sociocultural environment (e.g., status leveling and role entrapment) for Latino immigrants that are likely to have a critical impact on their adjustment. In addition, they described attitudes that immigrants may bring to counseling relationships and described some of the difficulties that counselors may experience in working with culturally different clients. Information in these sections may help counselors understand some of their reactions to Latino immigrants. The section on the counselor-client relationship is

eventually followed up by the implications section. In this last section, some guidance is provided, including the citation of some useful sources.

There were three specific issues raised in Smart and Smart's (1995) article that are controversial; consequently, it seems important to offer alternative perspectives. First, Smart and Smart depicted the relationship between the United States and Latino immigrants as essentially a paternalistic one, characterizing the United States as having "a rich and honored tradition of providing newcomers with opportunities for education, wealth, and upward social mobility" (p. 26) for which it has incurred a large financial burden. They depicted the Latino immigrant as less educated and skilled than their predecessors and contemporaries (i.e., immigrants from other regions of the world, especially Europe). However, this "rich and honored" tradition of the U.S. immigration practices has been dominated by differential treatment of immigrants based on race, ethnicity, and national origin. Obviously, the kind of "opportunities" provided to African slaves taints this purportedly "honored" tradition. Contemporary immigration policy continues to reflect differential treatment of immigrants based on their country of origin. For example, Rodriguez and Urrutia-Rojas (1990) found sharp contrasts in governmental responses to Southeast Asian refugees relative to Central American refugees. Specifically, they found that Southeast Asian refugees have been provided with official resettlement programs and afforded higher rates of approval for political asylum relative to refugees from Central America.

Moreover, the economic analysis cited by Smart and Smart (1995) is incomplete and misleading, as it implies that immigrants pose a net financial burden on the United States. The sociological and economic analyses that were reported by Smart and Smart are reminiscent of journalistic sensationalism; therefore, it was not surprising to discover that three out of four citations for this section of the article were journalistic, nonacademic sources: the *Salt Lake Tribune*, *Newsweek*, and *Time*. Smart and Smart should have consulted more authoritative sources. For example, in 1990, 38 leading U.S. economists (including seven Nobel laureates, such as Milton Friedman) were surveyed about the net impact of legal and illegal immigration on the U.S. economy. All of the economists indicated that immigration during the 20th century has had a very or slightly favorable impact on the U.S. economy (Moore, 1990). Moreover, the finding from this survey "contradicts a widely held perception that the 'new immigrants'—such as Mexicans, Vietnamese, and Koreans—are not economically assimilating or that they are less productive than past immigrant groups" (Moore, 1990, p. 3). Lastly, the majority of these economists suggested that the current level of illegal immigration has a positive economic impact and that the U.S. economy would benefit from an increase in the number of legal immigrants (Moore, 1990). If sociological

and economic arguments are to be used in psychological articles, then it seems critical that they be used in a scholarly fashion.

Second, one particularly controversial section of Smart and Smart's (1995) article seemed to be advocating offering incentives ("lollipops") to Latino immigrants to learn English. The discussion about the "lollipop principle" had somewhat of a patronizing tone, as this principle applies when children have something that they should not have and when they are incapable of deciding what is best for them. I think it is a mistake to draw parallels between lollipops and Latino immigrants' language usage. This section seemed to assume that Latino immigrants are unaware of the consequences of English language skills. In contrast, surveys show that Latino populations are keenly aware of the economic consequences of not learning English (Lambert & Taylor, 1990); consequently, Latino immigrants are not making uninformed decisions about the costs/benefits of bilingual skills, and their decisions should be respected by counselors, not coerced with sugar-coated incentives. It seems very odd that Smart and Smart devoted an entire section to recommending that Latino immigrants become bilingual, but that no recommendation could be found in this article that counselors become bilingual to work with Latino immigrants!

Third, Smart and Smart (1995) seemed to assume that counselors will play a major role in helping Latino immigrants cope with the acculturative stress imposed by the move to the United States. Smart and Smart may have overestimated the current usefulness of the counseling profession to Latino immigrants. The training programs in counseling psychology are inadequate in providing skills, attitudes, and knowledge that have been identified as critical in serving ethnic minority groups (Quintana & Bernal, 1995). In short, significant acculturative changes within the counseling profession need to occur before effective services can be provided to Latino immigrant groups.

I was surprised that Smart and Smart (1995) did not explicitly address the various orientations toward the acculturation process. The impression that readers might take from Smart and Smart's article is that acculturation is a unidimensional process. However, Berry (1993) has outlined four prototypical acculturation orientations for ethnic minority groups: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. He has also proposed complementary orientations for the response of ethnic majority groups: multicultural, assimilation (e.g., melting pot model), segregation, and ethnocide (see Berry, 1993). When working with Latino immigrants, counselors should assess for the acculturative orientations of the immigrant as well as the predominant orientations of the social, educational, employment, and legal communities for the immigrant. For example, immigrants who have adopted (or have been

forced to adopt) separation strategies might need to be referred to an ethnically similar counselor, but those immigrants with an assimilation orientation might prefer a White, Anglo counselor. Analogously, counselors working in communities that have not adopted multicultural orientations toward Latino immigrants may need to provide or find substantial social and/or cultural support for immigrants. These factors are equally important to researchers as they attempt to understand the nature of the acculturative relationship between immigrants and the local and national communities.

Lastly, I wish to join with Smart and Smart (1995) in their call for cataloguing the strengths of the Latino immigrants. However, they failed to give examples of these strengths. Moreover, some of the characteristics that I consider to be cultural strengths of Latino immigrants were characterized by Smart and Smart as factors that may impede their receiving counseling services. These cultural strengths include religiosity, "fatalism," strong ties with their ethnic communities, emphasis on personal respect, and deference to authority. The practice of counseling and psychotherapy could be enhanced by embracing values and coping skills from other cultures. In closing, I wish to encourage counselors to consider the acculturation process as having effects on both ethnic minority and ethnic majority populations and to warn counselors against the potential for paternalistic attitudes toward Latino and other immigrant groups.

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