

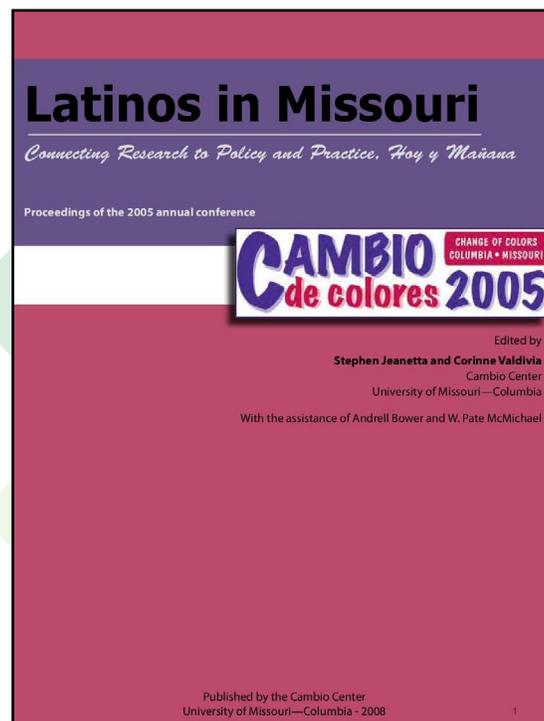


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The Nature and Extent of Latino Immigrants' Communication with Their Children about Sexual Issues

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Abstract

The second and third generation of Latino immigrants have historically not fared as well as their foreign-born parents on many health measures, such as life expectancy, unplanned pregnancy and drug use. To better prepare the children of immigrants for life in the U.S., we need to provide resources to their parents. As part of a larger study on family-planning service acquisition, 100 male and 100 female Latino immigrants in Boone County, Mo., were queried about their concerns regarding children raised in the U.S. and their intentions for addressing sexual-behavior issues with their children.

This presentation will first describe demographic characteristics of the respondents, such as level of acculturation, education, age and gender, that might affect their views on how to educate their children. These demographic variables will then be related to how immigrants perceive the context of reception for childrearing in the U.S. Then, the respondents' views on the importance of discussing various sexual issues with their children will be presented. Finally, the role of the family and other social institutions in educating children about sexual issues will be discussed.

Keywords: Latino health, Latino health education, immigrant parenting strategies

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Much remains to be learned about how to promote responsible teen sexual behavior, especially in ethnically diverse populations (Raffaelli & Green 2003). Recent trends demonstrate the need for more focus on Latinos in particular. Although overall teen pregnancy and birth rates have declined in the United States, among Latino teens the rate of decrease has been slower than for other population subgroups. From 1990 to 2002, the proportion of births to unmarried Latino teens rose from 25 percent to 74 percent. Latinos are projected to make up 24 percent of the teen population by 2025 (U.S. Census Bureau 2004). Much of the general teen population decrease in pregnancy and births can be attributed to the promotion of sexual responsibility through abstinence programs and the use of contraception among those who are sexually active. Hispanic teens, however, are less likely to use contraception than other teens. (Erickson 1998; Ryan, Franzetta, & Manlove, 2004). Researchers have not determined whether these differences in contraceptive use rates and pregnancies are related to some aspect of culture, the acculturation process, a lack of knowledge and skills or other factors (Pesa & Mathews 2000). The purpose of this study is to understand the role that recently immigrated Latino adults intend to play in educating their children about sexual issues.

Promoting Sexual Responsibility through Programming and Parenting

The main societal response to promoting sexual responsibility has been pregnancy prevention programs, namely sex education programs in schools; promotion of access to family planning clinics (Hoff, Greene, McIntosh, Rawlings & D'Amico 2000); and, in recent years, an emphasis on abstinence promotion (Wilson 2003). Many of these programs are directed toward the teens and do not include the rest of the family, especially the parents, even though researchers recognize the role of parents in encouraging sexual responsibility (Jaccard, Dittus, & Gordon 1998). Latinos tend to have a cultural orientation that is familial, not individualistic (Kwak 2003). Thus, programs that target only the teens might not deliver their message effectively to Latinos.

Across cultures, parents are the primary source of socialization for children and establish their basic values and orientation. Parents model gender roles, provide supervision and monitoring of behavior and pass on the beliefs and norms to the next generation. In the process, they pass on some basic information about sexual behavior. Much of the research on how this information gets transmitted from parents to teens has focused on how, through communication patterns, parents socialize teens regarding sexuality (Rosenthal, Senserrick, & Feldman 2001). Some research has found that the timing rather than quantity of information exchanged impacts sexual risk-taking behaviors (Clawson & Reese-Weber 2003). No conclusive relationship has been found between parent and child communication and youth sexual risk-taking behaviors (Kirby 1999; Miller 2002). In some situations, increased communication does seem to affect risk behaviors, but in other cases no relationship seems to exist. The inconclusive results have been attributed to study designs that do not account for the relevant variables, particularly the nature of the communication (Miller, Benson, & Galbraith 2001). Little research has been conducted on communication among ethnically diverse populations. The few comparative studies that have been conducted indicate that Latino parents communicate less than Anglo- and African-American parents about sexual issues (Baumeister, Flores, & Marin 1995; Hofstetter et al. 1995). The reasons for the lower levels of discussion have not been identified in research.

Some parents might not be comfortable transmitting sexuality knowledge, or because of the changing

social context, they might be ill-equipped to pass on information that is relevant in contemporary youth culture. Latino teens and parents, especially recent immigrants, might encounter a social context that limits the parents' effectiveness in communicating about relevant sexual information. Many originate from traditional cultures in which people marry in their teens and early twenties. Many are from small communities in which youth are chaperoned or closely monitored by the community and have few opportunities for sexual relations outside of marriage. Once they arrive in the United States, the social context is different — people marry later or not at all, cohabitation is common and sexual images and behaviors are openly displayed in the media. The parents might be unaware of what issues they need to discuss with their teens. They may not have the coping resources to counteract the pervasive influence of sexuality in the media and society. Yet, the parents of Latino youth might present the best means to reach this group of teens with a sexual responsibility and pregnancy prevention message. The teens interact with them on a regular basis, and the parents are the individuals most likely to be responsive to the teens' immediate needs (Schreck 1999).

Factors Impacting Parent/Child Communication about Sexuality

Previous studies have shown a relationship between a variety of sociodemographic variables and the extent of parent and teen communication about sexual issues. Using non-Latino samples, some studies found that gender influences communication, with mothers communicating more than fathers (Hutchinson & Cooney 1998; Miller, Kotchick, Dorsey, Forehand, & Ham 1998; Di Iorio, Kelly, & Hockenberry-Eaton, 1999). Other studies found that Latino mothers communicate more than fathers, and they communicate more to daughters than to sons (Raffaelli & Green 2003). Education levels also seem to influence communication, with more educated Latino parents tending to talk more with their children (Raffaelli & Green 2003).

Cultural attributes have not been examined closely in previous studies of parent and teen communication about sexual issues although Raffaelli and Green found a difference between parents of Mexican and non-Mexican origin; those who were non-Mexican were more open in communicating about such issues. Numerous studies have found that acculturation, the degree to which an individual has adopted the language and customs of a new society, impacts behavior in a variety of settings (Bell & Alcalay 1997; Weigers & Sherradan 2001; Zane & Mak 2002). Commonly used proxies for acculturation level are length of time in the United States and language abilities and preference (Arcia, Skinner, Baily, & Correa 2001). Those who have been here a shorter period of time might respond differently to some questions based on a different cultural orientation. Those who intend to stay might respond differently than those who intend to return to their country of origin. Those who intend to stay are more likely to think about the situation in the U.S. and what they need to do to prepare their children to live here. Those who speak mainly Spanish might not be as aware of the social context in which their children are living. Besides the general process of cultural adaptation, religious beliefs and affiliation might also influence communication about sexuality. One study found that Hispanics are more likely than Caucasians and African-Americans to say that religion shapes their sexual behavior (Manay, Laumann, & Michaels 2001).

Another constellation of factors might affect the nature of what is communicated about sexuality. The attitudes and values that parents transmit through their actions and words might impact teen sexual behavior. Past research has shown that the stricter the values of parents regarding premarital sex, the longer teens delay initiating sex, the less frequently they have sex and the fewer partners they have. In addition, the more positive the parents' views about using contraception, the more likely teens are to use it. The more negative the parents' views about early childbearing, the more likely teens will delay childbearing (Kirby 2001.)

What seems to be important in understanding the transmission of sexual information from parents

to children is not just the extent of the communication but also the nature. Some studies have found that parents provide little direct, specific information about sexuality issues (Kisker 1985; King & Larusso 1997). The Raffaelli and Green study found that parents were more likely to discuss relationships and values rather than specifics about sexual behaviors and protection. Other studies (Baumeister et al. 1995; Raffaelli & Ontai 2001) have also found that parents are less likely to discuss topics such as birth control and sexually transmitted illnesses than topics such as values and relationships.

This study seeks to expand our knowledge about parent and child communication about sexual issues. The study sample consists of recent Latino immigrants, many of whom do not even have children yet. Those who do have young children. Consequently, we cannot directly observe how these Latino adults will socialize their children regarding sexual behavior. This study examines the levels of importance expressed by recent immigrants regarding strategies and topics for socializing children about responsible sexual behavior. This information can inform the design of sexuality education programs for Latino youth and parents.

Methods

Instrumentation

The items used in this analysis were part of a 170-item survey instrument. The first set of four items was designed to gauge the level of concern people had about raising children in the United States. A female native speaker and trained parent educator developed the items based on her experiences working with Latino families with adolescents. The rest of the questions used in this particular analysis were derived from an earlier study by Jordan, Price, & Fitzgerald (2000) on rural parents with teenagers. The questions included respondents' own experiences in being educated about sexual issues, their intentions for informing their children about such issues and a list of specific issues for which they rated the importance of talking to their children about each one. A thorough review of the literature on sexual socialization confirmed the relevance of the included items, thus establishing face validity. The questions and response sets were modified to fit the context of the current study population, namely the fact that the respondents were being asked about future intentions, not current behaviors. The entire instrument was reviewed by an advisory group to the project consisting of family planning service providers who work with recent Latino immigrants. They provided useful feedback and confirmed the content validity of the items.

Response sets consisted of either categorical answers or Likert-type formats, for example "not very important" to "very important" or "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The instrument was originally written in English, then translated into Spanish, reviewed by several native speakers to ensure that terminology was culturally appropriate for the study population, and finally back-translated into English to ensure that the original meanings were retained. The questionnaire was pilot tested with five men and five women. Final adjustments were made based on their feedback.

Participants and procedures

The study population consisted of Latino immigrants in a small Midwestern city and surrounding area who were between 18 and 45 and had lived in the U.S. less than five years. A Mexican male recruited and interviewed 100 men, and a Peruvian female recruited and interviewed 100 females. They both used a snowball sampling technique. They first contacted people with whom they were already acquainted, and then, asked them for the names of other people to contact. Both interviewers were already fairly well-known and trusted in the Latino community, a fact that facilitated the task of finding recent immigrants willing to talk about issues related to family planning.

Potential respondents were asked if they would be willing to take part in a research study. They were told it would take about 90 minutes to go through the questions. The interviewer would record their

answers in writing. They would be given a voucher worth \$10 in merchandise from a local Latino store. For items with a Likert-type scale, the response sets were listed on cards that were laid out before the respondent so she or he could indicate where a response fell. The interviews took place over a 4-month period in 2004, usually at the home of the respondent.

Data was entered and analyzed using SPSS, version 12. Descriptive statistics provide background information on the respondents. Bivariate techniques were used to study variable relationships.

Results

Demographic and background characteristics

Referring to Table 1, similar proportions of men and women were married. Significantly more women were cohabiting, and more men were single. The majority of female respondents had at least one child. In contrast, 44 percent of the men had no children. Significantly more of the women had about 12 years of schooling. Almost half of the respondents had been in the U.S. less than one year, and most spoke Spanish at home, which indicated they were not well-aculturated. More women were in the youngest age range, 18-25, and more of the men were in the oldest age range, 36-45. To identify the potential impact of religion, respondents were asked how often they attended church services. The majority did not attend often, with a higher proportion of women not attending. Finally, the interviewees were asked if they intended to stay in the United States. The majority of respondents did not intend to stay, with significantly more men, at 78 percent, than women, at 53 percent, indicating an intention to return to their country of origin.

General concerns about raising children in the U.S.

The first step in addressing any issue is to be aware that it is an issue. As illustrated in Table 2, the women tended to voice stronger agreement than men that their children would have more opportunities growing up in the U.S. The men were less certain about this issue. Fifteen percent did not agree, and another 7 percent were not sure. Just 4 percent of the men strongly agreed with this statement compared to 63 percent of the women. In reflecting on more negative aspects of life in the United States, the majority of women, at 67 percent, and men, at 89 percent, agreed or strongly agreed that their children were more likely to get involved in sex before marriage in the United States. More women than men did not agree or were not sure about this issue. Another potential concern in the U.S. is the abuse of drugs and alcohol. The majority of both genders, but more men than women, agreed or strongly agreed that their children were more likely to abuse alcohol and drugs in the U.S. The final query in this set of items was designed to evaluate the extent to which individuals were so preoccupied with earning money that they would worry less about their children in the United States. A much higher proportion of men than women agreed with this statement.

Importance of talking to children about specific sexuality issues

Table 3 illustrates the beliefs about the importance of talking to children about different topics specific to sexuality issues. More men, at 37 percent, than women, at 23 percent, said it would not be important or were neutral about talking to their children about sex outside of marriage. No other topic generated as many combined "not important" or "neutral" responses. One topic, marriage and divorce, generated a majority of neutral responses for both genders. Just two topics, parenting responsibilities and sexual abuse and rape, generated a majority of "very important" responses for both men and women. For the other topics, listed at the bottom of Table 3, no distinctions emerged between men and women or between topics; the most common response was "important" for men and women.

Experiences and preferences regarding the role of various institutions in providing sexuality education

To understand respondents' preferences for how to educate their children about sexuality issues,

they were asked where they got most of their information. As illustrated in Table 4, differences emerged between men and women. The majority of women received information from health providers, followed by friends. The men were more divided. One-third received the majority of their information from health providers, followed by school and parents.

A majority of both men and women felt the family should be the main source of information about sexuality issues. Ten percent of the men thought the family should be the only source of such information. Only 2 percent of the men felt all information should be provided by institutions other than the family. The vast majority of men and women thought that schools, clinics and health departments were appropriate institutions to provide information. The respondents were split over whether the church was an appropriate place. The majority of women, 51 percent, and 40 percent of men responded that it was not an appropriate source of information.

Clearly, the majority of recent Latino immigrants who participated in this study perceived that the family should play the lead role in educating youth about sexuality issues. To better understand how outside institutions might support parents in this important task, the respondents were asked what forms of information transmission they would use. The majority of women preferred the option of attending seminars with their children. The men were more split, with about one-third choosing the seminar option and another one-third preferring to attend meetings for parents only. A third group of men expressed a preference for classes that only included the youth. Some women also preferred these latter two approaches, but the proportions were smaller.

Discussion

In expanding our knowledge about sexual education through parent communication, these results indicate some gender differences in education strategies and in what are considered important topics to discuss with children. This study is unique in that it elicited the perspectives of men on issues related to family planning. Including the perspective of men allows us to identify potential similarities and differences in what kind of programming would appeal to both mothers and fathers. It is limited in that levels of agreement about the importance of various topics do not always reflect actual behavior and those behaviors have not been observed for the sample. Forty-four percent of men and 21 percent of women do not even have children yet, and their views might change once they do become parents.

This study builds on past studies by replicating the items used in a study on rural parents and by conducting the study with an ethnic minority group that is rapidly increasing in the United States and tends to have a high rate of unmarried teen pregnancies. The sample, recent Hispanic immigrants in one Midwestern community, might not be representative of all recent Hispanic immigrants, but it is typical of the demographic phenomenon in this region of the country in that most participants are from Mexico, have been in the United States one year or less and have a low education level.

Consistent with past research, this study found differences between genders in the areas and extent of concern about children growing up in the United States, the importance of talking to children about various topics related to sexuality and preferences for institutional involvement in educating children about these topics. In general, men were more concerned than women about the influence of the United States on their children, yet many men stated they would be too busy working to worry much about their children. The men perceived less importance in talking about certain topics related to sex.

The respondents revealed some surprising findings about family formation. Many men and women were neutral about discussing marriage and divorce with their children. This finding might be related to their own marital status. Half of the sample was not married, and many mothers were single. Given their own family status, the respondents might not feel comfortable discussing marriage with their children. Another surprising finding is that significant numbers of both men and women indicated

feeling "neutral" or that it was "not important" to talk about sex outside of marriage. These two items relate strongly to values about family and sexual behavior. The source of most values lies in our family of origin and is transmitted through conversations and observations. Programs targeting teens through their parents should consider encouraging parents to effectively express their own values and to model responsible sexual behavior (Kirby 2001).

Another item that reflects values is parenting responsibilities. All the women and most of the men thought it was "important" or "very important" to discuss parenting responsibilities with their children. Thus, programs that support parents might not be effective if they focus on issues related to marriage and sex outside marriage; framing the issue in the context of responsible parenting might be more effective because so many respondents felt it was important.

The most commonly reported source of information about sexuality was health providers. Even though their own main source of information was not from their family, respondents indicated that the family should be the main source of information for their own children. These findings highlight the need for culturally relevant programs that support parents in the sexual socialization of their children.

The results also give us important insights into who the respondents perceived would be appropriate providers of supplemental information. Schools, clinics and health departments were considered appropriate by the vast majority of both men and women. Fewer people indicated that the church would be an appropriate provider of such information. Religion does not seem to have much role in their lives, at least in socializing children about sexual behavior. The Catholic Church has traditionally set the standard for norms and values in many Latin American countries, including Mexico. Among our study participants, its influence seems to be diminishing both in terms of strength of affiliation, or lack thereof, and in terms of having a role in sexual education. This finding might be related to the role of religion in the respondents' lives. At least 75 percent of the men and women seldom or never attend church. If a religious institution is not part of their daily lives, they might not see it as having a role in sexual education. Most of the sample, 80 percent, identified as Catholic, and the Catholic Church does not support forms of birth control other than the rhythm method. Consequently, the respondents might perceive that it would not be an ideal institution to provide complete information.

The men and women were more divided on how they would prefer to get information from outside institutions. A majority of the women, 62 percent, felt that youth and parents should get information together. The men were more split. About half of them preferred either parents-only or youth-only information sessions. This difference in preferences extends the previous research that has shown that men are less likely to talk to their children about sexuality issues (Miller et al. 1998; Di Iorio, Kelly, & Hockenberry-Eaton 1999). These findings suggest that different approaches might be needed to support mothers and fathers. Mothers can be reached through programs designed for them and their children. Fathers might support efforts outside the family to educate their children but not necessarily as a joint activity.

The findings suggest that at least some differences in rates of unmarried teen pregnancies and contraceptive use could be attributable to differences in the sexual behaviors and attitudes of parents. An influential factor in what children learn about sexual behavior might not be the quantity of information conveyed, but the nature of the topics discussed. This group of individuals indicated that more value would be put on the role of parenting than on marriage and discouraging sex outside of marriage.

This study has provided us with some useful insights into similarities and differences in how Latino men and women view sexual education for their children. Program developers would be wise to view their programs as supports for what Latino parents teach their children. Structuring the programs to reflect the priorities of the parents might encourage families to participate. This group of study participants is aware of the difference in social context between the United States and their country

of origin, as evidenced by their concerns about raising children in the United States. They should be a responsive audience for programs that help parents socialize their children.

Table 1

Background and Demographic Characteristics of Respondents, n=100

Question	Percentage among females	Percentage among Males
Marital Status***		
Single	19	38
Married	46	48
Cohabiting	33	8
Divorced/widowed	2	6
Number of children*		
0	21	44
1-2	59	33
3+	10	23
Years in school		
6 years or less	29	39
12 years	61	54
More than 12 years	10	7
Length of time in U.S.		
Less than 1 year	48	47
1-5 years	52	53
Age range		
18-25	50	42
26-35	38	37
36-45	12	21
Regularity of church attendance		
Never	24	14
Not often	49	65
1-2 times per month	9	9
Almost weekly	15	12
Intend to stay in U.S.??		
Yes	33	13
No	53	78
Don't know	14	9
Language spoken at home		
English	3	7
Spanish	94	93

Chi-square:*p<.01; **p<.001; ***p<.0001

Table 2*Concerns about Raising Children in the U.S.*

Question	Percentage among females	Percentage among males
My children will have more opportunities growing up in the U.S.		
Strongly agree	63	4
Agree	31	74
Disagree	3	15
Strongly disagree	1	0
Not sure	1	7
My children are more likely to get involved in sex before marriage in the U.S.		
Strongly agree	25	9
Agree	42	80
Disagree	19	10
Strongly disagree	2	0
Not sure	10	1
In the U.S., my children are more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol		
Strongly agree	20	12
Agree	42	68
Disagree	18	16
Strongly disagree	2	2
Not sure	15	2
Because I am preoccupied with earning money, I worry less about my children		
Strongly agree	1	7
Agree	8	49
Disagree	31	34
Strongly disagree	54	4
Not sure	5	6

Table 3*Importance of Talking to Children about Specific Sexuality Issues*

Issue	Percentage among Females	Percentage among Males
Marriage and divorce		
Not important	2	4
Of little importance	4	7
neutral	68	48
Important	26	39
Very important	0	1
Not having sex outside marriage		
Not important	4	9
Of little importance	9	17
neutral	10	11
Important	64	37
Very important	13	23
Parenting responsibilities		
Not important	0	0
Of little importance	0	1
neutral	0	3
Important	7	34
Very important	92	61
Sexual abuse and rape		
Not important	0	2
Of little importance	0	4
neutral	0	3
Important	28	37
Very important	72	53

Note: For the following issues, at least 85 people of the respondents indicated they would be "important" or "very important" topics to discuss with their children, and there were no significant differences between men and women: menstruation, reproduction (how a baby is conceived), sexual relations with a partner, dating, contraceptives, abortion and alternatives, media pressure to have sex and sexual abuse and rape.

Table 4*Experiences and preferences regarding the role of various institutions in providing sexual education*

Question	Percentage among females	Percentage among males
Personal information source		
Parents	11	18
School	14	23
Friends	18	6
Media	2	12
Written materials	6	8
Health providers	49	33
Preference for educating children about sex		
Family only	0	10
Mainly family	85	75
Mainly outside organizations	15	13
Outside organizations only	0	2
Which of the following should provide sex education?		
Schools	95	96
Clinics	94	97
Health Department	95	97
Church	49	60
Which of the following would you use to get information?		
Class with peers	10	18
Library	5	7
Seminars for youth and parents	62	37
Radio and TV	1	2
Parent meetings	22	34

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