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Latinos and Human Services in Grand Rapids, Michigan: A Qualitative Approach to Cultural Sensitivity

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ABSTRACT:  
This research report is part of a larger study. This section describes how human services organizations serve the Latino population in West Michigan. It documents that services are available but that the limited capacity of many services does not meet the high level of demand. Results reveal feelings of frustration, inadequacy, and alienation among those who need services most—immigrants new to the area whose English-speaking abilities are weak.

Statement of the Problem  
This study examines the psychological effects of cultural sensitivity, or lack thereof, within the Latino populations of Grand Rapids Michigan.1 In the nation as a whole, Latinos are the second-largest minority group, and the fastest growing. According to Hayes-Bautista, Schink, and Chapa (1988), the Latino population is expected to grow by 33 percent during the next decade of the 1990s, due primarily to this population's high rates of immigration.

As a result of this rapid growth, Latino families tend to be younger than the general population, have more children, be less educated, and are more likely to be poorer and live in inner-city neighborhoods. In addition, Zambrana (1995) found that many families who currently immigrate also struggle to adjust to the foreign language and new culture. These conditions can be expected to foster an increased need and dependence on a number of human services.

Past research has focused on the problems limiting the effectiveness of services provided to ethnic-minority populations. In particular, the U.S. Public Health Service (1992) concluded that the health and human service needs of Latino families and children have been neglected in the United States. Based on knowledge of the health and human service needs of Latino families and children, the 1992 study identified obstacles in the delivery of culturally relevant services. Cultural sensitivity and responsiveness of services were specifically addressed. Massey et al. (1995) called for innovative reformulation of strategies to replace existing fragmented and unresponsive programs that serve the needs of the majority as opposed to the minorities. Schorr and Schorr (1988) provide needed direction for reformation by arguing that the practice or the design of culturally sensitive programs and interventions must strive to incorporate a series of effective components. The authors highlight programs that are flexible, comprehensive, and responsive to the needs of the population being served; active collaboration across professions and agencies; and, staff availability and skills to build relationships that assure quality and continuity of services provided.

A fundamental goal of this research was to explore how human services in West Michigan accommodate the needs of the Latino population. This task was made more difficult by the paucity of existing data on this group (Amaro, 1993; U.S. Public Health Service, 1992).

Although Grand Rapids is not a typical Latino “stronghold” as is found in the southwestern U.S., it represents a situation that is found in greater frequency across the U.S. Smaller populations of Latinos immigrate to regions without Hispanic cultural antecedents; there, the community grows in numbers and develops a substantial middle-class that provides political and social leadership in the service sector. How this situation creates a context of cultural sensitivity in the implementation of human services is an important question. If services are not culturally sensitive, one would expect to find that individuals express feelings of

1 On May 4, 1978 the United States Census Bureau defined “Hispanic” as “a person of” Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American race. However, it should be noted here that the label “Hispanic” is not universally accepted by its referents, many of whom prefer a number of other labels to define this ethnic group such as Latino, Raza, Spanish-speaking, Spanish-surnamed, Latin, Spanish, Latin American, Chicano, etc., although arguments are frequently presented for the advantages of using one label over another (e.g., Hayes-Bautista and Chapa, 1987; Trevino, 1987). Gerardo Marin and Barbara VanOss Marin (1991), who conducted a survey among a representative sample of 700 Hispanics in San Francisco, found that the less acculturated Hispanics tended to prefer the label “Latino” in greater proportions than the more acculturated respondents. In this study, the population of middle-class individuals interviewed preferred the designator Latino rather than Hispanic, though not all were in agreement. Throughout this article the term “Latino” will be utilized when referring to these individuals where applicable.
frustration, inadequacy and alienation, perhaps leading to a rejection of service use. This study found that the main condition of cultural sensitivity was due to the role of established, middle-class Latinos who have “reinvested” in the Latino community as service providers.

Data Collection Method and Sampling
The main method in the study of Latinos’ use of services was the life history, conducted by personal interview. The interviews were open-ended. Respondents were asked general questions about their families, their history in the Grand Rapids area, their jobs, their connections in the Hispanic community, their aspirations, and about issues of bilingual/bicultural education and the use of social and economic services available to them.

The research sample was comprised of an initial list of respondents provided by the Hispanic Center. A list of individuals willing to be interviewed were allocated to student teams, while other names were obtained through informants using a “snowball” sampling technique. The final sample included eighteen males and sixteen females, dominated by Mexican-Americans, who make up the largest proportion of the Latino population in West Michigan. A diversity of ethnicities was represented, however with 18 Mexican-Americans, 9 Puerto Ricans, one Costa Rican, one Cuban, and one Dominican, as well as four South Americans (one each from Bolivia, Chile, Columbia, Peru). The majority of the respondents were professionals or business leaders in the community, representing these occupations: educators (9), business owners (6), social services (3), media (4), law/management/financial (3), government (3), miscellaneous professionals (2), and church (2).

The study was conducted between May 4 and June 17, 1998. The overall design was an ethnographic field study. Participant observation was adopted to enhance cultural relativism. Data was compiled via personal interviews and observations. Interviews ranged from 1 to 2-1/2 hours in length, with the exception of one, which lasted about 6 hours. Upon contact, informants were asked to sign release and consent forms. At the end of each interview session, data was compiled, transcribed, and documented. The data from the interview tapes, field notes, and critical incident reports were coded and entered into a qualitative research software program (ATLAS.ti.).

Selected Data/Results
This work summarizes approximately one-half of the results. Analysis of this portion of the interview data suggested that services within the Latino community in West Michigan were associated with two subgroups. Many services were available and accommodated the needs of the middle-class population interviewed for this study. For example, the interviewees confirmed that the Catholic Diocese and the Clinica Santa Maria, three Hispanic Newspapers, La Primera Agency, and the Hispanic Center of Western Michigan were providing “primary functions influencing change and growth” within the Latino community. Those interviewed generally felt that services had improved tremendously since the Hispanic Center and Latin American Services have emerged in this area. These services were commended and held in high regard by middle-class Latinos. Due to the level of formal education of this group, including their ability to speak English and their economic purchasing power, they were able to afford and take advantage of services when needed. But for other Latinos, especially those newly immigrated into the community, extreme problems were described.

According to the interviewees, these problems present obstacles threatening the well being of the low-income subgroup. The main problems described were an increase in the Latino population, growing diversity within this population by class and ethnicity, language barriers, educational opportunity, and poverty. Marcia, for example, noted that when she first moved to her neighborhood, there were few Latinos. Now, she noted, there are increased numbers in the area. Marcia believed that the new Latinos appear to come in waves according to nationality, and lately this wave has bought about an influx of Guatemalans.


3 The Catholic Diocese’s office of immigration assists in doing paperwork for legal-immigration and provides religious guidance and support. The Clinica Santa Maria has earned credit for being helpful in delivering medical services to the Latino population, while the three newspapers that are available have been praised for keeping the community informed. La Primera agency helps provide employment for Latinos who don’t speak English. They specialize in bilingual and Spanish-speaking employment. The Hispanic Center was recognized for their aid in offering resources for employment, translation, food and clothing, legal advice, assisting with phone calls and aiding in filing (various) documents. The Latin American Services were acknowledged for delivering various forms of services. This establishment was defined as a sort of “Jack of all trades” due to the fact that they, like the Hispanic Center of Western Michigan, provide the community with access to other services and supply job information.

4 To ensure anonymity of the respondents, the names of individuals in this paper have been changed to fictional ones.
This increase was also seen as visible among those accessing services at the Hispanic Center and other agencies serving Latinos, as well as in Grand Rapids area public schools. Vivian noted that “[the schools] are jammed with Hispanic children,” explaining this increase as a result of an amnesty period granted to all immigrants by Regan in 1988. According to Vivian, “this [period] is when the Hispanic population in Grand Rapids really came out. People were no longer afraid to send their children to public schools.”

One of the aspects of the Latino community described as problematic was the diversity within the Latino population. Lydia felt that the Latino community was divided because of internal diversity issues; that these divisions arise from how the services are provided to Latinos, noting that although there are good intentions, agencies need to unite to support the entire Latino community regardless of individuals’ class or ethnicity.

She noted that certain community leaders fail to collaborate with other leaders and groups because of the ethnic and philosophical differences. In addition, Lydia commented that “because services are spread out and divided, it’s difficult for many people who really need help to get [help].” Veda was worried about divisions between the different Latino ethnic groups. She said, “I have attended Latin American meetings in the area, but I was very disappointed with them. A lot of complaining about a lack of services occurred. I think the meetings were ineffective.” As for the failure of the meetings, she pointed to the problem of too many leaders and few or no people willing to do the “foot work.”

Another respondent, Ruben, stated, “there have been attempts to organize the Hispanic community, but these attempts have broken down for lack of common ground. There is too much on one plate.”

A major concern was expressed in the area of language. Most regarded the Spanish language as the connecting force of all Latino nationalities, adding that this aids in preserving their culture. Others reported that a unified identity suffers due to variations in labels and their meanings used to describe the Latino population. While these differences of opinion exist, Latinos agreed unequivocally that the English-language barrier is the leading cause of problems faced by new immigrants. According to Roger “the language, as people continue to come to the Grand Rapids community, is a problem.” He felt many of the newer immigrants have problems with English and this makes it hard to access services.

The Latino community did acknowledge efforts of governmental organizations to implement bilingual training programs. For example, it was noted that the Grand Rapids Police Department has provided a grant to the Hispanic Center to teach police officers Spanish. In Ottawa County, probation orders are served in Spanish to Latinos.

Bilingualism was viewed as promoting economic progress within the community. Carmen explained how businesses are recognizing the importance of the growing population of Latinos as consumers. As a result, more and more businesses are hiring bilingual staff, creating both a new population of consumers and more job opportunities for bilingual Latinos. The public schools were viewed as trying to create programs for non-Latino teachers to “understand the link between language and culture” and to make them sensitive to the issues of language acquisition. In these ways, the school district was believed to be improving its quality of education.

More progress in services was illustrated by the recent efforts of the Grand Rapids Housing Commission and Habitat for Humanity, who agreed to work together to improve neighborhood conditions and provide affordable home ownership and rental programs.

In contrast to this progress, threats of fiscal cuts in programs, downsizing, attempts to dismantle bilingual education, and poverty, made it likely that Latinos of lower-income would continue to be at risk. In the past, many services in the area of language and translations offered to the Latino population were free. But fees have risen due to an increased need and dependence upon these services brought about by population increase. Veda recalls when she worked for Latin American Services, “At the time when I was working there it was a free service, now it’s very expensive.” She understands that fees may be necessary because, as she states, “there are so many people needing the services.” Alexia spoke of how she took English classes for free at a public school on Division St. when she first came into the area: “They used to have this program at Wyoming schools, but programs have been cut.” Now, she says, it would cost her $200 to take English classes.

Another program in jeopardy is the bilingual driver’s education. This service was described very important to new comers in the area. As one respondent explained, “when people come to the United States and to Michigan they need to know how to drive to get their jobs, now there are only programs in English and those are usually very expensive.”

Finally, the most recent and devastating blow was described as the legislative push by Republican lawmakers for “No More Bilingual Education.” Respondents felt if laws were passed to dismantle bilingual education, it would be a major set back, primarily for Latinos newly arrived. More assimilated groups would also be affected, because many are bilingual teachers. Robert, for example, felt that current laws specifically target the Latino population unfairly. In his words, “Look at all the laws that are primarily targeted negatively at Hispanics. Propositions 227, 209 and 187 are strictly after
Hispanics. When they tell us America is the home of the free, it used to be, but it's not any more for us. Now, Hispanics have to prove their citizenship.\footnote{Proposition 187 originated in California and addresses issues of immigrant rights. On November 8, 1994, California voters approved Proposition 187, which sought to deny public education and medical care for undocumented immigrants and their children. While the courts have blocked much of its implementation, the anti-immigrant sentiment has influenced legislation at the federal level. Proposition 209, an anti-affirmative action policy that targeted a set of programs that have been in effect nationwide since the 1960's, was passed in November, 1996. Proposition 209 ended preferential treatment in college admissions, state and local employment, and in awarding state contracts. The latest Proposition, "227", passed in June 1998, banning bilingual education in public schools across the state of California (Magnusen, Audrey; Naff, Katherine C. 1998).}

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