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# Latino Families and Child Welfare: Engaging and Formalizing Informal Supportive Cultural Practices

Maria Vidal De Haymes

Loyola University Chicago, [mvidal@luc.edu](mailto:mvidal@luc.edu)

Ivan Medina

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# Latino Families and Child Welfare: Engaging Informal Supportive Cultural Practices

by Maria Vidal de Haymes and Ivan Medina



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These measures involve:

1. Advocating in both legislative and legal arenas for the cultural modification of policies and the expansion of services
2. Formalizing the informal family supports found in the Latino community (e.g., *hijos de crianza* and *compadrazgo*)
3. Removing institutional and programmatic barriers to recruiting foster and adoptive parents in the Latino community
4. Educating Latino parents and other caregivers about U.S. norms and laws regarding child rearing

The Child Welfare Division of Association House began on November 20, 1975, when Association House workers advocated on behalf of a Latino family who was filing a class action lawsuit against the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and two private agencies. The family was being excluded from full participation in services and benefits from the state's child welfare system on the basis of their national origin and race. On January 14, 1977, the lawsuit was settled by agreement of all involved parties. DCFS entered into a consent decree named after one of the plaintiff parties, Burgos, which mandated that all services and documents offered to Spanish-speaking clients be available in Spanish, and that DCFS hire enough workers to serve Spanish-speaking clients in metropolitan Chicago and the suburb of Aurora. DCFS sought out Latino community-based programs to contract with the Department to meet the needs of Spanish-speaking clients; the same year, the Association House signed such a contract, and its Child Welfare Division was born.

At present the Division serves approximately 450 minority children who

have been referred for services by DCFS. It has received numerous awards and has been recognized as a model provider of culturally competent child welfare services to urban minority communities.

The largest provider of child welfare services to Latino children and families in Illinois, Association House of Chicago (AHC) is a multi-service settlement house in the city's near-northwest community of West Town-Humboldt Park. Association House has been an anchor of the community for nearly a century. The agency was founded in 1899 as a settlement house devoted to assisting recent immigrants in joining the community. The original immigrant population served was Polish, however the neighborhood has experienced a continuous process of ethnic succession over the years, and the agency has adapted and grown in response to the changing community. Currently, Latinos comprise approximately 54 percent of West Town-Humboldt Park.

In the literature discussing Latino families and the child welfare system, many suggestions emerge for how to plan and carry out culturally responsive services that provide protection for children while strengthening families.

The Child Welfare Division of AHC provides a model for applying all these principles. This article will integrate a brief review of child welfare literature that concerns minority families with the experiences of AHC in providing culturally competent child welfare services to an urban Latino community.

## Legislative and Legal Advocacy

Some child welfare scholars and practitioners argue that good child welfare practice requires assessing the social functioning of the family and its members within the context of their social environment. Such an assessment looks beyond intrafamilial concerns to include external systems that impact families' ability to function in an optimal manner: economic, educational, social welfare, political, and legal systems. These scholars and practitioners advise that child welfare programs should have a dual focus: enhancing the ability of individuals and families to fulfill their wants, needs, and social functions; as well as working towards an environment that is supportive socially, politically,

and economically.

When child welfare workers view the focus of their work as not just the client, but his or her whole environment, they can reach new levels in the helping process: not just the individual or family level, but the neighborhood or community level and the level of social policy. While such a holistic approach is at the core of good child welfare practice in general, it is all the more urgent in child welfare work with families of color, who often find themselves in a social context that ranges from less than supportive to hostile.<sup>2</sup>

Historically, Latinos and other minorities' contact with the child welfare system has not been positive. Families of color were excluded from the formal child welfare system through the early and middle 20th century.<sup>3</sup> The current treatment of minority children continues to reflect racial bias. Hoagan and Siu write: "The system responds more slowly to crisis in minority families; such families have less access to support services such as day care and home-maker services; Black and Hispanic children receive less comprehensive service plans; and parents of color have been viewed as less able to profit from support services. Thus, minority children are overrepresented in substitute services, and a greater discrepancy exists between recommended and delivered services for minority children than for non-minority."<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, once in substitute care arrangements (such as foster care), Latino children are likely to stay there longer than their Anglo counterparts. Jenkins, et al. found that Latino children in foster care stayed an average of twenty-six months—six months longer than an Anglo child's average stay. This finding is particularly disturbing given that others have found an "underutilization of supportive child welfare services and an involuntary overutilization of substitute services."<sup>6</sup>

Since its involvement in filing and setting the Burgos lawsuit in 1977, the Child Welfare Division of AHC, in addition to the providing direct services, has continued to address the Latino community's need for the cultural modification and expansion of services through legislative and legal advocacy. The Division has a presence on the advisory committees of DCFS, the

Illinois Attorney General's Office, and the State Senators' Advisory Committee on Human Services. In 1991, it supported the Legal Assistance Foundation in a motion against DCFS for non-compliance with the Burgos Decree. More recently, as a member of the Latino Coalition for Better Public and Community Services, the Division was successful in preventing DCFS from laying-off a large number of disproportionately Latino and African American staff. The Division frequently assists families who are not their clients, but who are receiving inadequate child welfare services and would like the Division to advocate on their behalf.

### **Formalizing the Informal Latino Family Supports**

One of the most significant areas of research regarding Latino supportive cultural practices has been extended family and fictive kin networks. Many researchers have found Latinos to be more likely to live in extended-family households than whites. Extended-family households provide economic and social support by enabling families with limited resources to pool them. Angel and Tienda suggest that the incomes of wives, adult children, and non-nuclear relatives form a larger proportion of total household income for blacks than for whites.<sup>7</sup> Several researchers have found that Latino families sustain complex, often binational, intercommunity, extra-household linkages and patterns of helpful exchange after immigration.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, such networks facilitate the process of immigration and accommodation by providing both social and economic support. Both Perez and Pedraza credit the advancement of immigrant Cuban families and older family members' participation in childcare and housework to an extended family-household structure and the high rate of labor-force participation among Cuban women. Also, Chavez documented a strong presence of extended-family households among both documented and undocumented Mexican immigrants.<sup>10</sup>

#### **• Relying on *Compadres***

Association House recognizes and actively engages these informal supports in the Latino community by, for ex-

ample, extending the notion of kinship care to include non-biological or fictive kin, such as *compadres* and *padrinos*. AHC workers are trained to look for such supports within each family they serve, and often, when placement is necessary, the Division is successful in placing the child with viable members of the child's non-biological or extended family. It takes time to license the new foster home, but to spare the child the added stress of adapting to yet another foster family during that time, AHC often (after an extensive background check) can obtain court permission for the child to stay with the designated non-biological or extended family members in the interim as well.

#### **• Kinship and Emergency Foster Care**

The Division's emergency foster care program allows staff to begin working with the family immediately after DCFS has taken temporary custody. Prior to the development of this program many families were referred to the Division after the children had been in DCFS emergency foster homes for months, making it more difficult to mobilize the informal family networks and engage the biological families in planning for the care of the children.

Even before kinship care was considered a desirable practice by child welfare professionals, Association House viewed it as a valuable resource for families in crisis. One of the first child welfare agencies in Illinois to license relative foster homes, AHC places more than 50 percent of the children needing substitute care in relative homes within 45 days from the point at which DCFS takes temporary custody.

Recently a teenager who had been living in the same foster home for six years began to be disruptive at home and to experience conflict with the foster parents. Instead of removing the child from the home and placing him with a new foster family, the Division was able to place him in the home of the foster parent's daughter, who was also a licensed foster care provider. This arrangement

1. provided the youth with a familiar family as respite home while the Division workers addressed the



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they often keep formal adoptions secret because of the stigma attached to them. Many community members do not consider adoption because they mistakenly believe that "single adoptive parents are not permitted to work, that one must have a good income and a good education to be a foster or adoptive parent, and that an adopted child must be kept even if problems become too much to handle."<sup>14</sup>

But the study uncovered several ways in which agencies were addressing some of these barriers:

1. increasing staff diversity and sensitivity to cultural factors;
2. using adoption subsidies and medical assistance offered by state and federal governments;
3. public education; and
4. advocating for foster care-to-adoption arrangements.

Other researchers have suggested other ways to address the foster care crisis for Latino families. Vidal suggests that child welfare workers become aware of the importance and nature of godparenting (*compadrazgo*) in the Latino community and use it as a social support and resource for permanency planning.<sup>15</sup> And Delgado suggests increasing the number of cases in which relatives and extended family members become licensed as foster care parents.

Because Association House is committed to placing children needing substitute care in homes that are culturally familiar to them, it has concentrated its recruitment efforts on securing Latino foster homes—and with considerable success that can be attributed in part to its nontraditional approach: the Division's first workers were required to be licensed foster care providers themselves. Not only did this practice create additional Latino foster homes, it also served to build understanding, congruence, and identification between foster care homes and the agency staff. To ensure similar ethnic and class cultural backgrounds between the families whom it is recruiting and its staff, the Division employs primarily Latinos who live in West Town—Humboldt Park.

conflict he was experiencing with his foster family,

2. prevented a disruption in his care, and
3. avoided his placement in a more restrictive environment.

The Division also works with Latino foster families to distinguish temporary foster care and its legal rules and requirements from the practice of caring for or raising another family's child in many Latino traditions (*crianza*), which is not guided by those legal stipulations. During the licensing and training of foster parents, Association House staff work to help foster parents see themselves as a social support of the biological family. This enhances the chances of the foster family continuing to be a resource for the biological family after the formal closing of the case.

### Barriers to the Recruitment of Latino Foster and Adoptive Parents

Numerous studies have noted that racial/ethnic matching in adoption facilitates the development of self-esteem, racial/ethnic identity, and coping mechanisms or strategies for living in a racist society, while others have identified difficulties in these areas among transracial adoptees.<sup>11</sup> While there remains considerable controversy, there is a substantial body of research that indicates that racial and ethnic matching

in adoption is the ideal practice.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the centrality of the family in Latino culture and the budding recognition of its potential as a resource by child welfare workers, there are many barriers to finding Latino adoptive and foster homes for Latino children.

Rodriguez and Meyer shed light on many of these barriers in a 1990 study.<sup>13</sup> The barriers and complaints most frequently identified by adoptive foster families and by those waiting to become foster and adoptive families were:

1. programs or workers making them feel uncomfortable about their race;
2. workers attitudes that they deemed "too white, middle-class";
3. poor or infrequent communication with staff;
4. staff insensitivity, superiority, and rigidity; and
5. and lack of acceptance of applicants who receive AFDC.

Rodriguez and Meyers also found some myths, fears, and misconceptions in African American and Latino communities that contributed to the problem of securing enough minority homes.

Although Black and Hispanic communities openly acknowledge informal adoptions within the extended family,

Case loads are kept relatively low so that workers can act as extended family members to foster families and can support them when they need it. With support from Division staff, potential foster families who may be deemed "inadequate" by traditional licensing standards due to cultural beliefs (e.g., not understanding the value and necessity of therapy for some children) can become a valuable resource to children, other families, and the community.

A great increase in the number of cases involving children with special needs has led the Division to offer training to all foster families, to help them meet the specific needs of the children they will take into their homes. The specialized training increases the number of foster families available to children with very complex needs and allows families receiving AFDC, who previously were recruited for only traditional care, to give specialized care. These families can provide nurturing, enriching homes with additional support, training, and attention from the licensing staff.

## Educating Latino Parents and Caregivers about U.S. Child Care Norms

Researchers have found cultural differences in other areas besides family patterns. Rose and Meezan, as well as Giovannoni and Becerra, note differences in perceptions of child abuse and neglect.<sup>17</sup> Disciplinary practices and child-rearing standards also vary with class and ethnicity.<sup>18</sup> Often these practices are considered to be culturally normative and may represent an adaptive response to economic deprivation and racism.

Association House staff offers Latino parents and other caregivers a 12-week training program to help them learn U.S. norms and laws regarding child rearing that may differ from some of the practices found in some Latino cultures. The training was developed by staff and foster families to ensure cultural relevance. Once foster families have completed the program they participate in monthly trainings, which include a support component to reinforce training and to provide the parents with an opportunity to exchange ideas and experiences. Association House has also



provided education on an institutional level by serving as an incubator and mentor for three other Latino community-based agencies, helping them develop and establish themselves as child welfare service providers.

In Illinois, approximately 40,000 children are involved with the state's child welfare agency due to findings of abuse and/or neglect. Of these, roughly seven percent (2,800) are Latino.<sup>19</sup> Although small in number compared to the total DCFS population, Latinos are a substantial and growing population with special cultural and language considerations. Only culturally responsive child welfare practices—which include legislative advocacy, formalization of community resources, expansion of the pool of Latino foster homes, and education—can make the system work for Latinos.

*Maria Vidal de Haymes is an assistant professor in the School of Social Work at Loyola University in Chicago. Ivan Medina is director of the Association House of Chicago, 2150 W. North Ave., Chicago, IL 60647.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>PRATER, G. (1992) "Child welfare and African-American families." In Cohen, N. (ed.) *Child welfare: A multicultural focus*. (Needham Heights, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon); SOLOMAN, B. (1989) "Social work with Afro-Americans" in Morales, A., and B. Sheafor (eds.) *A profession of many faces*. (Needham Heights, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.; DELGADO, R. (1992) "Generalist child welfare and Hispanic families." In Cohen, N. (ed.) *Child welfare: A multicultural focus*. (Needham Heights, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon).

<sup>3</sup>PRATER, G. (1992) (see above)

<sup>4</sup>HOGAN, P., and S. SUI. (1988) "Minorities and the child welfare system: An historical perspective." *Social Work* (33) 493.

<sup>5</sup>JENKINS, J., B. DIAMOND, M. FLANZRAICH, J. GIBSON, J. HENDRICKS, and N. MARSHOOD (eds.) (1983) "Ethnic differentials in foster care placements." *Journal of Social Work Research and Abstracts* 19 (2) 41-45.

<sup>6</sup>DELGADO, R. (1992) (see above) 146

<sup>7</sup>ANGEL, R., and M. TIENDA (1982) "Determinants of extended household structure: Cultural patterns or economic model?" *American Journal of Sociology* (87) 1360-1383.

<sup>8</sup>BIRD, H., and G. CANINO (1982) "The Puerto Rican family: Cultural factors and family intervention strategies." *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis* (10) 257-268; ALVAREZ, R. (1987) *Families: Migration and adaptation in Baja and Alta California from 1800 to 1975*. (Berkeley: University of California Press); PORTES, A., and R. BACH (1985) *Latin journey: Cuban and Mexican immigrants in the United States*. (Berkeley: University of California Press); MASSEY, D., R. ALARCON, J. DURAND, and U. GONZALEZ (1987) *Return to Aztlan* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press).

<sup>9</sup>PEREZ, L. (1988) "Cuban women in the U.S. labor force: A comment." *Cuban Studies* (18) 159-164; PEREZ, L. (1986) "Immigrant economic adjustment and family organization: The Cuban success story reexamined." *International Migration Review* (20) 4-20; PEDRAZA, S. (1991) "Women and migration: The social consequences of gender." *Annual Review of Sociology* (17) 303-325; PEDRAZA, S. (1992) "Cubans in exile, 1959-1989: The state of the research." In Fernandez, D. (ed.) *Cuban studies since the revolution*.

<sup>10</sup>He found difference in the patterns of extension between the two groups. CHAVEZ, L. (1985) "Households and migration and labor market participation: The adaptation of Mexicans to life in the United States." *Urban Anthropology* (14) 301-345.

<sup>11</sup>MCROY, R., L. ZURCHER, M. LAUDERDALE, and R. ANDERSON. (1984) "The identity of transracial adoptees." *Social Casework: The Journal of Contemporary Social Work* (January) 34-39.

<sup>12</sup>SIMON, R., and H. ALSTEIN (1992) *Adoption, race, and identity: From infancy through adolescence*. (New York: Praeger).

<sup>13</sup>RODRIGUEZ, P., and A. MEYER (1990) "Minority adoptions and agency practices." *Social Work* (35) 528-531.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., pg. 530

<sup>15</sup>VIDAL, C. (1988) "Godparenting among Hispanic Americans." *Child Welfare* 67 (September-October) 453-459.

<sup>16</sup>DELGADO, R. (1992)

<sup>17</sup>ROSE, S., and W. MEEZAN (1993). "Defining child neglect: Evolution, influences, and issues." *Social Service Review* 67 (June) 279-293; GIOVANNONI, J., and R. BECERRA (1979) *Defining child abuse*. (New York: Free Press).

<sup>18</sup>POLANSKY, N., M. CHALMERS, E. BUTTENWEISER, and D. WILLIAMS (1981) *Damaged parents: An anatomy of neglect*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press); GARBARINO, J., and A. EBATA (1987) "The significance of ethnic and cultural differences in child maltreatment." In Hampton, R. (ed.) *Violence in the Black family: Correlates and consequences*. (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books); LASSITER, R. (1987) "Childrearing in Black families: Child-abusing discipline." In Hampton, R. (ed.) *Violence in the Black family: Correlates and consequences*. (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books).

<sup>19</sup>In 1989, of 210,400 children in 47 states who had entered foster care, 10.5 percent were Latino, 30.6 percent were African American, and 53.7 percent were Caucasian. MERKEL-HOLGUIN, L., and A. SOBEL (1993) *Child Welfare League stat book* (Washington, D.C.: Child Welfare League of America).