Family Mediation and Cultural Diversity: Mediating with Latino Families

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Properly done, family mediation means providing all clients with service that meets their needs, regardless of their ethnic origin. The scanty treatment of cultural diversity in the mediation literature suggests that this is often not the case. To reverse the trend, data from the clinical and intercultural literatures are used to construct a portrait of Latino families. The fifteen service-related practice implications that are then derived may be seen as an initial standard of cultural competence in mediation.

Family mediation is typically defined as a "voluntary, non-adversarial alternative to dispute resolution mechanism in which an impartial mediator assists clients, of a relatively equal bargaining position, to reach a mutually satisfactory agreement on issues affecting the family" (Ellis and Stuckless, 1996, p. 3). The focus of mediation, then, is not on the substantive issues in dispute, but rather on the process by which clients are encouraged to work out their own solutions, in a spirit of compromise. This depicts mediation as distinct from other forms of alternative dispute resolution (ADR)—such as adjudication, arbitration, or conciliation—since the mediator has no power to impose or enforce an agreement on the parties.

Although mediation is an old technology, its application to families undergoing divorce is recent, dating from the mid-1970s (Irving and Benjamin, 1995). Since then, its acceptance and credibility have steadily increased (James, 1997), and with them have come the accouterments of professionalism. Compared to that of established professions, however, the professionalization of family mediation remains formative. For example, the law has an established practice model, whereas mediation is currently characterized by various models of practice (Schwebel, Gately, Renner, and Milburn, 1994), ranging from structural to therapeutic (Kruk, 1997).

Consequently, a number of issues have been neglected. Cultural diversity is one such issue. Early claims to credibility were based on application of

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universalistic standards that, by omission, were in turn based on white, middle-class couples (Folberg and Taylor, 1984; Irving and Benjamin, 1987). More recent efforts have begun to reverse this position, calling for greater cultural sensitivity in mediation practice (Barsky, Este, and Collins, 1996; LeBaron, 1997; LeResche, 1992; Meierding, 1992) while questioning mediation's fundamental beliefs and assumptions (Gunning, 1995).

Although laudatory, such interest in cultural diversity is clearly belated, with authors in such other professions as social work (Devore and Schlesinger, 1996), family therapy (Falicov, 1996; McGoldrick, Pearce, and Giordano, 1982), and psychology (Sue, Ivey, and Pederson, 1996; Wehrly, 1995) having long held that culture was central to clinical practice. Even more important, the fact that there are a mere handful of references in the mediation literature suggests that the field's commitment to this issue remains tenuous.

On the one hand, there is some urgency in coming to terms with questions such as what should be involved in providing culturally competent family mediation service. How might family mediation need to be reshaped to become a relevant option to culturally diverse populations? The trend is clear that North America is becoming steadily more culturally diverse, while mediation's commitment to self-determination dictates against imposing white, middle-class norms and standards. Similarly, the private and informal character of mediation places the onus on practitioners to avoid conscious or unconscious expression of ethnocultural stereotypes and prejudices (Gunning, 1995).

On the other hand, in attending to cultural diversity it is equally important to avoid pathologizing it. We assume that family mediation is inherently ambiguous, depending as it does on achieving consensus. This renders mediation vulnerable to a range of dilemmas, such as neutrality versus intervention, or fairness versus self-determination. Working with the uncertainties of cultural diversity is likely to exacerbate these dilemmas, but practitioners must guard against "blaming the victim" for our own anxiety.

In this context, our article is intended to decrease uncertainty and reduce anxiety by exploring application of mediation practice to Latino families.[1] Such families tend to display a constellation of sociodemographic attributes: Spanish as a mother tongue; immediate or ultimate origin in Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Central or South America, or Spain; faith in Roman Catholicism; and a preference for large families.[2] We focus on such families because in the United States they are the second largest minority group (in 1990, 22.4 million) and the fastest growing one (Ruiz, 1995).[3] Other reasons for our interest include the relative abundance of research material delineating family attributes in the clinical (Green, 1995) and intercultural literatures (Essandoh, 1996; Patterson, 1996), and the scanty coverage of such families in the mediation literature (Duryea and Grundison, 1993; Taylor and Sanchez, 1991).

We therefore selectively examine each of these literatures in turn, with the primary intent being to construct a contemporary portrait of Latino family systems. This portrait then serves as the basis for drawing a series of inferences in

an effort to characterize culturally sensitive mediation practice with Latino couples undergoing divorce. In turn, our reliance on data drawn from clinical literatures suggests that these inferences likely generalize best to mediation models that lie toward the therapeutic end of the spectrum (Kruk, 1997; Wong, 1995), including Irving and Benjamin's therapeutic family mediation model (1995), and Bush and Folger's transformational mediation model (1994).

In general, for us to address the issue of cultural diversity involves a form of meta-mediation in which mediators and clients need to negotiate shared understanding. This implies the importance for mediators of becoming aware of their own cultural values and biases, of striving for greater sensitivity and understanding of client's worldviews, and of acquiring greater expertise in choosing and applying culturally appropriate intervention techniques and strategies.

Latino Family Systems: Generic Attributes

The clinical and intercultural literatures are complementary in helping us construct a contemporary portrait of Latino family systems. Even though these literatures are complex and overlapping, in general the clinical literature addresses internal family dynamics, while the intercultural literature addresses relations between Latinos and the white or Anglo majority.

Internal Family Dynamics. The portrait of Latino family systems that emerges from the clinical literature involves concern with four components: values, conduct, commonality, and their comparison to majority family norms.

Values. In anthropological terns, Latinos may be described as having an allocentric culture, that is, one in which the interests of the group and relations among group members take precedence over individual concerns or internal psychological states (Albert, 1996). This generalized interpersonal orientation helps explain the centrality of at least eight cultural values.

The most salient of these values is *familismo,* which places the multigenerational, informal extended family at the core of the culture (Devore and Schlesinger, 1996). Family thus extends vertically to include grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins (to the fourth generation), and laterally to include godparents (*compadre, comadres*) as well as close family friends (*cuatismo*). Thus, *la familia* refers to the kin network, as opposed to *la casa,* which denotes the immediate or nuclear family (Falicov, 1996).

Within *la casa,* spouses have culturally distinctive roles and responsibilities. *Machismo* means that the husband, as the head of the household, has primary responsibility to protect and preserve the family's well-being, including its income and its honor in the community (Guttman, 1996; Mayo, 1997; Mirande, 1997; Ybarra, 1995). *Marianismo/Hembrismo* means that the wife and mother has primary responsibility for caregiving and household management, including flexibility, self-sacrifice, and perseverance in the face of troubles

(Davenport and Yurich, 1991; Comas-Diaz, 1989; Miralles, 1989) typically seen as inevitable (*aguantarse*).

In its dealings with extended family and friends, *familism* is associated with *compadrazgo*, which emphasizes the salience of interdependence and mutual obligation (Taylor and Sanchez, 1991), and with *personalism*, in which personal relationships take priority over standardized rules, procedures, or schedules (Weaver and Woderski, 1996). Mutual obligation is especially important when resources are low, allowing all to benefit if only some have resources to contribute. In times of crisis, for example, Latino family boundaries are sufficiently permeable to support child lending and taking in relatives for varying durations (Garcia-Preto, 1996). As for personal relations, this represents a view of time in terms of an extended present, thus rendering it flexible and in the service of social relations rather than vocational or other pursuits (Harris and Moran, 1991).

These values make for extended family systems that are extraordinarily close and cohesive (Dana, 1993), with related values serving to promote harmony and goodwill and avoiding or at least controlling interpersonal conflict. To take some examples, *simpatia* (which has no exact English equivalent) positively connotes individuals seen by others as likeable, sensitive, and easygoing (Marin and Triandis, 1985). *Dignidad* denotes the essential worthiness of others (Albert, 1996), while *respeto* emphasizes the importance of mutual respect and public honor (Falicov, 1996). Finally, *controlarse* refers to control of sexual and aggressive impulses (Sewell, 1989). As Hall (1976) explains, Latinos are caught in a dilemma, sensitive to insult or criticism that might offend their pride or honor, yet prohibited from direct confrontation. Accordingly, interpersonal conflict is likely to be handled indirectly (*indirectas*), either through avoidance or involvement of a *compadre* or priest acting as an intermediary or go-between (Dana, 1993).

Conduct. This constellation of values serves to promote social relations marked by closeness, harmony, cooperation, and sensitivity. Some of this is explicit, with social interaction characteristically friendly, spontaneous, and emotional (Duryea and Grundison, 1993). Extended kin often live in close residential proximity (Falicov, 1996). Social contact, which is frequent, typically involves hugging (*abraza*), public kissing, and other forms of physical contact (Axtell, 1985). Emotions are close to the surface and easily expressed in tears, rage, or laughter, with much effort made to create a warm and accepting atmosphere (*ambiente*) in which nearly everything is highly personalized. As Keefe (1984, p. 68) explains, "for (Latinos), it is important to see relatives regularly face-to-face, to embrace, to touch, and to simply be with one another, sharing the minor joys and sorrows of daily life."

Despite such lavish affective displays, from the perspective of an outsider social relations among Latinos are deceptive, appearing simple and straightforward when, in fact, they are subtle and complex. Indeed, Latino culture is generally characterized as "high context" (Hall, 1976). This is intended in three

senses: centrality of close social relations; reliance on control over external social contexts; and pervasive use of elaborate and indirect forms of expression, especially nonverbal cues. This way of organizing social relations has two consequences. One is that in handling conflict Latinos characteristically resort to a short series of rapidly escalating steps (Hall, 1976). Should the efforts of a go-between fail, confrontations can be bitter and prolonged, with violence a real possibility. The second consequence is that Latinos make a clear distinction between insiders and outsiders. Although the boundaries within the extended family are fluid and permeable, those between the extended system and outsiders are rigid and relatively impermeable (Duryea and Grundison, 1993). Marital difficulties, for example, if they are discussed overtly at all (given *indirectas*) are only discussed with extended kin, as opposed to strangers.

Commonality. This portrait is meaningful in relation to many Latino families. However, recent research suggests that Latino family systems are far more heterogeneous than was once thought (Baca Zinn, 1995; Del Castillo, 1994; Mayo, 1997; Mirande, 1997). Such efforts suggest a distinction between how, for example, Latino couples present themselves to the world—the social fiction—and how they actually operate on a daily basis—the social reality. The fiction is that husbands, in accord with *machismo,* are powerful, authoritarian, and distant, while wives, in accord with *hembrismo,* are passive, compliant, and submissive. The reality is that Latino couples distribute across a continuum of spousal relations, from husband-dominant to egalitarian to wife-dominant (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Hurtado, 1995; Ybarra, 1995). Thus the generic portrait here is a good place to begin, but only detailed assessment locates a given couple on spousal and other continua related to, for example, parenting, conflict management, financial management, extended kin, the church, and employers and workmates.

Majority Family Norms: Enmeshment. Recent research has taken a critical look not only at Latino family dynamics but also at how such dynamics have been viewed by "outsider" researchers. This critical review supports three conclusions. First, outside researchers have tended to view Latino families through the lens of majority family norms and values. Second, the result has been emergence of a cultural-deficit model. Third, on the basis of that model, researchers have tended to blame Latino family values for stifling individual initiatives and aspirations, portraying the Latino family as primitive, deficient, and repressive (Zambrana, 1995).

A case in point concerns the notion of family enmeshment. Developed by Minuchin (1974), it refers to family systems characterized by diffuse intergenerational boundaries, poor individual differentiation, and parental intrusion and overinvolvement in the lives of their children. Given the deficit model just noted, it is hardly surprising that the close, cohesive relations that typify Latino families are characterized as enmeshed (Inclan, 1990). Operating from the "inside," however, recent studies have tended to depathologize Latino families.

The authors of these studies argue that in applying enmeshment to Latino families majority authors tend to conflate two separate processes: closeness, which promotes secure attachment and mutual cohesion; and intrusive overinvolvement, which promotes dysfunctional adaptive strategies and processes (Falicov, 1996; Garcia-Preto, 1996; Koss-Chioino, 1995). Green and Werner speculate that the majority tendency to equate closeness with enmeshment may be due to "androcentric European/American, middle-class ethnocentric models of mental health, which place comparatively lower value on closeness and caregiving (and higher value on individuals' separateness and self-sufficiency) in family relations" (1996, p. 130; parentheses in original).

Dealings with the Outside World. The portrait of Latino family systems that emerges from the intercultural literature involves three components: discrimination, acculturation, and underutilization.

Discrimination. The opportunities available to Latino families are severely constrained by limited employment opportunities, the result of which is that nearly half of all Latino families report income below, at, or just above the poverty line (Benjamin, 1996). There may be a temptation to blame Latinos for their status. However, available data suggest that poverty among Latinos is primarily related to key structural and systemic barriers to employment. *Structural barriers* refer to the fact that the majority of Latinos are limited both in formal education and English language proficiency (Portes and Truelove, 1987). This is especially true among recent immigrants (Pedraza, 1991; Duryea and Grundison, 1993). *Systemic barriers* refer to widespread racism and discrimination (Chavez, 1990; Turner, Fix, and Struyk, 1991). In combination, these various barriers ensure that Latinos display high rates of unemployment and underemployment, with those who find work often confined to jobs characterized by low wages, low prestige, and high turnover (Rodriguez and Melendez, 1992).

In relation to Latino family values such as *machismo,* poverty and unemployment among males—especially if they involve a dramatic change from their status in the home country—are associated with shame, which in turn promotes marital conflict, desertion, separation, and divorce (Duryea and Grundison, 1993). The divorce rate among Latinos in the United States is roughly on a par with that of whites (Cox, 1993). However, unlike the case for whites (whose divorce rate has been relatively stable; see Cox, 1993), there is some evidence that the comparable rate among Latinos may be rising (Del Castillo, 1994).

Acculturation. For some time, it was widely assumed that there was a direct relationship between acculturation—that is, learning to speak English and adopting the values of the dominant culture—and mental health (Turner, 1991). Authors adopting a more critical stance have decried such a view as simplistic (Cortes, 1994; Hardwood, 1994; Rogler, Cortes, and Malgady, 1991) or even a form of "psychological imperialism" (Strier, 1996). This alternate perspective is consistent with recent research indicating, among other things,

that (1) cultural identification is positively related to mental health; (2) compared to first- and second-generation Latinos, the third-generation counterparts display higher rather than lower levels of maladjustment; (3) there is, similarly, a direct relationship among Latinos between mental health problems and efforts at Americanization; and (4) the most successful Latinos are those who have become bicultural—that is, who have become sufficiently skilled in dealing with Latinos and Anglos that they feel at home in both cultures (Domino, 1992; Falicov, 1996; Green, 1995; Gushue and Sciarra, 1995; Padilla, 1994; Weaver and Woderski, 1996).

Based on evidence of intergenerational conflict (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994) and a shift in authority among Latino families in which wives work outside the home (Duryea and Grundison, 1993), we may speculate that difficulties in immigration, transition, and acculturation may, in addition to male shame, constitute primary sources of marital conflict.

Underutilization. Finally, in comparison to whites, Latinos have traditionally been portrayed as less likely to use, and more likely to terminate, mental health services (Solomon, 1988). Various explanations have been proposed, but most tend to pathologize Latino family attributes—suggesting, for example, that values such as *machismo* equate help seeking with evidence of weakness, thus prohibiting use of needed services (Padilla and De Snyder, 1985). As with cultural reconstruction of enmeshment, so, too, recent and more critical review of the notion of underutilization has shifted the focus from client attributes to service effectiveness and responsiveness. Such efforts reveal, on the one hand, that Latino cultural and economic attributes play a minor role. On the other hand, underutilization is primarily related to barriers to service use, some institutional (such as lack of culturally appropriate counseling services or Spanish-speaking therapists), others structural (such as lack of local services, absence of ancillary services associated with transportation and child care, or services being available only available during business hours; Woodward, Dwinell, and Arons, 1992). Indeed, there is growing evidence that culturally responsive and accessible agencies do increase service use— and client satisfaction—while decreasing premature termination (Malgady and Rodriguez, 1994).

Culturally Sensitive Mediation Practice

This portrait of Latino families supports at least fifteen implications for practice, which we list here in no particular order of importance. Seen collectively, these inferences represent the initial stage of creating professional standards of culturally sensitive mediation practice with Latino families.

That said, two qualifications are in order. First, as will be apparent shortly, the inferences in question are generic in character, having equal application to marital and family therapy as well as therapeutic styles of family mediation. However, it must be stressed that therapy and mediation have very different

goals. Whereas therapy is concerned with long-term reorganization of family systems, mediation is concerned with removing blockages to productive negotiation and clarifying the nature of postdivorce spousal relations. Thus, the purpose in whose service these inferences are used distinguishes between these two approaches.

Second, these inferences apply to Latino family systems. The extent to which they generalize to other ethnic minority groups is an empirical question. Indeed, to extend these standards of practice to other groups, most notably blacks and Asians, it is extremely important that analyses such as ours regarding Latinos be conducted.

Need for Detailed Assessment. Latino families distribute on a continuum regarding group identification. Some families identify passionately with their Latino origin. Others repudiate that origin, while most fall somewhere between these extremes. The portrait drawn earlier in this article is a beginning, but only detailed assessment can indicate where on the continuum a given family should be placed. At present, there are at least a dozen instruments useful for this purpose, including Congress's "culturagram" (1994) and Irving and Benjamin's "ethnic group client protocol" (1995; see Ivey, Ivey, and Simek-Morgan, 1997). Alternatively, given the notion of *personalismo,* the practitioner may prefer to elicit client-centered personal narratives.

Personal Involvement. Among Latino families, rapport is likely to involve more than merely developing trust. It means moving from the status of outsider to that of insider, with whom private family matters may be freely discussed (Falicov, 1996). To that end, practitioners need to develop a personal relationship with key family members. Such personal involvement places demands on oneself not normally experienced in dealing with white clients, including issues of self-disclosure, the boundary between professional and personal, and established notions of professional expertise having to do, for example, with public touching and displaying affect.

Time to Commitment. Given discriminatory treatment by white institutions, Boyd-Franklin (1989) observed that blacks may take much longer than whites to join with the therapist; in consequence they risk being labeled "resistant." A similar institutional history coupled with norms of privacy predict that Latino families may also be slow to warm to a non-Latino mediator. Accordingly, practitioners are well advised to cultivate patience with Latino client couples.

Respect for Hierarchy. In keeping with *machismo,* Latino families are organized hierarchically, with husbands at the head. As we have seen, this arrangement may be real or it may represent a social fiction. Accordingly, part of the assessment process has to include explicit inquiry into the organization of the marital relationship, especially as regards any recent changes to it. With such information in place, the practitioner is advised to respect the existing hierarchy (in terms, for example, of the order in which spouses' responses are elicited). However, this is one area in which the difference between therapy

and mediation is glaring. Whereas therapists may see a power imbalance as unproblematic if it is accepted by both spouses, mediators cannot allow such imbalances to stand for fear that the terms of any agreement may be similarly biased (Kelly, 1995).

Use of Indirect Methods. Efforts at power balancing and other interventions may involve a variety of methods. Among Latino families, the notion of *indirectas* recommends that the practitioner avoid confrontational techniques and prefer more subtle and indirect ones, such as allusion, proverbs, folk tales, storytelling, humor, metaphor, and reframing (Zuniga, 1992).

Social Reframing. Latino families, particularly those new to the country, do not exist in a vacuum; rather, they are viewed against the backdrop of social, cultural, economic, and political processes over which they have little control. Through the lens of familism, such processes can indirectly promote marital and intergenerational conflict. By using social reframing, which acknowledges these larger processes, mediators can normalize feelings of guilt and inadequacy, recast feelings of blame and betrayal into shared responsibility, and help establish a climate of mutual understanding and collaboration.

Involvement of Extended Kin. In part, the choice of technique depends on who is present in any given session. Normally, that is, with white client couples only the spouses themselves would be present for most sessions. Occasionally, children (or, still more rarely, lovers) may also be included. Among Latinos, with their extended notion of family, inclusion of extended kin and extrasystemic *compadres* may be both typical and useful. This may be especially important in an effort to maintain family unity despite divorce, to restore harmony, and to promote relationship and community healing (Gold, 1993).

Home-Based Versus Clinic-Based Service. To the extent that each client couple is different from all others, mediation necessarily requires flexibility on the part of practitioners. However, dealing with Latino clients moves the issue of flexibility to a new level, since it is integral to the culture itself. This manifests in several ways. One area in which flexibility is required is the site of service delivery. Traditionally, service occurs at the mediator's office. This is appropriate for many Latino client couples, but in keeping with *personalismo* and *ambiente* many Latino clients may prefer service in their own home. For the mediator, this choice of sites is problematic. Assuming that the spouses have separated, the home of each spouse might be seen by the other as territory that is anything but neutral. The alternative is for the mediator to create an alliance with a local community multiservice agency. Such an alliance gives the mediator periodic access to a neutral service site as well as wider credibility with the Latino community (Castro, Coe, Gutierres, and Saenz, 1996; Vega and Murphy, 1990). In the end, the choice of site depends on the individual preferences of the Latino couples being served.

Warm and Accepting Atmosphere. One reason for favoring home-based service concerns the importance to Latino clients of creating a warm and accepting atmosphere in keeping with *ambiente*. The atmosphere may be

crucial in relieving tension and anxiety as well as increasing the likelihood of productive exchange, that is, exchange that is open, frank, and trusting. Although it is possible, this is less likely to materialize in agency sites, which are invariably more formal and less familiar than their home-based counterparts.

Time as an Extended Present. As noted above, Latinos tend to view time as an extended present, thus rendering time much more elastic and less constraining than in the majority culture. For the practitioner, this means that sessions frequently do not begin at a fixed time, nor do they last for a fixed duration. Rather, meeting times vary as a function of various social contingencies, while session duration is determined by the quality of interaction among the participants. Such temporal flexibility argues against home-based service (wherein the mediator travels to the client) and in favor of agency-based service (wherein the client travels to the mediator). In the latter circumstance, the mediator can be productively engaged in other tasks until the clients arrive.

Language: Spanish or English. Most native-born Latinos (90 percent) speak English, while the same is true of 35–65 percent of first-generation immigrants (Portes and Truelove, 1987). Consequently, among the former, mediation is typically conducted in English. Conversely, among most of the latter, it is almost certainly to be conducted in Spanish. In both cases, the ideal is to have a cadre of native-born Latinos trained in mediation, for they would be both bilingual and intimately familiar with cultural nuances. Such a cadre may be in the making, as an increasing number of Latinos complete their university education (Benjamin, 1996). At present, however, Latino professionals are in chronic undersupply, partly because foreign professional credentials are typically not recognized here. The alternative is for English-speaking mediators to pair with bicultural Latino members of the community, the latter acting as translator and cultural guide for the former. Such an arrangement increases the likelihood of misunderstanding, though it affords the Spanish-speaking Latino community access to mediation as opposed to the adversary system.

Nonverbal Cues. The high-context character of the Latino culture means that much of the message in interpersonal communication is encoded nonverbally. For the mediator accustomed to the low-context character of the Anglo culture (wherein most content is contained in verbal exchange), sudden transition to the Latino culture is unmanageably difficult. For example, mediators should be aware that silence, guarded posture, and avoidance of eye contact—especially on initial contact—are in keeping with the Latino nonverbal communication style in the presence of an authority figure and imply neither resistance nor lack of cooperation. The preferred route to such cultural competence involves either formal training or a form of cultural apprenticeship. Our impression is that most mediation training programs still give only passing attention to cultural diversity.

Indeed, one of the implicit purposes of this article to reverse this trend. The only alternative is the sort of apprenticeship noted above, in which a non-Latino mediator is paired with a community member. Of course, the point is that only culturally competent mediators should provide service, however that competence is acquired. What is not acceptable—though it is all too often the case—is that Latino clients be expected to conform to the implicit cultural requirements of their non-Latino mediators.

Transition Difficulties. Although Latino immigrants are likely to anticipate that coming to North America is not easy, few are emotionally prepared for it to be as difficult as it often is. Maternal employment, school-based norms of parenting, cross-generational conflict, underemployment or unemployment, and major status loss can tear such families apart. Accordingly, it is crucial that initial assessment efforts thoroughly explore these and related transition issues. On the one hand, such issues may well shape the course of mediation. On the other hand, such issues suggest that divorce is only one of several alternatives, and that issues that the couple perceive as intractable may in fact have available solutions.

Public Education. In addition to low income, many Latino spouses have little formal education. Consequently, there is no reason to expect that in divorce such families have any reason to be aware of the mediation alternative. To get the word out requires considerable public education. To ensure that the message is tailored to the needs of the Latino community and is received as credible and trustworthy, mediation needs to forge alliances with community leaders and community-based service agencies.

Family Life Following Divorce. Finally, the centrality of the extended family in Latino culture is such that divorce is likely to be viewed as a threatening process in the extreme, potentially disrupting the flow of relations and the exchange of resources. In this context, we believe, mediation (as opposed to litigation) displays a much better fit with the needs of the community. Rather than promote conflict and enmity, mediation encourages cooperation and trust. In addition, it can and should make postdivorce relations—among spouses, extended kin, and the larger community—a topic of explicit concern.

Final Word

Quality in mediation service means that all practitioners meet at least minimum standards of competence, and that all client couples, regardless of their ethnic origin, receive service appropriate to their needs. At present, attention to cultural-diversity issues remains scant, in both the mediation literature and the curricula of most mediation training programs. This implies that at least some minority clients are probably receiving substandard service. This state of affairs is clearly inconsistent with professionalism in mediation. The portrait of Latino families presented in this article, together with the inferences derived from it, suggests that we can do better—much better. Minority clients deserve no less.

Notes

1. We prefer *Latino* to *Hispanic* because the former is the term in common use among group members themselves whereas the latter was imposed by governmental authorities for statistical purposes (Green, 1995).

2. These last two attributes are connected. The fact that the majority (75 percent) of Latinos are devout Roman Catholics means that they are absolutely prohibited from using any artificial birth control methods. Large families are a common consequence of this faith.

3. Benjamin (1996) reports that in 1990 Latinos constituted 36 percent of the minority population and 9 percent of the total population in the United States. By 2001, these proportions are projected to rise to 50 percent and 14 percent, respectively, with minorities projected to represent 35 percent of the general population.

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