SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE WITH LATINOS: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE[1]

Trabajo Social en Práctica con la Comunidad Latina: Una Reseña Literaria

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ABSTRACT

As the Latino population in the United States increases, it is critical that social workers develop a comprehensive understanding of the needs and experiences of this population and are prepared to deliver interventions that address these needs. This literature review synthesizes the current research on both theoretical frameworks for effective practice with Latinos and examples of culturally appropriate intervention strategies. Implications for future research, as well as for social work practice and education, are discussed.

Key words: Latinos, social work practice, theoretical frameworks, culturally appropriate interventions

RESUMEN

A medida que la población Latina crece en los Estados Unidos, resulta crítico para los trabajadores sociales el comprender mejor las necesidades y experiencias de esta población y estar mejor preparados para generar intervenciones adecuadas que aborden dichas necesidades. Este artículo ofrece revisión de literatura que sintetiza la actual investigación con Latinos, tanto en términos de esquemas teóricos para una intervención eficaz como en ejemplos de estrategias de intervención culturalmente apropiadas. Finalmente se discuten implicancias para futuras investigaciones, así como para la intervención en Trabajo Social y la formación de profesionales.

Palabras clave: Latinos, intervención, trabajo social, marcos teóricos, intervenciones culturalmente apropiadas

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I. INTRODUCTION

Historically, the literature regarding social work with racially and ethnically diverse populations in the United States has been of marginal interest, making it difficult to legitimize the need for specialized, culturally relevant social work practice approaches (McMahon & Allen-Meares, 1992). As discussed by McMahon and Allen-Meares (1992), much of the literature on social work interventions with diverse populations from the 1980's focused on intervening at the individual level, paying little attention to the broader societal context informing individuals' experiences. In addition, interventions promoting assimilation to mainstream U.S. society were commonly favored in the literature from this period (McMahon & Allen-Meares, 1992). Although the social work profession and its accrediting bodies currently place increased emphasis on ensuring that practitioners have the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively serve diverse populations (Allen-Meares, 2007), the social work profession continues to run the risk of perpetuating individual, institutional, and cultural racism because it is grounded in institutions that continuously privilege those with higher socioeconomic means and individuals of the Caucasian race (McMahon & Allen-Meares, 1992).

As racially and ethnically diverse populations continue to grow in the U.S., it is vital to address the aforementioned gaps in the literature. Considering that racial and ethnic minorities experience disparities in socioeconomic status (Adler & Rehkopf, 2008; Lynch & Oakford, 2011), educational attainment (Lynch & Oakford, 2011), health outcomes (Adler & Rehkopf, 2008), and child welfare system involvement (Shaw, Putnam-Hornstein, Magruder, & Needell, 2008), additional research on culturally responsive practice is imperative for social workers to effectively serve these populations. Informed by the idea that increased attention must be paid to the needs of underserved populations in social work scholarship, this paper will specifically explore the current literature on social work practice with the Latino community, a community that has received limited attention in social

work research and practice both historically and in the present day. Considering the heterogeneity that exists within the Latino population (Delgado, 2007; Latino Social Workers Organization [LSWO], 2012), this paper will begin by discussing demographic characteristics and associated considerations for social work practitioners. The authors will then synthesize the current research on existing theoretical frameworks and culturally appropriate interventions, highlighting both promising practices and areas where additional research is needed. The authors will conclude by considering the implications of the current literature for social work practice and future scholarship.

II. LATINOS IN THE UNITED STATES: DEMOGRAPHIC CONSIDERATIONS

The Latino population in the U.S. continues to grow exponentially, with projections estimating that one in three U.S. residents will be Latino by 2050 (U.S. Census, 2008). Migration factors of each Latino subgroup heavily impact their lives and well-being in the U.S. Sherraden and Martin (1994) discuss theories explaining individuals' decisions to migrate, including the 'push-pull' theory of migration. This theory states that factors such as violence, repression, and poverty in the country of origin push the population to a receiving country such as the U.S., which pulls the population with a demand for work at higher wages and perceived freedom (Sherraden & Martin, 1994). Once in the U.S., the individual or family must negotiate familial, economic, and political contexts in both their country of origin and the U.S. Migrants are also faced with the task of maintaining connections to their cultural heritage while simultaneously adjusting to U.S. cultural values and norms (Ramirez Garcia, 2012). This process of navigating multiple micro and macro level contexts must be considered for effective social work practice with this population (Sherraden & Martin, 1994; Ramirez Garcia, 2012).

To fully understand the demographic make-up of U.S. Latinos, it is also important to note that there are more than twenty different countries under the Latin American umbrella. Individuals from the various Latin American countries

may differ in cultural origins, traditions (cultural, religious, and spiritual), language, dialect, immigration history, foreign or domestic upbringing, and gender roles and expectations. All of these unique characteristics may be glossed over when considering the population as ethnically homogeneous (LSWO, 2012) under the terms Latino or Hispanic. Approaches such as the La Familia perspective, formulated by the Latino Social Workers Organization or LSWO (2012), account for these unique demographic characteristics and give consideration to an individual's preferred racial or ethnic group identification (i.e. Latino/Latino American, Hispanic, Chicano, etc.), as well as their level of acculturation, generational status, and legal status.

Sensitizing social work professionals to cultural differences has been essential in the work being done with racially and ethnically diverse populations such as Latinos, regardless of the social worker's own racial and ethnic background. Montalvo (2009) discusses the use of critical incident interviewing as a strategy for addressing what he defines as the ethnoracial gap among social work practitioners who differ racially or ethnically from the Latino individuals whom they serve. Identifying a critical incident consists of reflecting on the moment when it became evident that one was racially or ethnically different from others in society. This practice of reflecting on one's own cultural identity and developing increased cultural awareness is a component of culturally competent practice, which can be defined as an evolving body of knowledge and behavior necessary for practice with diverse populations (Davis, 2007; Horevitz, Lawson, & Chow, 2013; Sperry, 2012).

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR SERVING THE LATINO COMMUNITY

A review of the literature on social work practice with Latinos yields limited research outlining theoretical frameworks for effective practice. Among the frameworks developed specifically for practice with the Latino community is Delgado's (2007) cultural assets paradigm. Delgado (2007) discusses that mainstream social work practice has traditionally viewed culture as a barrier to be

overcome. More specifically, social workers are typically encouraged to learn about Latino cultural values in order to eliminate potential obstacles to effective service delivery. This type of approach overlooks the rich opportunities within the Latino community to utilize cultural values and resources as strengths during the treatment process (Delgado, 2007). The cultural assets paradigm thus emerged as an alternative to the deficits-centered approach to practice. Rooted in the belief that the key to effective service delivery is understanding local context and maximizing the cultural resources available at the local level, Delgado (2007) states that practice informed by the cultural assets paradigm requires that social workers invest in developing trusting relationships with Latino community members. Whether intending to practice on the micro or macro level, social workers must conduct extensive local assessments and develop a comprehensive understanding of community supports and resources before initiating an intervention. According to this theoretical framework, interventions must be solidly grounded in a knowledge of local context and promote the strengths that exist within this context, whether at the individual or community level, to effectively address the needs of the Latino population.

Literature also points to the relevance of ecosystems theory for informing culturally competent practice with Latinos (Falicov, 2007). As originally conceptualized by Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1994), ecosystems theory asserts that an individual's development is shaped by interactions between multiple levels of their environment, including their home, neighborhood, and larger cultural, social, and political contexts. In her discussion on family therapy with Latino immigrants, Falicov (2007) states that consideration of these multi-level environmental interactions has particular salience, as immigrants must navigate between the cultural context of their country of origin and that of their new country of residence. Due to the transnational nature of many immigrant families, with immediate family members commonly residing in different countries, effective practice with this population must consider how functioning is impacted by transnational

relationships, loss of community in one's country of origin, and experiences of oppression and discrimination in one's new country of residence (Falicov, 2007). While Falicov's (2007) discussion of the ecological perspective focuses on its application with the Latino immigrant community, ecosystems theory is relevant for practice with U.S.-born Latinos as well. Delgado (2007), for example, states that U.S.-born Latinos who are able to navigate the cultural context of mainstream U.S. society while maintaining their cultural identity tend to have better mental health outcomes than U.S.-born Latinos who do not stay connected to their cultural heritage. Utilizing an ecological perspective to inform interventions that support individuals in the process of navigating multiple cultural contexts is thus relevant for addressing the needs of both the immigrant and U.S.-born Latino populations.

IV. TRANSLATING THEORY INTO PRACTICE

How are theoretical frameworks translated into practice with the Latino community? The literature suggests that theory informs the development of two general categories of practice. According to Falicov (2009), practice interventions may fall under the category of culturally specific or culturally adapted interventions. Culturally specific interventions are based on the idea that "different cultures have their own healing approaches" (Falicov, 2009, p. 295). Interventions falling under this category are thus developed for a specific target population and grounded in cultural constructs that are thought to be inapplicable to different cultural communities. Culturally adapted interventions, in contrast, refer to interventions that were not necessarily developed specifically with the Latino community in mind, but that were modified to better address the needs of this population. Culturally adapted interventions integrate key cultural values throughout the treatment process (Falicov, 2009).

A review of the literature suggests that culturally adapted interventions are more common than culturally specific interventions and are utilized across a range of practice settings. Anez, Paris, Bedregal, Davidson, and Grilo (2005) outline eight

core cultural values that are central to the delivery of culturally adapted interventions with Latinos. These values include *familismo, respeto, personalismo, confianza, dichos, controlarse y aguantarse, sobreponerse*, and *fatalismo*. Many of these core values are rooted in the importance of the relational context. While *personalismo* specifically refers to the centrality of relational interactions in the daily lives of Latino community members, *familismo* (translated in English as "familism") highlights the importance of relationships between immediate and extended family members. Individuals who are not members of the biological family, such as *padrinos* (godparents), are typically included in conceptualizations of family networks. Based on the centrality of the family within the Latino community, it is not uncommon for individual well-being to be closely connected to the well-being of the larger family unit. *Confianza* (trust) and *respeto* (respect) are values that also closely inform social and familial interactions. Respect for authority figures and one's elders are of particular importance for Latino community members (Anez et al., 2005).

The remaining four cultural constructs that Anez et al. (2005) outline are related to emotional expression and worldviews commonly held among the Latino population. The constructs of *controlarse y aguantarse*, for example, refer to self-control and the ability to regulate one's emotions, attributes that are highly respected. Similarly, *sobreponerse* refers to one's ability to overcome difficult emotional experiences. *Dichos* and *fatalismo* can be understood as ways of viewing the world, or making meaning of one's experiences, that assist individuals in coping with difficult experiences. *Dichos*, translated as "sayings," use language metaphorically to offer insight into how to cope with a particular problem, while *fatalismo* ("fatalism") refers to the belief that there is a more powerful force in the universe, such as a God or a spiritual entity, which determines the course of events in one's life. Anez et al. (2005) assert that while limited empirical attention has been given to interventions that incorporate these cultural constructs, practitioners

who can integrate these constructs throughout their practice are better equipped to address the needs of Latino individuals.

In keeping with the ideology of adapting intervention models to be more culturally sound, Organista (2009), in his practice model for social work with Latinos, integrates Latino-relevant social science theories and research with the ecosystems perspective. His approach incorporates theoretical frameworks around oppression and social justice, acculturation and adjustment, social stratification, ethnicity and power, ethnic identity, and diversity within the Latino population. Organista (2009) sees these frameworks as the lens for assessing the needs of Latinos in a historical, social and cultural context; establishing relevant interventions; and informing practice that promotes social justice. Based on these frameworks, Organista (2009) has developed a four-dimension matrix that considers how the increase in service availability and access, the assessment of problems in the social and cultural context, the selection of culturally and socially acceptable interventions, and the increase of service accountability can influence practice outcomes. Each of these dimensions are informed by previous literature relating to culturally competent practice frameworks and are tailored to represent the needs of Latino clients, allowing for the model to be culturally relevant with a heterogeneous population.

The literature on social work practice with Latinos also reflects specific examples of the application of culturally adapted interventions across a range of practice settings. To begin, a qualitative study of mental health therapists who practiced individual therapy with Latino clients found that therapists commonly integrated cultural values throughout the treatment process (Gelman, 2004). Mental health therapists discussed the need for increased investment in building rapport, increased self-disclosure as a vehicle for cultivating the treatment relationship, and acceptance of gifts in accordance with the value of *personalismo*. Among bilingual clients, therapists also acknowledged that encouraging clients to

share emotional experiences in their first language and switching to their second language to regulate overwhelming emotions was a culturally appropriate strategy for addressing trauma. In addition, recognizing micro and macro level contexts was identified as another key component in the practice of culturally adapted individual mental health therapy. A recognition of micro level context entails understanding that culture will have distinct meanings to different individuals, and the therapist is thus charged with the responsibility of exploring clients' unique beliefs rather than making universalistic assumptions. In turn, acknowledging macro level context requires "engagement with each client's environmental and systemic reality" (Gelman, 2004, p. 95). Experiences of discrimination and stressors related to material needs impact mental health, and addressing such macro level factors during individual treatment is key to an effective culturally adapted mental health intervention.

In addition to individual mental health therapy, literature on the application of culturally adapted interventions spans interventions in the areas of family therapy, group work, child welfare practice, and health education and promotion. Falicov's (2007) multidimensional ecosystemic comparative approach to family therapy utilizes an approach grounded in ecosystems theory to address the needs of transnational immigrant families. In her theoretical article on the application of this approach, Falicov (2007) states that the family therapist must address the relational, community, cultural, social, and political contexts as they impact family members. Families where members reside in both the U.S. and their country of origin must redefine roles and cope with prolonged separation at the relational level, while at the community level newly arrived immigrants must cope with the loss of extended support networks and forge connections in their new community. In addition, newly arrived immigrants must navigate the cultural context of their country of residence while maintaining cultural ties to their country of origin. This process of navigating multiple cultural contexts is complicated by experiences of discrimination and structural oppression, including limited access to culturally and

linguistic appropriate resources. Interventions addressing a family's needs at all three of these levels are key to the practice of effective family therapy with the immigrant community (Falicov, 2007).

In the field of group work, Stacciarni, O'Keeffe, and Mathews (2007) identify culturally specific factors that must be considered for effective group practice with Latinos. For example, due to residential instability resulting from a lack of affordable and stable housing, group work that is short-term is considered best practice. Stacciarni et al. (2007) identify other important group practice strategies including addressing transportation and childcare concerns, having linguistically accessible verbal and written content, and creating a comfortable group atmosphere that uses informal conversations, or *plática*, at the start of sessions along with serving food and refreshments. The creation of a comfortable group atmosphere is particularly important in accordance with the value of *personalismo*. Stacciarini et al. (2007) also recommend that practitioners provide a clear explanation of the group structure at a pre-session. Incorporating Latino cultural values throughout the therapeutic process was noted as central to continued participation in group treatment and overall effectiveness of services (Stacciarni et al., 2007).

In the realm of child welfare practice, Dettlaff and Rycraft (2009) found that a cultural adaptation of the systems of care framework was effective in decreasing additional substantiated reports of child abuse and neglect among Latino families involved with the child welfare system in Texas. The systems of care framework aims to prevent a child's removal from the home by developing a coordinated network of formal and informal community-based resources that can support the family (Dettlaff & Rycraft, 2009, 2010). Culturally adapted systems of care interventions require that child welfare practitioners are familiar with the cultural assets and resources available within Latino communities and are able to connect children and families to these resources (Dettlaff & Rycraft, 2009, 2010). In the case of Latino immigrant families, Dettlaff and Rycraft (2010) emphasize that child

welfare practitioners should clearly communicate to families that their immigration status is confidential, and should also ensure that they refer families for services to which there will not be access barriers associated with their immigration status. Including extended family members from a family's country of origin in the treatment process is also key to ensuring that a system of care is maximizing informal supportive resources among immigrant families (Dettlaff & Rycraft, 2010).

In the area of health promotion, research indicates that the lay health advisor model is an effective intervention for improving health outcomes among the Latino community (Ayala, Vaz, Earp, Elder, & Chellington, 2010). According to this model, community members are trained to educate other members of their cultural community regarding physical health symptoms, health behaviors, and resources for accessing medical care. Lay health advisors, also known as *promotoras* (health promoters) within the Latino community, may solely serve the role of providing health education or may serve the double role of educating community members while also linking them with medical services (Ayala et al., 2010). In both cases, the aim is to improve health outcomes and increase access to care among individuals who face barriers to accessing services. A review of the literature on the use of this model within the Latino community points to its effectiveness in improving health behaviors and outcomes, but also indicates a need for additional research of high methodological quality on this topic (Ayala et al., 2010).

V. FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

A synthesis of the literature on social work practice with the Latino community points to the importance of continued research endeavors. Delgado (2007) states that while his cultural assets paradigm is grounded in extensive knowledge of and experience serving the Latino community, there is a need for empirical research evaluating the effectiveness of interventions informed by this paradigm. Culturally adapted interventions that integrate cultural constructs in clinical settings also tend to be based on anecdotal reports of effectiveness rather

than grounded in evidence gathered through experimental or quasi-experimental research (Anez et al., 2005). In addition to limited empirical research testing the effectiveness of culturally specific and culturally adapted interventions, Maldona-Molina, Reyes, and Espinosa-Hernandez (2006) also point out the limited attention paid to the Latino community in the area of prevention research. Research exploring risk and protective factors tends to treat Latinos as a homogenous group, giving little consideration to the impact of differences in national identity and generational status on the applicability of a study's findings (Maldona-Molina et al., 2006). Research also tends to measure acculturation as a static characteristic rather than a fluid process, which presents another limitation to obtaining evidence that can inform meaningful and culturally appropriate interventions (Maldona-Molia et al., 2006). Increasing the empirical foundation that informs effective practice with the Latino community thus requires additional high methodological quality research that not only assesses interventions, but that also identifies the community's needs and resources for coping with adversity.

While a strong empirical foundation is clearly a critical element to increasing effective social work practice with Latinos, it is not the only necessary element. In order to effectively address the service needs of this diverse population, the social work profession must also ensure that social workers are properly equipped for practice in this area. Social work education plays an important role in ensuring effective service delivery. Research points to mixed results regarding the adequacy of current masters level social work education programs in preparing social workers for practice with the Latino population. While there are specific examples of the use of cross-cultural experiential learning models that yield at least some level of success in student preparation (Cordero, 2008), research has also found that a minority of faculty teaching at the masters level believe that their programs adequately prepare their students for practice with Latinos (Furman, Bender, Lewis, & Shears, 2006). In addition, there is also concern that the profession's focus on ethnic sensitive practice tends to generally emphasize preparation for

serving clients who are culturally different from the practitioner rather than preparing practitioners to understand the specific needs and cultural values of different ethnic groups (Iglehart & Becerra, 2008). Effective social work practice with the Latino community thus entails increased emphasis on the development of social work curricula and experiential learning models that facilitate students' understanding of the unique values, assets, and micro and macro level contexts informing the experiences of this heterogeneous population.

VI. CONCLUSION

The Latino population reflects a heterogeneous community of individuals with diverse national identities, immigration experiences, and acculturative processes. In reflecting on the historical relationship between the social work profession and this traditionally underserved population, it is evident that the profession has often fallen short of recognizing the rich cultural assets of this community and has missed opportunities to integrate these cultural assets into culturally relevant interventions. As increased attention is paid to the necessity of operating from a strengths-based framework and developing interventions that integrate cultural values across interventions in a range of settings, awareness of the need for a strong empirical foundation also increases. Advocates of the Latino community recognize that addressing the population's needs in a culturally appropriate manner requires increased investment in research and masters level social work education programs that prepare students for effective practice. In turn, increased investment in research and education requires that the needs of the Latino community be seen as a priority for the social work profession. Critical to these efforts is recognizing and addressing the realities of everyday oppression in the Latino community, and in turn integrating a structural dimension into social work practice that attempts to challenge and dismantle oppressive social structures. Through continued dialogue on the needs of the Latino population and advocacy for interventions that both address macro level stressors and promote

community strengths and resources, allies of the Latino community can help to ensure that this population receives equitable access to services that effectively address their needs and give increased consideration to the structural factors that impact Latinos' overall well-being.

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