Immigrant Latino Children and Families in Child Welfare: A Framework for Conducting a Cultural Assessment

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ABSTRACT. Culturally competent practice with immigrant Latino children and families requires a thorough understanding of the impact that migration and acculturation has had on each family and how these experiences have contributed to their involvement in the child welfare system. The growth of the Latino immigrant population in the United States requires that child welfare agencies examine and adapt their practices to ensure effective response to the specific needs of this population. This article provides a framework for conducting a comprehensive cultural assessment with immigrant families in order to provide caseworkers with the information necessary to provide culturally relevant services that adequately respond to each family’s unique circumstances and experiences.

KEYWORDS. Child welfare, immigrants, Latinos, cultural assessment

Immigrant children and families represent one of the largest and fastest growing populations in the United States. During the 1990s,
more than 15 million immigrants entered the United States, an increase of 50% since the 1980s and more than 100% since the 1970s (Capps and Fortuny, 2006). As of 2005, foreign-born immigrants comprised 12% of the total US population, while children of immigrants represented one-fifth of all children younger than age 18 years (Capps & Fortuny, 2006). Immigrants from Latin American countries account for more than 50% of the immigrant population in the United States (Capps & Passel, 2004). Additionally, the number of undocumented residents in the United States continues to rise each year, with data indicating 8.4 million undocumented residents from Mexico and other Latin American countries in the United States as of March 2004, of which 1.7 million are children younger than age 18 years (Passell, 2005).

Within the child welfare system, the number of Latino children has steadily risen over the past several years, with national data indicating the percentage of Latino children confirmed as victims of maltreatment has risen from 10.0% in 1995 to 14.2% in 2000 to 17.4% in 2005 (US Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 1997; 2002; 2007). Within certain major destination states, this trend has seen even larger increases. In Texas, the number of Latino children confirmed as victims has risen from 36.6% in 2000 to 43.3% in 2005, while in California, this figure grew from 39.6% in 2000 to 48.7% in 2005 (US DHHS, 2002; 2007). While these figures indicate a rising population of Latino children involved with the child welfare system, data are lacking on the number of these children who are immigrants or children of immigrants, as this data is not collected by child welfare reporting systems. However, data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW), which consists of a nationally representative sample of children who come to the attention of child welfare agencies, indicates that among the Latino children involved with child welfare agencies, more than one-third (34.82%) of these children were living with an immigrant parent (NSCAW, 2007).

Children in immigrant families are often considered at increased risk of maltreatment due to the stress and pressure experienced by the family system resulting from migration and acculturation (Korbin & Spilsbury, 1999; Roer-Stier, 2001). Fear, stress, loss, isolation, and uncertainty about the future are factors often experienced by Latino immigrants as a result of migration. Additional pressures resulting from acculturation often lead to a variety of strains and difficulties on the family system, as parents and children experience changing cultural contexts along with the loss of previously established support systems (Partida, 1996; Roer-Stier, 2001). As a result, social workers
in the child welfare system must understand the impact that migration and acculturation has had on each family system, and how these experiences may have contributed to their involvement with the child welfare system.

Additionally, culturally competent practice with Latino immigrant families requires that social workers clearly assess the cultural values and traditions of immigrant families and how these values and traditions may impact service delivery and intervention. Understanding the influence of culture is critical to addressing issues of child maltreatment, as research indicates that both child-rearing practices and ideologies are influenced by and vary across cultures (Korbin & Spilsbury, 1999; Roer-Strier, 2001). Cultural values shape the ways in which families view their problems, accept responsibility, and respond to interventions. The lack of understanding of the influence of culture has been cited as the primary barrier to adequate assessment and effective intervention in cases of child maltreatment among immigrant families (Shor, 1999). As a result, culturally competent practice with Latino immigrant children and families requires more than just a general understanding of Latino culture and improved accessibility of services. In order to adequately assess for risk, social workers need to understand and address issues of culture, migration, and acculturation with each family system, and the effect these issues have on cases of child maltreatment.

This article provides a framework for conducting a comprehensive cultural assessment with immigrant families in order to provide case-workers with the information necessary to provide culturally relevant services that adequately respond to each family’s unique circumstances and experiences. The article will review the literature on the impact of migration and acculturation on Latino children and families and provide a framework for a comprehensive cultural assessment that explores these issues. The article concludes with implications for intervention resulting from the assessment process.

### THE IMPACT OF Migration ON Latino CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

While circumstances leading to migration vary among families, most families choose to migrate because the financial or political situation in their own country has left them with no other options (Partida, 1996). For families living in poverty in their country of origin, the decision to migrate is often based on financial necessity,
with families migrating to the United States in search of greater wages and increased job opportunities in order to improve the living conditions of their family (Jennissen, 2007; Segal & Mayadas, 2005). Family migration may occur in several phases, with children often migrating in more than one trip until the economic condition is stable enough for all children to join the family (Garcia, 2001).

For many immigrant families, the migration experience denotes a significant life crisis. The initial act of entering the country can be dangerous, with many migrants experiencing violence, robbery, and sexual assault during the migration process (Solis, 2003). Children are often separated from parents and other siblings for extended periods while placed with family or kin in the country of origin (Partida, 1996). Once in the new country, families continue to experience stress resulting from language barriers, unfamiliar customs, and loss of routine (Hancock, 2005; Solis, 2003). The stress associated with this initial transition can result in depression and anxiety, while individuals who experience significant trauma during migration may develop symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Smart & Smart, 1995). Further compounding these difficulties is the possibility of pre-existing psychological concerns that may worsen as a result of the migration experience (Leon & Dziegielewski, 1999).

Following the initial crisis of migration, families continue to experience challenges as they struggle to learn the language and navigate confusing and unfamiliar systems. While many of these challenges are tangible (finding employment, shopping, paying bills, navigating the school and medical systems), each of these can result in significant anxiety, as individuals discover that their existing abilities and coping skills are no longer capable of meeting the demands of the new environment (Vega, 1992). Families coming from a background of poverty in their country of origin may also struggle to meet the basic needs of their family.

Immigrants who are undocumented are likely to experience additional stress, as they live with the ongoing fear of discovery and deportation. The anti-immigrant sentiment that exists in many parts of the United States has intensified these fears for many undocumented immigrants. As immigration laws become more punitive, families who are undocumented are at higher risk of discovery and increased stress. Along with fears of deportation, many undocumented parents also fear separation from their children, which has occurred in many of the raids conducted recently by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). In 2006, more than 3,600 immigrants were apprehended by ICE officials as a result of worksite enforcement operations, an increase of
700% since 2002 (US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2006). In many of these cases, parents were separated from their children for extended periods with no way of contacting them or deported to their country of origin while their children remained in the United States. (Capps et al., 2007).

**ACCULTURATION AND ACCULTURATIVE STRESS**

The process of acculturation refers to the internal process of change experienced by all immigrants upon exposure to a new culture (Padilla & Perez, 2003). Early theoretical literature suggested that the process of acculturation occurs when individuals from one culture are continuously exposed to another culture, with this exposure resulting in changes to the original cultural and behavioral patterns of the group. These changes result as individuals seek ways to adapt to the new culture in order to reduce conflict (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936). Later theorists explored the psychological processes involved in acculturation, describing acculturation as a process involving not only behavioral change, but changes to value systems, developmental processes, and cultural norms. How individuals acculturate and to what level they acculturate were described as being a function of the value systems, roles, personality styles, and developmental processes of the individual (Social Science Research Council, 1954; Teske & Nelson, 1974). These later conceptualizations were important to the understanding of acculturation as the inclusion of value systems, roles, and cultural norms suggests that the process of acculturation may differ among immigrant populations as a result of cultural differences. Current literature suggests that acculturation is a complex process that is dependent on a multitude of individual and cultural factors, including ethnicity, gender, age, religious beliefs, family structure, language, and personality (Padilla & Perez, 2003).

Acculturative stress is a distinct concept from acculturation, referring to the stress that directly results from the acculturative process (Berry et al., 1987). On migration, individuals are faced with a multitude of challenges as they attempt to navigate the new culture. Acculturative stress results when individuals lack the necessary skill or means to interact and be successful in the new environment (Berry et al., 1987). For many immigrants, the acculturative stress experienced following migration is life-long, pervasive, and intense (Smart & Smart, 1995). Language barriers, lack of employment, loss
of social support, inadequate financial resources, and discrimination experienced in the new culture are all factors associated with acculturative stress (Smart & Smart, 1995).

While acculturative stress is supported in the literature among all immigrants, this literature also suggests that acculturation is more difficult for those immigrants who are more distinct from the host culture (Leon & Dziegielewski, 1999; Padilla & Perez, 2003; Smart & Smart, 1995). When significant differences exist between the country of origin and the host culture, the process of acculturation becomes more challenging as a result of the cultural negotiation that must occur. Immigrants who are more distinct from the host culture in ethnicity, religion, and language are more likely to experience social discrimination and prejudice as a result of the factors that identify them as different from the majority (Padilla & Perez, 2003; Smart & Smart, 1995). Accented speech, unfamiliar customs, and differences in skin color are all factors that identify immigrants as outsiders to those in the dominant culture.

Portes and Rumbaut (2001) propose that it is the human and social capital of immigrant parents that determine the outcomes experienced by their children. In this model, skills that immigrants hold such as education, work experience, and language skills, along with the perceptions of the native population, determine the success or failure of the second generation. However, they acknowledge that all immigrants do not begin this process on an equal playing field due to the significant role that race plays in social acceptance, stating, “Regardless of class origin or knowledge of English, nonwhite immigrants face greater obstacles in gaining access to the white middle-class mainstream and may receive lower returns for their education and work experience” (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001, p. 47).

Given these issues, several researchers suggest that the acculturative stress experienced by Latinos is different than that of other immigrant populations (Fontes, 2002; Hancock, 2005; Smart & Smart, 1995). Differences in culture, language, and traditions serve as significant sources of stress for Latino immigrants, as well as barriers to accessing resources for the family. Additionally, the process of moving from ethnic majority in their country of origin to a minority in the United States can be disorienting for many Latino immigrants (Espin, 1987). While many poor immigrants have experienced discrimination in their country of origin due to their social class, the experience of overt discrimination for the first time as a result of their ethnicity can be challenging. The transition to minority status combined with the anti-immigrant sentiment that currently exists in the United States often
results in feelings of social stigmatization for Latino families. This can lead to feelings of powerlessness and low self-esteem, as immigrants become aware that judgments are made against them based on assumptions of their ethnicity, rather than their actual abilities (Casas, Ponterotto, & Sweeney, 1987).

**EFFECTS OF ACCULTURATIVE STRESS ON LATINO CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

A significant body of research has examined the effects of acculturative stress on Latino children and families. High levels of acculturative stress have been found to be significantly associated with depression and suicidal ideation among Mexican and Central American immigrants (Hovey, 2000a, 2000b; Thoman & Suris, 2004). Additional studies have found a significant relationship between acculturative stress and poor physical health in Mexican immigrants (Finch et al., 2001; Finch & Vega, 2003). Among adolescents, acculturative stress has been found to be significantly associated with depressive symptoms (Romero & Roberts, 2003), suicidal ideation (Hovey & King, 1996), and substance use (Vega et al., 1998).

Particularly relevant for children and families in the child welfare system are the family problems that may result following migration. Within family systems, the experience of migration often results in changes to previously established gender roles and expectations as a result of cultural and financial pressures (Coltrane, Parke, & Adams, 1994). Financial stressors often necessitate women entering the workforce, which may require men to accept additional responsibilities for childcare and housework (Coltrane et al., 1994). Research indicates that women’s greater contributions to family income generally lead to greater control over budgeting and decision-making, as well as leverage in assignments of household responsibilities (Pessar, 1999). However, these changes may result in increased risk for relationship conflict. While immigrant women who are employed in the United States generally experience greater autonomy and independence, men may experience the opposite (Pessar, 1999). Additional research indicates that outside employment of wives and unemployment of men are both significantly associated with domestic violence among Latino immigrant couples (Aldarondo, Kaufman, & Jasinski, 2002).

Among parents and children, differences in acculturation levels often form the basis for significant tension between parents who adhere to traditional cultural values and children who are more rapidly
exposed to the social norms of the majority culture. Latino parents tend to foster close, loving relationships with their children and expect their children to obey, respect their elders, and conform to established rules (Zayas & Solari, 1994). Tensions may occur as children experience conflict between these parental expectations and the values of the majority culture that emphasize autonomy and independence (Falicov, 1998; Fontes, 2002). Research indicates that increased parenting stress is common among Latino immigrant parents, who feel they are no longer able to control their children and preserve the closeness of the parent-child relationship (Simoni, 1993). As parents struggle to maintain discipline, they may become more rigid in an attempt to regain the control they had prior to the influence of the new culture (Partida, 1996).

**CULTURAL COMPETENCE WITH LATINO CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

As a result of the multiple challenges faced by Latino immigrant families and the complexity of these challenges, there is a need for social workers in the child welfare system to respond to and consider these challenges in the assessment and intervention of child maltreatment. The National Association of Social Workers (Washington, DC) (2001) defines cultural competence as the “integration and transformation of knowledge about individuals and groups of people into specific standards, practices, and attitudes used in appropriate cultural settings to increase the quality of services, thereby producing better outcomes” (pg. 12). This operational definition requires that social workers not only understand the cultural backgrounds of their clients, but also use their knowledge of their clients’ backgrounds to inform and guide their practice. As applied to child welfare, culturally competent workers understand the unique cultural values, beliefs, and experiences of the families with whom they work and practice interventions that respond to the specific cultural needs and experiences of each family. This involves an awareness of how the family’s culture influences their behavior, their view of the current situation, and their response to potential interventions. Key to this awareness is the assessment process.

The role of the assessment in child welfare is to determine the level of risk present within the family system, as well as to understand the underlying causes contributing to maltreatment (Mather & Lager, 2000; Righthand, Kerr, & Drach, 2003). As a result, thorough
assessment of Latino immigrants requires that social workers clearly assess the immigration and acculturation experiences of each family in order to adequately understand and respond to the family’s needs. Consistent with the philosophy of client-centered practice, thorough assessment of Latino immigrant families should determine whether the issues leading to their involvement in the child welfare system derive from individual issues or from environmental effects resulting from migration and acculturation. Many of the risk factors associated with child maltreatment—financial distress, personal dissatisfaction, depression, rigidity, family conflict, stressful life events—are all factors associated with immigrant families who are experiencing high levels of acculturative stress (Cadzow, Armstrong, & Fraser, 1999; Miller, Fox, & Garcia-Beckwith, 1999). Facilitating effective change for these families first requires that social workers understand the extent to which acculturative stress has contributed to the issues of maltreatment and identify interventions that address the underlying causes of these issues.

Additionally, adequate assessment should involve a thorough understanding of families’ cultural values and beliefs, particularly as they relate to families’ child-rearing practices and understanding of child maltreatment. Leon & Dziegielewski (1999) argue that the majority of social workers hold beliefs and values that reflect those of the majority culture. When working with unfamiliar cultures, social workers should be aware of the probable influence of their own cultural values and biases when making assessments of immigrant populations (Leon & Dziegielewski, 1999; Quinones-Mayo & Dempsey, 2005). Considerable effort should be spent engaging the family and learning about their culture in order to improve understanding of the situation and facilitate culturally relevant assessment.

**FRAMEWORK FOR CONDUCTING A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT**

The framework for the Cultural Assessment shown in Table 1 was developed to facilitate a culturally competent assessment of Latino immigrant children and families involved in the child welfare system. The framework is designed to provide social workers with the information necessary to understand the impact that migration and acculturation has had on each family system, and the extent to which issues of child maltreatment are related to acculturative stress, cultural
### TABLE 1. Cultural Assessment Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Issue</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>History and experience of immigration</td>
<td>Country of origin</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Length of time in the United States</td>
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<td>Motivation for immigration</td>
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<td>Hopes and expectations related to immigration</td>
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<td>Difficulties encountered during migration</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Process and stages of migration</td>
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<td>Significant family members remaining in country of origin</td>
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<td>Initial challenges encountered upon arrival in United States</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Current feelings regarding the immigration experience</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Feelings regarding expectations for immigration as compared to current reality</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Immigration status of family members</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Difficulties resulting from undocumented status of any family members</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience of acculturation</td>
<td>Experience adjusting to new culture</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Feelings and attitudes regarding acculturation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Familiarity and comfort with American culture</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Challenges experienced adjusting to American culture</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Family problems resulting from acculturation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Difficulties resulting from a language barrier</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Current English fluency, communication needs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Perception of the receptiveness of the host country</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Experience of being Latino in the United States</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Experience of discrimination and oppression</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Community and friendship patterns</td>
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<td>Availability of social support in current environment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family and cultural values and traditions</td>
<td>Family roles and structure</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Intergenerational family structure</td>
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<td>Emotional attachment to family members</td>
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<td>Cultural values and norms</td>
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<td>Cultural traditions and celebrations practiced in the home</td>
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<td>Religious affiliation and current involvement</td>
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<td>Beliefs concerning health and mental health services</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Attitude toward social services</td>
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<td>Cultural values and beliefs regarding child</td>
<td>Child-rearing practices and traditions</td>
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<td>maltreatment</td>
<td>Cultural beliefs regarding discipline and corporal punishment</td>
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<td>Cultural values concerning appropriate physical care and parental supervision</td>
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<td>Extent to which the maltreatment identified is considered either normal or dysfunctional</td>
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<tr>
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<td>within the family’s culture</td>
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<td>Understanding of how similar issues are handled in the family’s culture</td>
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conflict, and lack of environmental resources and supports. The frame-
work also provides the opportunity to gather significant information
concerning family strengths, which are often embedded in families’
cultural values and traditions. Following a description of each phase
of the assessment, implications for intervention are presented that
address the need for an individualized plan of service that directly
flows from information gathered in the assessment.

History and Experience of Immigration

The first phase of the cultural assessment begins with a thorough
understanding of the immigration experience and the family’s feelings
regarding this experience. This area of assessment should focus not
only on the family’s country of origin and length of time in the
United States, but on the actual experience of immigration and the
effects this has had on the family system. The family’s motivation for
immigration, their hopes and expectations, challenges encountered,
and plans for the future should all be explored with the family.
As indicated previously, families often migrate in phases, which can
cause considerable stress on the family unit. If periods of separation
occurred within the family, it is important to assess the impact this
has had on the family system and any effects on relationships or
cohesiveness within the family. It is also important to determine if
any significant family members remained in the country of origin, as
this may contribute to stress as well as loss of social support.

This phase of the assessment should also include a discussion
of the family’s current feelings regarding their immigration experi-
ence. Many Latino parents may view their migration experience as
a significant source of pride and accomplishment because of their
increased ability to meet their family’s needs. This accomplishment
should be acknowledged by social workers, particularly as it relates
to the parents’ ability to support and raise their children in the midst
of ongoing challenges (Glickin & Garza, 2004). Alternately, many
families experience disillusionment on migration when faced with the
multiple challenges that have resulted. Some immigrants may begin to
experience feelings of guilt and regret over their decision to migrate
because of the challenges their family has had to endure and the
relationships that were left behind (Smart & Smart, 1995). In this
situation, social workers may be able to help families identify the
accomplishments that have been made and the strengths that were
used in this process.
This phase of the assessment must also include a discussion of each family member’s immigration status and any barriers or challenges resulting from the undocumented status of any family member. In addition to difficulties obtaining employment, many immigrants are fearful of accessing needed services and benefits due to concerns about their immigration status. Those who are undocumented fear deportation, while those who are attempting to apply for residency may be fearful of being deemed a “public charge” under immigration law, which may jeopardize their ability to become legal residents if they are considered unable to support themselves (Holcomb et al., 2003). Those fears, as well as confusion regarding eligibility for benefits, leave many immigrants without access to needed resources and supports. This is further complicated by the fact that more than 60% of children of immigrants live in mixed immigration status families, where at least one child is a citizen but one or both parents are non-citizens (Capps et al., 2005). In these “mixed-status” families, children who are citizens are entitled to public benefits; however, their undocumented parents may fear being deported or prohibited from becoming naturalized if they attempt to access resources for their children (Holcomb et al., 2003).

**Experience of Acculturation**

This phase of the assessment should address each family’s unique experience of acculturation and the effects this has had on the family system. Social workers should address the family’s feelings regarding acculturation, the family’s level of comfort with aspects of US culture, and any challenges related to acculturation in order to obtain an adequate understanding of the acculturative stress experienced by family members. As indicated previously, many of the risk factors associated with maltreatment may be related to issues of acculturation. As a result, social workers should obtain a thorough understanding of these issues in order to develop interventions that will adequately address the underlying causes of these risk factors. Problems resulting from acculturation, including marital strain, domestic violence, drug or alcohol use, and parent-child conflict, each of which may contribute to maltreatment, should be thoroughly explored and assessed.

As problems related to acculturation are addressed, it is also necessary to obtain an understanding of the family’s current level of English fluency and their comfort level communicating in English. Although some families may be able to communicate in English, they may feel
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more comfortable communicating in Spanish, particularly when the issues being discussed relate to the safety and well-being of their children. Families who are not comfortable speaking English may feel unable to express themselves adequately and may misunderstand crucial information. As a result, communication needs should be explored and addressed in all aspects of service planning and delivery.

This phase of the assessment should also address the family’s perception of the receptiveness of the United States and any experience of discrimination or stigmatization since migration, as this can contribute significantly to acculturative stress. Literature on social stigmatization suggests that individuals who feel stigmatized as a result of their identity are likely to be hesitant about the information they reveal about themselves in an attempt to control the perceptions of others (Major & Crocker, 1993). Additionally, families who have experienced discrimination or have felt stigmatized may be initially wary of accepting help until the social worker’s intentions are more fully understood (Major & Crocker, 1993). It is important that these initial reservations be understood by the social worker and not perceived as resistance. When working with immigrants who have experienced discrimination or stigmatization, time should be spent developing the helping relationship and establishing trust in order to facilitate adequate assessment.

Understanding the family’s experience of acculturation should also involve an identification and understanding of the social supports established in the community, which may be used as resources in service delivery. Many immigrant families migrate to areas with established immigrant communities and questions should be asked to determine how involved the family is with this community. Informal networks among immigrant communities are an essential element in helping families integrate and adjust to US culture, and also provide valuable sources of resources and referrals. These existing supports can be used as strengths from which to build upon throughout the intervention process. In the absence of these supports, linking the family to informal networks within the ethnic community will help to reduce isolation and establish ongoing protective systems.

Family and Cultural Values and Traditions

In Latino culture, the family is the main resource for emotional and financial support, particularly in times of need (Glicks & Garza, 2004). This family unit generally extends beyond the immediate fami-
ily and may include grandparents, godparents, and others who are considered an integral part of the family system. Social workers should assess the family structure within each family system and engage all members as defined by the family. Additionally, social workers should ascertain the family members who have the responsibility for decision-making within the home and be respectful toward this role. An ecobehavioral genogram may be useful in this phase to assist in understanding the roles, structure, allegiances, and conflicts that are present in order to improve understanding of the family system.

During this phase of the assessment, it is also important to understand the cultural values that influence the thoughts and behaviors of the family. This information can be gathered by asking questions about the values that parents hope to instill in their children, guiding principles by which family members live, and aspects of their culture that are most cherished and important. Cultural traditions and celebrations can be explored to obtain a further understanding of the family’s level of acculturation and to be respectful toward these traditions. In addition to improving understanding of the family, this phase of the assessment also serves to identify family strengths, as many strengths and protective factors are rooted in families’ cultural values and traditions. Adherence to these values allows families to draw strength in times of crisis and serves as the basis for the development of coping mechanisms. In this phase of the assessment, it is important that social workers recognize that while many Latino families share a common culture and heritage, there is significant heterogeneity within Latino culture and among countries of origin. Thus, assessment of families’ cultural values and traditions should include an understanding of the families’ country of origin and unique cultural experiences.

It is also important to obtain an understanding of families’ views toward mental health and social services. Being labeled with a mental illness carries a stigma in many Latino families, and the suggestion of mental health services may serve as a barrier to service delivery if not approached with sensitivity (Weaver & Wodarski, 1996). Similarly, in order for social workers to empathize with their clients it is important to understand the family’s views toward receiving social services. Culturally traditional Latino families generally do not seek help from outside sources, preferring to utilize family members or close friends as the source of support (Glicken & Garza, 2004). This may have implications for service delivery as families may be overwhelmed by involvement with multiple service agencies. Informal services may be used as a supplement to traditional service delivery methods in order to facilitate trust as well as preserve cultural connections.
Cultural Values and Beliefs Regarding Child Maltreatment

Thorough assessment also should include an understanding of the family’s cultural values and beliefs as they relate to the family’s child-rearing practices and their understanding of the reason for child welfare involvement. This phase of the assessment should explore the family’s cultural norms as they relate to child-rearing and appropriate discipline, and address the family’s beliefs concerning maltreatment. Differences in cultural values, particularly as they relate to corporal punishment, often result in misinterpretation and misdiagnosis of abuse or neglect among immigrant populations. While extreme physical harm is considered abusive in all cultures, physical discipline is viewed as an appropriate form of punishment in many Latino cultures by parents who care about the welfare of their children (Buriel, Mercado, & Chavez, 1991; Fontes, 2002). Similarly, parents who are unfamiliar with US customs and laws are vulnerable to allegations of neglect, as newly arrived immigrants may leave children unattended for short periods, delay medical attention while using traditional folk remedies, or fail to have a child immunized. In order to provide culturally competent services, it is imperative that social workers understand the influence of culture on the incident of maltreatment and consider this influence when assessing for risk of future abuse.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERVENTION

A primary role of the assessment in child welfare is to identify the underlying causes contributing to maltreatment in order to serve as the basis from which interventions are developed. Following the assessment, the influence of culture and the effects of migration and acculturation must be considered in planning service delivery to ensure that services adequately address the underlying causes of the problem. Historically, services to children and families have been selected from a limited set of choices that have not fully considered families’ culture, values, or experiences. However, in order for effective change to result, interventions should consider the cultural influences inherent in the family and how these influences may affect service delivery. Interventions that result in positive change should come directly from the assessment and an understanding of the influence of culture and the family’s experiences with migration and acculturation.

It is important to remember during the intervention stage that the family’s experiences with migration and acculturation will continue to affect service delivery. In general, families who experience greater
amounts of acculturative stress will be less likely to have the ability to engage in the development of new skills or resources that are necessary for addressing child maltreatment (Smart & Smart, 1995). It is also less likely that these families will be able to draw on existing strengths and coping abilities to effectively address the problem due to the stress they are experiencing. As a result, issues of acculturative stress and the associated anxiety experienced by immigrant families must be addressed first in order for effective long-term change to result.

Literature on intervention with Latino immigrant families stresses the importance of interventions that increase social support and reduce isolation (Denner et al., 2003; Fontes, 2002). Social support has been shown to reduce stress and provide the protective factors that are necessary to minimize the negative effects of acculturative stress (Denner et al., 2003). Mutual support groups have been shown to be effective in helping Latino immigrant families adjust to their new environments due to the establishment of supportive relationships and the ability to learn from others who have experienced similar issues (Simoni, 1993). Engagement in community resources including English classes, vocational education, and parenting aides has also been shown to reduce family conflict and levels of acculturative stress (Valdes, 1996).

Once the stress in the family is reduced, interventions can be developed that address the issues of child maltreatment. Services should be driven by the particular needs and preferences of the family, with the family involved as key stakeholders in the process. This level of involvement emphasizes the family’s role in the solution to their problems and helps to ensure that services are sensitive to their culture and values. When possible, services should be based in the community so children can remain connected to their environment and cultural norms and informal community support systems should be involved in facilitating service delivery. These informal supports can be used for childcare, transportation, and general emotional support. Throughout the process, the social worker should demonstrate an understanding of the importance of the family’s culture by ensuring that services are consistent with the values and norms of the family. Through this understanding, the worker demonstrates respect and commitment to the family, thus improving the family’s willingness to participate in services.

**CONCLUSION**

Latino immigrant children and families face a multitude of challenges upon entering the United States. Changing cultural contexts
combined with the loss of their community and other social supports make them vulnerable to stress, depression, and a host of other complications while attempting to establish a safe and permanent home for their children. Given the complexity of these issues, child welfare agencies need to recognize and respond to the unique needs of this population. Culturally competent practice requires a thorough understanding of the impact that migration and acculturation have had on each family, and how these experiences may have contributed to their involvement in the child welfare system. Additional research is needed on the health and mental health needs of Latino immigrant children and families in the child welfare system in order to expand the knowledge base and develop interventions that address these needs. Additionally, research is needed on intervention strategies with immigrant children and families in the child welfare system, in order to provide empirically based information on effective practices with this population.

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