

Journal of Family Strengths

Volume 16

Issue 1 *Latino Civic and Social Engagement:
Voices, Experiences, Trials, and Triumphs*

Article 2

9-30-2016

Latino Civic and Social Engagement

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Recommended Citation

Pohl, Bernardo E. Jr; Garcia, Viola; and Emeka, Traqina (2016) "Latino Civic and Social Engagement," *Journal of Family Strengths*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/jfs/vol16/iss1/2>

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Latino Civic and Social Engagement: Voices, Experiences, Trials, and Triumphs

By Bernardo Enrique Pohl, Viola Garcia, and Traquina Emeka

The Latino population of the United States is a vibrant community. For example, the presidential election of 2012 highlighted the rapidly growing political and social influence of Latinos in the United States. Today, the fact that Latinos can single-handedly decide who will occupy a public office is no longer a hypothesis; it is a vivid reality. Per capita, Latinos have some of the highest purchasing power in the country. In the media, the Latino community surpasses all expectations as Hispanic media outlets have the highest ratings, even among English-speaking outlets. In the coming years and decades, the political, social, and economic participation of Latinos will be very important. Without a doubt, it will reshape and define this nation's social landscape.

Nonetheless, Latinos face many roadblocks: voting apathy, high rates of school dropout and unemployment, incarceration, and serious immigration dilemmas. Distinctively strong communities, visible and powerful leadership, and solid foundations inside the family structure play key and pivotal roles in strengthening the Latino community and Latino visibility in this country.

In response to this dynamic, the current issue of the *Journal of Family Strengths* focuses on the Latino community, seeking evidence-based practices and solutions that promote better civic and social participation of Latinos in our nation. From qualitative studies to interviews to legal perspectives, this issue addresses the values and strengths of family and community among Latinos, exploring vignettes of the Latino community that are seldom covered and often ignored. Covering the multiple facets that create the landscape of the Latino community allows readers to better grasp what makes it so strong and unique.

Traditionally, the coverage of Latino affairs has been problematic, highlighting some of the negative aspects and social ills that are often associated with Latinos: the immigration dilemma, education gaps, poverty, and the socioeconomic divide between poor and affluent Latinos. However, overlooked are vast riches that make their community unique: Latino participation in politics, the generational experience of Latinos in society, Hispanic media, Hispanic purchasing power, Latinos in school, and immigration legislation. In this issue, we invite the reader to delve deeper into the many facets of the Latino community.

Immigration: Economic Power, Family, and Legislation

It would be an understatement to say that immigration is a big topic in the Latino community. Immigration is of paramount importance to millions of Latinos in the United States. In this issue, readers will follow Flores (2016) as he delves into the immigration dilemmas faced by the United States and the Latino community, helping us discover the three-dimensional aspect of a complex issue. In his article, Flores contends that “the issue of immigration legislation and policy in the United States is complex and emotional. It combines changing attitudes toward nations, ethnic and racial groups, and geopolitics” (p. 1). We could not agree more. In his article, “Undocumented and Unafraid: the Emergence of an Undocumented Movement and Its Impact on Public Policy, the DREAM Act, DACA, DAPA, and Family Unification,” Flores first explains the circumstances that force undocumented university students to embrace the bold decision to take a public stance against policies and social attitudes that are, for the most part, anti-immigration and anti-immigrants, which have created a very uncertain world for these students and for millions of undocumented immigrants. Flores explores several dimensions of Latinos and immigration: the historical background of immigration in the United States; the need for and benefits of comprehensive legislation reform; the undeniable economic power of the Latinos in this country; and the positive effects of fully integrating millions of undocumented youth into the social, political, and economic fabric of the United States. The dream of undocumented students is really the American Dream (Flores, 2016, p. 22). In the end, Flores’s article is about a dream – the dream of millions of people to belong and prosper in our great nation.

The broad perspective of Latino experiences during immigration that Flores (2016) provides is complimented by an in-depth examination of the strength of family agency in an article by Gullón-Rivera: “The Strengths of Recent Immigrant Parents Raising Young Children: an Application of the Concepts of Human Agency.” Coping with the various aspects of immigration is not easy. First of all, immigrants are confronted with the reality of arriving in a new country, where the customs, language, and societal norms are different from those of the homeland. In addition, immigrants must learn to navigate a new system of social services and education for their children. Although many studies have highlighted the experiences of immigrants arriving in this country, “little attention has been devoted to the experience of recent Latino immigrant parents as *human agents*, mainly those who are raising young children, and to parents’ sense of adjustment” (Gullón-Rivera, 2016, p. 2). Often, studies of this nature focus on the influences exerted by the environment on the individual;

however, in this study, we witness how immigrant parents transform themselves into environmental changers as they face many challenges, such as the task of coping with the familiar cultural traditions of raising a family in the midst of a new social environment. Furthermore, according to Gullón-Rivera, these immigrant parents must learn to navigate the complex web of social services that are available, which can include schools and medical care. It is the intimate narratives of these families that make Gullón-Rivera's study unique, providing an examination of the human agency of immigrant parents through a different lens.

In his study, Dr. Gullón-Rivera provides a portrait of resilience and hope in the experiences of recent Latino immigrants to the United States; the article focuses specifically on immigrants with young children, ages 0 through 7 years, and seeks to recognize and draw attention to the transition from one culture to another and the need to navigate the many systems of American society (health care, education, and employment). The author evaluates the current state of the pre-immigration and post-immigration experience for this unique group of recent immigrants. The article presents repeated expressions of hope, community connection, and a sense of family. It is noted that success for these immigrant families depends upon proper resources and support.

The study includes a diverse group of immigrants from Mexico, Argentina, the Dominican Republic, Peru, and El Salvador. Although immigrant families may experience numerous stressors as they strive for a successful transition into the United States, the study suggests that having a strong network of support from both the sending country and the receiving country can alleviate many of these stressors. The immigrant families recount how strong support and encouragement from family and friends helped to relieve many of the barriers to immigration. Strong kinship networks and a coordination of support helped the families during pre-immigration. Although the stories of the recent immigrants in this study are individual examples of successful adjustment to American society, public policies and supports need to be put into place for all immigrant families.

Many of the participants in the study expressed positive worldviews following immigration. Additionally, the study participants reflected on their time in the United States and noted that their coping mechanisms are influenced by strong family networks. Many developed relationships with their children's schools and were connected with stable employment within a few months of arriving in the United States. An overriding theme in the piece is the importance of family and doing what is best for young children. In the case of many of the participants, their post-immigration experience has inspired them to continue to hope as they strive to keep a delicate

balance between transitioning to a new culture and maintaining their traditions of respect and family.

Of the utmost importance is recognizing the needs of immigrants during the transition from their home countries. Some of the specific issues discussed in the article include access to health care, education, English language instruction, and stable employment. Those interviewed suggest that their primary motivation for leaving their home country and immigrating to the United States was family well-being – the desire to provide better opportunities for their children through access to quality education and health care, and therefore a better life. The parents in this study specifically sought to learn the English language so as to be better equipped for employment opportunities and to be able to participate in the education of their children. Gullón-Rivera (2016) notes the importance of access to opportunities and the need to prepare immigrants for the transition. A system of care and respect should be offered to immigrants and their needs after immigration.

The article recognizes the plight of immigrant families as well as the successes associated with familial and community support. Guillón-Rivera captures the accounts of those who have made a successful transition following immigration. He addresses the pliability of Latin immigrants during pre-immigration and post-immigration. The author notes that immigrant parents are “capable of self-organizing, self-regulating, and being proactive in response to their needs and environmental circumstances” (p. 4). The article is realistic in that it clearly points out that there may be trials and hard times; however, hope and victory can come with intrinsic motivation, community support, and a strong kinship network.

Perception of Latino Images

The article of Stokes, Clemens, and Rios (2016) focuses on the importance of understanding Latina perceptions of body image and how the media may influence those perceptions. In Western culture, specifically the culture of the United States, there is a general perception that the ideal of beauty is defined by a thin body. Generally, the media portray images in a myriad of ways to suggest that thinness equals beauty and that other body sizes are undesirable. Women are faced with the extraordinary task of maintaining a certain physical appearance to fit in with what the dominant culture defines as beautiful. Latinos are the largest and fastest-growing ethnic group, and Latinas make up 51% of the Latino population in the United States (p. 6); the population of Latinas is steadily increasing in this country, and the issue of body image needs to be addressed to understand how body perception may affect them.

The author uses a sociocultural model to suggest that the media transmit images that are internalized, and as such, individuals may develop a sense of self based upon what is viewed as “ideal.” Also presented in the research are two theories that purport to provide an understanding of body image perception. Cultivation theory suggests that the greater the exposure to media, the more distorted a person’s reality. Heavy media viewing may result in body dissatisfaction, given that most women shown in the media have body types that do not represent “normal-size” women. Self-comparison suggests that individuals may evaluate self-worth through the lenses of others. For example, as noted in the research, a young Latina may feel discouraged when her mother does not have a positive image of her body (p. 16). A mother with a positive body image will likely pass this perception on to her child. Accordingly, self-comparison theory offers that individuals strive to seek a thin body type; individuals want success, esteem, and beauty, and the media portray thin women as possessing these attributes.

The authors also note a major concern regarding how media influence on body dissatisfaction may result in eating disorders, depression, anxiety, and other issues. Because of constant social pressure and the continuous flow of images via social media, film, billboards, and the like, most women do not feel that they can attain the perceived beauty defined as a superthin body type. A strong ethnic identity can help Latinas overcome media influence and acquire a positive body image. Additionally, the author suggests that positive influences such as family, peers, and partners may help Latinas have a healthy, positive sense of self.

Individuals do not inherently possess knowledge of their self-concepts; instead, this knowledge flows from interaction in social environments with significant others and with significant entities – family, friends, community organizations, and the media. (p. 14)

Stokes, Clemens, and Rios (2016) address the difficulties surrounding body image and how they can be influenced by the media; the authors provide an awareness of the growing Latina population and how the body image of this population has been generally ignored in the literature. The article acts as a voice for Latinas and promotes the importance of individual Latino cultures, ethnicities, and heritages. The authors also note that future research should address these differences in culture and ethnicity in the groups that comprise the Latino population. It is of the utmost importance to understand differences among Latinas, Hispanics, and Chicanas as subgroups. Put another way, Latinos as a group cannot be

lumped together in a single category; if this is done, the individual cultural differences are lost. Society needs to embrace the differences of all people and use those differences to strengthen and define our nation. The message to Latinas and all women should be one of independence, worthiness, confidence, and pride. We are all valuable human beings with varying degrees of difference in body type, ethnicity, culture – the list goes on. We must celebrate difference.

Latinos in School: Cultural Differences, Pedagogy, Latino Voices in Digital Narratives, Bilingual Teachers

Three articles in this issue sought to investigate approaches to addressing the increasing number of Latino students in schools. The authors contribute to our understanding of practices and solutions for this growing population. While all three of the investigations occurred in large urban districts in the Southwest, the situations, findings, and inferences may well apply or occur across the country. The central focus of this journal on the strengths perspective in family-centered practice is evident in the articles, although the findings reveal gaps between current teacher perceptions of themselves, their impact on pedagogy, and how future teachers are affected by obstacles and supports in their quest to become teachers.

In the article of Russell and McDonald (2016), we find that culture, background, and family affect learning to teach and teaching in a powerful way, as outlined in the teacher profiles organizer used to assess perceptions of teachers' pedagogy. The cultural lens continuum revealed glaring evidence of the teacher profiles reflecting a mismatch between mainstream teachers at "various levels of cultural awareness as well as knowledge and skill in working with a diverse student population" (p. 6). The pedagogy of one of the teachers "was limited to isolated events, and most instructional activities on culture were not infused within students' daily experiences or family life" (p. 9). As supported by the literature, it is clear that culturally relevant practice is the "teacher's ability to identify his or her cultural identity in relation to other cultural identities in the classroom" (p.19), and that when family strengths are not valued, teaching and learning are not optimized.

The findings of Mitchell, Miller, and Dalton (2016) confirm the supporting literature in asserting that "by integrating their heritage language into the learning process, families become integral parts of the literacy process, which demonstrates the value of their home culture and language" (p. 2). The preservice participants in the study "recognized the importance of their stories as they began to think about teaching in the classroom" (p.

14), confirming "... that their life stories could provide the connections they will seek with their future students" (p. 15).

Gauna and Beaudry (2016) further demonstrate the "potential obstacles and supports faced by children raised in linguistically and culturally diverse families in the United States who wish to become Spanish bilingual teachers" (p. 1). Given the inference in the findings of the other two articles about the relationship between teachers and students and how experiences in societal, familial, and school contexts shape us, this article provides insights into "these issues in ways that can support the future development of strong Spanish bilingual teachers" (p. 2).

All three of the school-related articles indicate that opportunities to link family and community to the curriculum taught in classrooms provide more equitable instructional practices.

Perspectives From the Field

The importance of voting in the Latino community cannot be ignored; the role that Latino voters play is more visible and important than ever. In the article "Si Votan: Texas Latino Politicians' Perspectives in Engaging Latino Voters in the Electoral Process," Pfeffer and Sanborn (2016) interviewed politicians Adrian Garcia, former sheriff of Harris County, Texas, and Texas Sen. Eddie Lucio Jr. to discuss the role that Latino voters play in state and national elections. In this article, two prominent and veteran Texas Latino leaders share their personal stories about trials, humble beginnings, perseverance, and triumphs. Garcia describes how his first experience with politics and activism was about saving the automotive repair class in his high school. He vividly described how he organized students and parents in his efforts to save the program. Later, he ran for city council when Vasquez vacated his seat. Lucio narrates his family's humble beginnings; however, humble circumstances never diminished the importance of voting in his family, as he describes in the article. Given the pivotal role that Latino voters play in state and national elections, it is not a surprise that Garcia and Lucio delved into the importance of promoting greater Hispanic participation at the voting booths. For Garcia, voting became an essential act of civics during the late 1970s – an era of great social and political uncertainty. For Lucio, it was the patriotic legacy inculcated by his father – taking fullest advantage of the opportunities that our nation provides.

The articles in this issue of the *Journal of Family Strengths* seek to educate the reader about the multifaceted dimensions of the Latino community, sharing their voices, experiences, trials, and triumphs. We believe that the issue is very important, offering articles that explore many aspects of the experiences of members of the Latino community, from

dreamers hoping for a better future, to politicians remembering their roots, to the personal experiences of bilingual teachers. We encourage the reader to learn more about the fascinating lives of Latinos in this country, discovering what makes this community so interesting and unique.

Flores, W. V. (2016). Undocumented and Unafraid: The Emergence of an Undocumented Movement and its Impact on Immigration Policy, the DREAM Act, DACA, DAPA, and Family Unification. *Journal of Family Strengths*, 16(1).

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Mitchell, L., Miller, D., & Dalton, C. (2016). Finding Latino/a Voices in the Storytelling Process: Preservice Teachers Tell Their Stories in Digital Narratives. *Journal of Family Strengths*, 16(1).

Pfeffer, R., & Sanborn, R. (2016). Si Votan: Texas Latino Politicians' Perspectives on Engaging Latino Voters in the Electoral Process." *Journal of Family Strengths*, 16(1).

Russell, C., & McDonald, D. (2016). The Continuum of Lens Through Which Teachers View Cultural Differences: How Perceptions Impact Pedagogy. *Journal of Family Strengths*, 16(1).

Stokes, D. M., Clemens, C., & Rios, D. (2016). Brown beauty: Body image, Latinas, and the media. *Journal of Family Strengths*, 16(1).