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Latina Undergraduates' Attitudes Towards Counseling: An Exploratory Study

Rosalilia Mendoza, B.A., University of California, Irvine

Yesenia Ortiz, B.A., Southern Illinois University, Carbondale

Jeanett Castellanos, Ph.D., University of California, Irvine (castellj@uci.edu)

Alberta M. Gloria, Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-Madison (amgloria@wisc.edu)

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Abstract

Previous studies have assessed racial and ethnic minority students' (REMs) attitudes towards counseling but research has not specifically examined Latinas' perceptions and attitudes towards university counseling services. To address the paucity of research, this study explores the general understanding of Latina undergraduates' perceptions about counseling and university counseling services. Using a psychosociocultural framework, five focus groups ($n = 31$) were conducted at a Southwestern 4-year university. Deductive dimensions are psychological, social, and cultural while preliminary inductive domains include: community's understanding, values, perceptions of counseling; family attitudes or perspectives; Latinas' attitudes and perceived utility of counseling; and suggestions for effective counseling services.

Latinas and Higher Education

- Fastest and youngest growing group comprised of approximately 14% of US population (US Census, 2004)
- Between and within group heterogeneity
 - Mexican Americans comprise largest percentage of Latina/os
- Disproportionately represented in higher education (Castellanos & Jones, 2003)
- Latinas earn more bachelors' degrees than their Latino counterparts (NCES, 2005), yet are more vulnerable or at risk of academic nonpersistence (Hatchett & Holmes, 2004)

Perceptions of University Environment

- Latina/os who perceive the university environment negatively have adjustment difficulties (Gloria & Kurpius, 1996)
- Latina/a/o cultural values (e.g., *personalismo*, *familismo*) are often not appreciated or integrated into the university (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000)

Sources of Navigation

- External sources of management include friends, ethnic or group organizations, mentors, family, and relatives (Castillo & Hill, 2004)
- Internal sources of management include substance abuse, religion, and self-beliefs (Hatchett & Holmes, 2004; Leong et al., 1995)
- No research to date warrants attention to an understanding of Latinas' perceptions of university counseling centers

Perceptions and Attitudes Towards Counseling

- Latina/os often hold negative attitudes towards counseling services (Leong, Wagner, & Tata, 1995)
- Females are more willing to seek counseling services than males (Constantine et al., 2003)

- Latinas may not utilize the university counseling services during times of distress and instead seek out support from family or friends (Gloria et al., 2004)

Guiding Purpose of Study and Theoretical Framework

To understand Latina students' general perceptions and attitudes towards counseling. General information and exploratory open-ended assessments of Latina/o attitudes towards counseling were guided by a psychosociocultural framework which considers psychological, social, and cultural elements simultaneously (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). In particular, issues focused on individual and familial perceptions of counseling and potential role and utility of counseling. Guiding questions included:

- What is your families' perception and understanding towards counseling services?
- What are your perceptions and attitudes towards counseling?
- What do you perceive as the potential role of counseling services for your well-being?
- What elements of counseling do you perceive as useful?

Study Setting and Procedure

- Institutional Review Board approved study conducted at Southwestern 4-year university
- Recruitment from classrooms, ethnic student organizations, and nonparametric sampling (e.g. flyers)
- Five semi-structured focus groups lasting 70 to 90 minutes
 - Refreshments and incentives provided
- Sessions audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim

Student Participants

31 Latina Undergraduates

Average Age = 20.90 (SD = 1.64), 18 to 25
GPA = 2.93 (SD = .44), 2.10 to 3.70

Ethnicity

26 Mexican Americans
 2 Central Americans
 2 Multiracial
 1 South Americans

Class Standing

1 Freshman
 5 Sophomores
 13 Juniors
 12 Seniors

Generational Status

23 First Generation (First Born in US.)
 2 Second generation
 4 Third generation
 2 Missing

Transfer Status

6 Transfer students
 17 Nontransfer students
 8 Missing

Area of Study

1 Arts
 2 Humanities
 6 Social Ecology
 21 Social Sciences
 1 Other

Previous Counseling Experience

16 Yes
 14 No
 1 Missing

Open ended question asking about valuable elements of counseling: counselor's objectiveness, counselor's attentiveness, confidentiality, reaches comfort level, and space for self-reflection/growth

Preliminary Results

Data analyses implemented an integration of Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) method (Hill et al., 1997) and theoretical deduction (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) using psychosociocultural framework (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). Research team consisted of two faculty (cultural auditors) and two undergraduates (group facilitators and data interpreters).

Deductive Findings – Implementing the PSC Framework

Psychological Dimension:

3 Domains: Self-Efficacy, Self-Disclosure, and Locus of Control

Self Efficacy: Expectations mixed, comprised of high and low confidence

Self-Disclosure: Ranged from willingness to “open up” to —inability to express oneself

Locus of Control: Both internal and external

Social Dimension:

2 Domains: Family Support and Friend Support

Family: Serves as a primary/secondary support, encourages/discourages counseling

Friends: Serve as primary/secondary support, encourage/discourage counseling

Cultural Dimension:

4 Domains: University Counseling Center, Counselor’s Ethnic Identity, Cultural Values, Acculturation

University Counseling Center: Positive and negative perceptions

Counselor’s Ethnic Identity: Mattered/did not matter

Cultural Values: The role of familismo and personalismo in seeking counseling

Acculturation: Counseling sought depending on generational status

Inductive Analysis – General Understanding and Perceptions of Counseling

Community’s Understanding, Values, Perceptions of Counseling:

3 Themes: Negative perceptions, Values, Unawareness

Negative perceptions: Stigma towards utilization of services

Values: Accepts counseling only for extreme cases

Unawareness: Services are not affordable or inaccessible

Family Attitudes or Perspectives:

2 Themes: Familial Systems and Gender Differences

Familial Systems: Immediate family perceives counseling positively while extended family perceive negatively

Gender Differences: Females perceived counseling more positively than males

Latinas’ Perceived Utility of Counseling:

3 Themes: Positive and Negative Attitudes

Positive: Perceived university counseling center as resource

Latinas value counseling when their counselors are perceived positively

Negative: Latinas who previously sought counseling unsatisfied held negative attitudes

Suggestions for Effective Counseling Services:

2 Themes: Outreach and Language

Outreach: Community involvement and promotion of mental health awareness

Language: Counselors ability to communicate in client’s preferred language

Discussion and Implications

- Latinas define psychological health/well-being as an integration of both psychological and biological stability
 - *Establish a Latina support group integrating mind and body connections*

- Latinas who had never sought counseling held both negative and neutral perceptions, consistent with previous findings that college students stigmatize counseling services (Constantine, 2002)
 - *Counselors collaborate with student leaders to promote positive utility of counseling services*
- Primary social support sought from friends and family vs. counseling services (Gloria et al., 2005).
 - *Develop peer paraprofessional support programming*
- Family major support system for first generation college student (Gloria & Segura-Herrera, 2004)
 - *University counseling center must recognize primary role of family within student well-being*
- Mental health services perceived as financially and practically inaccessible (Leong et al., 1995)
- Utility of services to address issues of cultural congruity (Gloria & Robinson-Kurpius, 1996)
 - *University counseling centers must address Latina/o values and their cultural fit to the university environment*
- Counseling services should outreach to the community reinforcing collective cultural values (Falicov, 1998)
- Counselors should speak clients' native language (McNeil et al., 2004)
 - *Graduate programs should train counselors in multicultural competencies (e.g., interact in client's language)*

Limitations ~ Future Research

- Setting of previous counseling not explored ~ Explore participants' exposure to counseling services (i.e., university campus or community)
- Findings limited to Latina undergraduates~ Cautiously interpret to Latinos or other REM students in subsequent analyses
- Exploratory and preliminary findings~ Compare quantitative and qualitative results on understanding and perceptions towards counseling
- Latina/o ethnicities are aggregated ~ Examine within group differences (e.g., Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans)
- Students' perceptions of parents attitudes assessed ~ Interview parents and students' perceptions simultaneously

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