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The Relationship Experience of Latina/o-White Couples

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The Relationship Experience of Latina/o-White Couples

by

Dana Nixon

A Thesis

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Abstract

Interethnic Latina/o-white couples are becoming more common, yet little is understood about why these couples stay together or get divorced (Fu & Wolfinger, 2011; Garcia, Riggio, Palavinelu, & Culpepper, 2012; Qian & Lichter, 2007). This study uses phenomenology methodology to better understand their lived experience. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five Latino-white couples and one Latina-white couple. The five themes discovered include interethnic couple identity; combining languages; external support of the relationship; external stressors of the relationship; and partaking in the partner's culture. Using a Human ecology lens allows for understanding of what makes these couples different and similar to monoethnic couples. Viewing a couple's co-constructed culture at a microsystemic level may be more beneficial than viewing each individual's culture of origin from a macrosystemic level. Clinical recommendations for interethnic Latina/o-white couples include helping couples cope with discrimination, having therapists use the correct terminology, and addressing what language they are comfortable with in session. Further investigation is needed in regards to how Latina/o-white interethnic couples handle language choice, discrimination, and perceptions of participating in their partner's culture.

Table of Contents

	Page
List of Tables	6
Chapter	
1. Introduction	7
Introduction	7
Statement of the Problem	7
Purpose of the Study	9
Objectives for the Study	9
Assumption of the Study	9
Delimitations	9
Research Question	10
Definition of Terms	10
Summary	10
2. Literature Review	12
Introduction	12
Research on Latina/o-White Couples	13
Contextual Influences	18
Cultural Differences: Stressors and Coping	21
Summary	26
3. Methodology	27
Introduction	27

	4
Chapter	Page
Participants	28
Human Subject Approval–Institutional Review Board (IRB)	30
Instruments	30
Research Design	32
4. Results	35
Introduction	35
Interethnic Couple Identity	35
Combining Languages	39
External Support of the Relationship	42
Partaking in the Partner’s Culture	45
Summary	47
5. Discussion	49
Introduction	49
Discussion and Conclusions	49
Couple Dynamics	54
Limitations	54
Recommendations	55
Future Research	56
Summary	57
References	58

Chapter Page

Appendices

A. Consent Form	63
B. Demographic Questionnaire	66
C. Recruitment Email	69
D. Recruitment Flyer	70
E. IRB Approval	71

List of Tables

Table	Page
3.1 Demographic Information for Participants	29
3.2 Couple Description	30

Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

Today, nearly one in seven new marriages are interethnic, making interethnic couples an important topic of research (Garcia, Riggio, Palavinelu, & Culpepper, 2012). Studies thus far have delivered inconsistent results on whether these couples have a more difficult time staying together than monoethnic couples. This proposal looks specifically at Latino/a-white long-term committed relationships (defined as in a committed relationship for over 1 year). Garcia et al. (2012) mentions that Latina/os are the largest and fastest growing minority group in the United States. They are an important interethnic group to study because marriages are becoming more common between Latina/o and white individuals (Qian & Lichter, 2007), and the divorce rate for these couples is uniquely based on crossing the Latina/o-white ethnic boundary (Fu & Wolfinger, 2011).

Statement of the Problem

Latino/a-white couples are more prevalent than other types of interethnic couples (Hohmann-Marriott & Amato, 2008; Lee & Edmonston, 2005; Qian & Lichter, 2007). In recent decades, the number of interethnic Latino/a-white marriages has increased making them more common than black-white marriages. Some argue that because this interethnic union is so common, these couples will be less likely to face the challenges of interethnic marriage, such as discrimination (Hohmann-Marriott & Amato, 2008). Hohmann-Marriott and Amato (2008) reported greater relationship quality compared to other interethnic couples, even though interethnic couples had lower satisfaction overall compared to monoethnic couples.

The divorce rate of Latino/a-white marriages is higher than that of monoethnic white couples and Latino couples meaning that their divorce is uniquely related to being in an interethnic marriage (Fu & Wolfinger, 2011). Convergence hypothesis explains that the divorce rate for interethnic couples should be the average of the divorce rate for monoethnic couples of each ethnicity. Therefore, a marriage between a Latina/o and white person would be expected to have a divorce rate that is the average of Latino couples' divorce rates and white couples' divorce rates. Fu and Wolfinger (2011) report that the rate of divorce among women is the highest among blacks; Latinas have the lowest divorce rate, and whites are in between. In their sample of wives' self-report, analysis controlled for religion in terms of if the wife was raised with or without religion. Thus, the divorce rate for Latino/a-white couples hypothetically should be lower than that of monoethnic white couples, but higher than that of monoethnic Latino couples.

They find that when Latina/os marry whites their risk for divorce increases substantially than if they choose to marry another Latina/o. Looking at the percent of marriages intact at 15 years, the probability for survival of marriage for Latino/a-white couples (64% for white husband/Latina wife and 58% Latino husband/white wife) fell below the probabilities of monoethnic white couples (66%) as well as that of monoethnic Latino couples (72%), rather than in between them. Fu and Wolfinger (2011) conclude that interethnic Latina/o-white couples' divorce is uniquely related to crossing the Latino/a-white ethnic boundary given that the probabilities did not follow the convergence hypothesis.

Purpose of the Study

It is difficult to understand past research that claims that Latino/a-white couples have high relationship quality as well as increased risk of divorce due to marrying outside their ethnicity. Due to inconsistent findings, we do not have a clear understanding about these couples. Looking at everyday experiences of these couples through a qualitative lens may shed some light on previous inconsistencies. Qualitative research permits the researcher to look into these experiences and understand how interethnic Latino/a-white couples make meaning of their relationship.

Objectives for the Study

In order to complete this study, two tasks need to be accomplished. Permission is needed from the St. Cloud State Institutional Review Board to begin the study and 6-10 couples will need to be recruited to begin interviews. Couples will be recruited using a recruitment email as well as a flyer.

Assumptions of the Study

Assumptions include that participants will answer interview questions and the demographic questionnaire honestly and pass along the recruitment email or flyer to other couples that meet the criteria for the study. It is also assumed by this writer that each participant will have an understanding of what makes up the culture of their family of origin, including language, traditions, and customs.

Delimitations

Due to the qualitative method of this study, no specific variables are tested. A quantitative method was not selected because there is not sufficient research on Latina/o-

white couples to determine what variables would be important to study for these couples. The qualitative method focuses on the meaning these couples make and is used to better understand what has an impact on Latino/a-white couples.

Research Question

The grand tour question that guides this research is, how do Latina/o-white couples make meaning of their relationship? This question is used to understand what is important for these couples that may be unique to them.

Definition of Terms

According to the Pew Hispanic Center (Taylor, Lopez, Martínez, & Velaso, 2012), the terms “Hispanic” and “Latina/o” can be used interchangeably; both refer to one ethnic group recognized by the federal government consisting of “A person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race” (p. 11). As recommended by Falicov (2014), I will use the term “Latina/o” when discussing people from several countries of Spanish culture. I will also use the term “Hispanic” when it is the original term used in a research study to stay true to the term used by the researcher.

Summary

Latina/o-white interethnic couples are becoming more common (Garcia et al., 2012; Qian & Lichter, 2007) and research provides inconsistent results on the outcomes for these couples (Fu & Wolfinger, 2011; Hohmann-Marriott & Amato, 2008). The literature review, through the lens of human ecology theory, explains research on Latina/o-white couples, contextual influences, and cultural differences: stressors and coping. The methodology used is phenomenology, in which the phenomena of six Latino/a-white couples is understood through

their unique lived experience (van Manen, 1997). The results section explores the five themes that emerged: interethnic couple identity; combining languages; external support of the relationship; external stressors of the relationship; and partaking in the partner's culture.

In the discussion section, the results are understood through a human ecology lens. Through this lens, the couple identity and language choice is formed at the microsystemic level. The external supports and stressors that interact with the couple at the mesosystemic and exosystemic level appear to be similar to those found for monoethnic couples. Partaking in the partner's culture is best understood from the microsystemic level rather than a macrosystemic level. In doing so, combining two cultures is seen as co-created by the couple and normal to everyday life rather than a battleground for cultures to clash. Themes unique to these couples that needs further exploration include language choice, understanding discrimination as a couple, and focusing on individual perceptions of their partner partaking in their culture.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Informing perspectives. The topic of interethnic Latina/o-white couples is influenced by human ecology theory, in this qualitative investigation, in that it is designed to understand the context of the Latina/o-white couple relationship (White & Klein, 2008). It is the assumption of the author that multiple layers of a couple's ecological context influence the couple's development, including identity. Human ecology theory explains how the environment influences the decision of individuals. According to this theory, the family lives within several ecosystems that are all dependent on each other.

Decisions are made by individuals and families based on the resources in their environment and how that environment interacts with a person's traits and abilities (White & Klien, 2008). Thus we cannot understand an individual unless they are in the context of their physical, cultural, and social environment, because they are interdependent of one another. The environment offers opportunities for couples, but also limitations, therefore individuals do not have sole control of their actions, and decision-making is based on how they interact with the environment. This theory makes it clear that people must be viewed as part of an ecosystem and not only as individuals.

There are four different levels of an ecosystem, each one "nested" within the other: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem (White & Klien, 2008). For this investigation, the microsystem involves the direct interactions with others, for example, that the individual has with their partner or others. The mesosystem is the interaction of two or more microsystems such as family of origin and partner. The exosystem

consists of systems that indirectly affect the couple at the micro- or mesosystem level and have no direction interaction with them, such as the media. Finally, the macrosystem deals with the cultural context in which the couple is involved.

The different levels surround the ecosystem of the individual, who is defined by their racial identity. From the microsystemic level, the individual interacts with their partner to form their couple identity. At the mesosystemic level, the family and friends of the couple make sense of the interethnic relationship. The exosystemic level explains how society views Latina/o-white couples, and on the macrosystemic level, the context deals with how the couple relationship fits into the surrounding values of the culture.

Research on Latina/o-White Couples

Racial identity. There is confusion around racial identity for Hispanics because “Latino/Hispanic” is considered an ethnic group and not a race (Taylor et al., 2012). As an ethnic group they share “...a common language, culture, and heritage, but not a common race” (p. 9). According to the federal government, there are five major racial categories: white, black, American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. Most Hispanics feel they do not fit into one of these categories on the US Census. Instead, 51% identify their race as “some other race” or volunteer “Hispanic/Latino,” 36% identify as white, and 3% identify as black. Falicov (2014) adds that Latina/os appear to prefer to self-identify as white in regards to racial identification.

Wieling (2003) explains that due to a large percentage of Latina/os having light skin color, Latina/os would be more likely to enter an interethnic marriage with whites than other minorities. According to Feliciano, Lee, and Robnett (2011), few Latina/os choose to have

potential dates with only other Latina/os when dating online, indicating an interest in interethnic dating. Also, Latina/os generally view themselves more similar to whites (Garcia et al., 2012). Latina/os are the most included group by whites in online dating, as well as being the most included by other races, suggesting that they have the advantage of racial ambiguity (Feliciano et al., 2011). On the same note, Latina/os are more likely to prefer white partners than black partners, insinuating a more flexible Latino-white racial boundary (Garcia et al., 2012).

Garcia and colleagues (2012) explain that Latina/os are more likely to marry outside of their ethnic group if they are younger, are born in the United States, and are living in the western area of the United States. This suggests that US born Latina/os are likely to marry outside of their ethnicity than immigrant Latina/os. In addition, Qian and Lichter (2007) include that highly educated Hispanics are more likely to be in interethnic marriages with a white spouse. Garcia and colleagues (2012) also state that Latino men and women are both just as likely to marry outside of their ethnic group. Looking between Latino groups, it is important to note that the interethnic marriage does not look the same for all groups.

According to Shin (2011), the interethnic marriage rates are different among different countries of origin; this study looked at Mexicans, Cubans, and Dominicans. Results show that Cubans are more likely to marry whites due to having a 'white' racial identity whereas Dominicans who self-identify as having a 'black' racial identity are more likely to marry other Latina/os. Mexicans are most likely to marry within their ethnic group. However, within all three groups, intermarriage with whites was positively correlated with English proficiency and educational attainment.

Along with racial identity, Latina/os also have a minority identity which is best explained through the Minority identity development model (Sue & Sue, 2013). This model demonstrates the transitions that people of the minority culture go through as they understand how their culture fits in with the dominant culture. This model consists of five stages in which attitudes change toward the self, toward others of the same minority, towards others of different minorities, and toward the dominant group. In the conformity stage, Latina/os prefer white mainstream cultural values over their own. In the dissonance stage, Latina/os find inconsistencies with the belief that white mainstream culture is better than their own. In the resistance and immersion stage, Latina/os reject white mainstream values. In the introspection stage, Latina/os become uncomfortable with the rigid beliefs of the third stage and concerned with views of the Latino group that conflict with individual values. In the integrative awareness stage, Latina/os are able to appreciate unique characteristics of their culture as well as those in white mainstream culture.

Racial identity is not only a factor for Latino/as but for the white partner as well. Helm's white racial identity developmental model reveals that white people can be at different phases in developing a non-racist identity and that racism is a part of life for white Americans (Sue & Sue, 2013). According to this model, whites fall between two phases of developing a healthy white racial identity. The first phase is abandonment of racism in which white people are oblivious to racism, have unresolved racial moral dilemmas, and have beliefs about racial identity that are part of the dominant ideology. The second phase, defining a non-racist identity, involves understanding racial differences, questioning what it means to be white, accepting one's role in continuing racism, and abandoning white entitlement. Whether white

partners are in the process of abandoning racism or defining a non-racist identity would most likely affect the likelihood of dating a dating a Latina/o partner or how they would support their Latina/o partner in the relationship.

Couple identity. Similarity of values is one thing that attracts interethnic partners to each other (Ibrahim & Schroeder, 1990). Similar to monoethnic couples, having similar values would lead to less arguments and confirmation of each partner's beliefs. In her qualitative study of interethnic Latina/o-white couples, Wieling (2003) found that Latina/o-white couples believed they had similar world views, with an increased awareness of true values of each partner after having children. Similar values also brings similar motivations to marry. In the qualitative data gathered by Negy and Snyder (2000), they found that the motives for marriage reported by interethnic couples were no different from most individuals' motives to marry and that ethnicity had little to do with their decision to get married.

Interethnic marital satisfaction is often compared to that of monoethnic couples. Past research offers inconsistent findings on whether monoethnic and interethnic couples have the same or different levels of marital satisfaction. Some studies have shown that interethnic couples are similar to monoethnic couples in terms of dyadic interactions and predictors of divorce (Kreider, 2000; Troy, Lewis-Smith, & Laurenceau, 2006). Troy and colleagues (2006) looked at interethnic dating couples' relationship satisfaction compared that of to monoethnic dating couples and concluded that there was no difference between the relationships. In their first study, they compared 32 interethnic couples and 86 monoethnic couples; of the 32 interethnic couples 9 were white/Hispanic and 4 were Hispanic/other. They found no differences in relationship quality, conflict patterns, relationship efficacy, coping

style, and attachment style. In fact, interethnic relationships were found to have significantly higher relationship satisfaction compared to monoethnic couples. Kreider (2000) reminds us that predictors of divorce for interethnic and monoethnic couples are relatively similar.

Though she does find that interethnic couples are 50% more likely to divorce, data from the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth revealed that other factors such as education level and age at marriage are more important for predicting divorce than having a spouse of a different ethnicity.

On the other hand, Hohmann-Marriott and Amato (2008) find interethnic couples report lower levels of relationship quality. Hohmann-Marriott and Amato (2008) contradict these previous studies by finding lower relationship quality in interethnic marriages. Using data from two extensive national surveys, the National Survey of Families and Households and the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, they find these couples experience less satisfaction in their marriage, more conflict, and are more likely to think that their marriage will end. Hohmann-Marriott and Amato (2008) explain that this has been attributed to interethnic couples having more complicated relationship pasts, such as prior marriages and children, and coming from divorced families. In addition, they mention that fewer shared values are found between these couples.

Focusing specifically on interethnic Latina/o-white marriage, research shows that couples typology and marital satisfaction are no different from monoethnic couples for this population. Olson and Garrett (2006), find no significant differences between interethnic Hispanic/white couples and monoethnic Hispanic and white couples in terms of couple typology. In this sample, couples were married an average of 9 years, and the Hispanic

partners were second or third generation. Olson and Garrett (2006) looked at couples who took the ENRICH inventory to determine the couple typology of the participants; this inventory measured marital satisfaction, communication, and conflict resolution. There were no significant differences in any of the five couple types: vitalized, harmonious, traditional, conflicted, and devitalized. Vitalized couples have the highest levels of satisfaction; harmonious couples have moderately high satisfaction but disagree on parenting; traditional couples have average satisfaction and are satisfied with their parenting; conflicted couples have difficulties communicating and resolving conflict; devitalized couples are persistently dissatisfied with their marriage (Olson & Fowers, 1993). This means there were no significant differences in couple typology between monoethnic Hispanic and white couples and interethnic Hispanic/white couples (Olson & Garrett, 2006).

Findings further confirm that the underlying dynamics of married couples are relatively similar across ethnic groups. Negy and Snyder (2000) conclude that interethnic Mexican-American/white couples are more similar than different to monoethnic white couples in terms of marital satisfaction. However, this study took place in a region where Mexican-Americans were the dominant ethnic group. This suggests that interethnic couples may experience more distress when the minority group, of which one spouse is a part of, is actually reflected as the minority in that community.

Contextual Influences

Familial influences. Waldman and Rubalcava (2005) state that interethnic couples have a higher frequency of divorce and are more likely to succumb to stress due to social and familial disapproval of these marriages. This lack of social support has been associated with

increased rate of divorce (Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005). Unlike monoethnic couples, they have to normalize the relationship by justifying the reasons for being with someone of a different ethnicity to friends and family members (Harris & Kalbfleisch, 2000).

Through semi-structured interviews with intercultural couples, Bustamante, Nelson, Henriksen, and Monakes (2011) found that one of the primary stressors for couples was dealing with extended family relationships. Often partners felt left out in their spouse's family of origin especially when they were not familiar with the family's native language. In comparing monoethnic and interethnic couples, Hohmann-Marriott and Amato (2008) found that interethnic couples had less supportive relationships with their parents and in-laws and concluded that familial disapproval is what makes the relationship less likely to endure.

In contrast to the notion of interethnic couples receiving less social support, a study conducted in Canada by Penning and Wu (2013) found different results after investigating different types of social support for interethnic couples. They broke down social support into instrumental and emotional support with instrumental being tangible forms of assistance such as housekeeping, transportation, and financial help; emotional support consists of showing others that they are loved and appreciated. They concluded that middle-aged and older adults in interethnic marriages were less likely to receive instrumental support, specifically transportation, whereas they were just as likely as monoethnic white couples to receive emotional support.

Societal influences. Interethnic relationships have a long history of societal opposition. Interethnic marriage was not legal until the Supreme Court decision of *Loving v. Virginia* in 1967, making it relatively new in the US compared to monoethnic marriage. More

recently, Alabama was the last US state to remove their law banning interethnic marriage in November 2000 (Troy et al., 2006). The children of interethnic unions were not recognized by the US Census until 2000, when individuals were finally able to select more than one racial category to describe themselves (Kenney & Kenney, 2012). Other challenges from societal opposition include interethnic couples facing stares from others, and mistreatment by restaurant staff, real estate agents, retail clerks, hotel managers, and coworkers (Troy et al., 2006). However, Kenney and Kenney (2012) believe that interethnic partner differences are more a concern of society than they are within the marriage.

Despite societal opposition, there are several environmental factors that make it more likely for Latino and white individuals to develop romantic relationships. These factors include a larger presence of minorities in social settings including the workplace, having friends of a different race, and having certain religious influences, which leads people to find interethnic marriages acceptable and thus are more likely to enter into a romantic relationship with someone of a different ethnicity (Perry 2013a, 2013b). Whites that are religiously unaffiliated have greater support for interethnic marriage with all minority groups than those that have a conservative religious affiliation (Perry, 2013b). In addition, whites who participate in devotional religious practices, meaning their practice is more individual and private, are more supportive of interethnic marriage; this suggests that they have internalized the teachings of their faith of acceptance towards others. The link between support for interethnic marriage and presence of a minority group is whether or not whites develop friendships with those in the minority group from the cross-ethnic interactions (Perry, 2013a).

Therefore, when whites develop friendships with Latina/os they are more likely to be in support of Latina/o-white marriages.

Cultural Differences: Stressors and Coping

Latino culture. Before discussing Latina/os as one group, it is imperative to mention that a more accurate description of one's culture can be gained by referring to the country of origin as opposed to Latino culture in general. Taylor and colleagues (2012) report that 51% of Hispanics prefer to be identified by their family's country of origin whereas just 24% prefer the label of Hispanic or Latina/o. In addition, 69% indicated that Latina/os in the United States do not have one common culture, rather many different cultures. However, among all cultures there is a shared connection to the Spanish language. A difference in culture exists based on immigrant generation as well; US born Hispanics believe they have more in common with other Americans than do immigrant Hispanics.

Essential components of Latino culture include collectivism (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), familism (Bacigalupe, 2003), respeto (Falicov, 2014) and defined gender roles (Falicov, 2014). Cultural values are often broken down into individualistic and collectivistic cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). North Americans typically view the self as independent in which case their goal is to be autonomous and unique; the white population of the United States would be considered as having individualistic cultural values. Latin Americans view the self as interdependent in that their goal is to fit in and promote connections with significant others; Latina/os would be considered as having collectivistic cultural values.

An important element of Latino culture is familism, which emphasizes the family as a fundamental part of identity (Bacigalupe 2003). This concept explains that family values are

likely to come before those of the individual as demonstrated by a strong faithfulness to family members. Loyalty to the family becomes ever present in the lives of a couple which may consist of caring for extended family members as part of a moral obligation to the family. In regards to marriage, Ellison, Wolfinger, and Ramos-Wada (2013) report that in Latin culture marriage is meant to last a lifetime and is considered more important than the independence of each individual spouse. This idea also ties in with the religious values of Catholicism held by many Latina/os. About 70% of Latina/os in the U.S. consider themselves Catholic and those that regularly attend church are more likely to have conservative views on divorce, cohabitation, and the sacredness of marriage (Ellison et al., 2013).

The concepts of respeto and defined gender roles are also a part of some Latino families. Respeto deals with having respect for parental authority in the family (Falicov, 2014). It is expected that children fulfill duties for their parents and work within a hierarchical framework in which children have the least authority and grandparents have the most. However, grandparents can also take on a parenting role in the family. Families work within this hierarchy not solely because adults are authority figures but also because they have sincere respect for their elders.

Gender roles may look different in Latino culture compared to that of the United States. The concepts of machismo and marianismo are used to describe men and women in a negative and positive light (Falicov, 2014). Falicov (2014) recommends looking at these roles from a strength-based perspective to avoid negative and harmful stereotypes. Machismo negatively refers to men that are domineering and prideful; however, this is also a positive trait in men in which they are praised for being dedicated as a father and a responsible spouse

to their wife. The female stereotype of marianismo refers to women being self-sacrificing and modest, but also an expression of bravery and commitment to family and community. Falicov (2010) proposes that the grand narratives of machismo and marianismo be challenged because all men and women, not just those in Latino culture, express their gender in unique ways.

Stressors. Ibrahim and Schroeder (1990) argue that conflict in interethnic marriages stems from couples assuming similarities when in reality that is not the case. They describe the likelihood of differences in religious and cultural family rituals as well as holiday celebrations, which are not likely to emerge until later on in the relationship. To expand upon “lack of similarity,” Waldman and Rubalcava (2005) explain that these couples have unrecognized differences in their values and behaviors that stem from different culturally established principles. The different cultures allow for the partners to develop different explanations of their relationship and their partner’s behavior (Kim, Prouty, & Roberson, 2012). This can lead to identity confusion or feeling rejected by their partner.

Specific challenges for Latina/o-white married couples include language barriers and unequal arrangements (Bacigalupe 2003; Negy & Snyder, 2000). In regards to language barriers, Bacigalupe (2003) explains that couples may have to negotiate their use of English and/or Spanish in the relationship. In his case study, one couple, consisting of a Latina wife and white husband, was unable to have intimate conversations with each other due to the husband’s lack of Spanish proficiency. Negy and Snyder (2000) add that language barriers can contribute to difficulty in finding shared social-support groups including friends, church or community groups, and most importantly each partner’s family of origin. There is also the issue of having unequal arrangements in a Latina/o-white marriage. For example, the partner

that is from the dominant culture, in this case the white partner, may carry some privileges that the Latino partner does not. This can lead to the partner with less privileges feeling that they have less control in the relationship and that they have to accept the rules of the dominant culture (Bacigalupe, 2003).

According to Kenney and Kenney (2012), interethnic couples are likely to experience challenges during various family transitions due to the influences of each partner's cultural background. Negy and Snyder (2000) explain that differences in cultural backgrounds in interethnic couples are the most likely to become evident during child rearing. In their study comparing Mexican American/white couples to monoethnic white couples, Negy and Snyder (2000) found that the interethnic couples demonstrated significantly higher distress regarding their children compared to the monoethnic white couples. This distress may pertain to supporting biethnic children who may feel conflicted about their cultural identity. They suggest that this clash in cultural values can result in differences in role division expectations in childcare and discipline, gender role attitudes, and religious differences concerning child rearing. In addition to child-rearing, and gender role expectations, Bustamente and colleagues (2011) add that time orientation is also a primary stressor. For the couples in their qualitative study, this lead to disagreements about arriving on time to events, procrastination, and taking naps during the day.

An additional stressor for an interethnic Latina/o-white couple is that of discrimination of the Latina/o partner. Falicov (2014) explains that Latina/os feel stigmatized more as a group than as an individual due to factors like their culture, language, and immigrant status. These factors are more evident for first-generation immigrants, whereas the second generation

feels they are marginalized due to race. Torres, O’Conor, Mejía, Camacho, and Long (2011) report that Latina/os face stressors from housing discrimination, discrimination in the education system, and underrepresentation in the government. In addition, Falicov (2014) emphasizes the stress of *racismo* which is the experience of racism including shunning and rejecting that Latina/os receive from other Latino groups. Torres and colleagues (2011) identifies Latina/os at risk for mental health symptoms due to these additional stressors and cautions that unsupportive reactions from friends, family, and society regarding instances of discrimination will further increase mental health symptoms.

Coping strategies. Bustamante and colleagues (2011) find that there are several coping strategies that interethnic couples use to deal with stressors relating to culture. These include gender role flexibility, humor, taking the cultural perspective of one’s spouse, recognizing similarities, developing a combined culture, and having an overall appreciation for other cultures. Bustamante and colleagues (2011) explore cultural deference by one partner as beneficial to the relationship. They define cultural deference as, “a tendency to defer to the culture-related preferences of a partner” (p. 159). Cultural deference is considered accepting the cultural perspective of a partner, for example, by listening to music or eating the food of a spouse’s culture. People that culturally deferred in the study often refer to themselves as being “multicultural or bicultural.”

Cultural deference is understood as a strength of the relationship rather than a drawback to interethnic marriages (Bustamante et al., 2011). It is a conscious decision by spouses to balance cultural differences. Cultural deference can refer to either the spouse in the majority or minority culture; however, in the literature this concept is more widely known as

acculturation and is measured in ethnic minorities. Cultural deference may be a better way of looking at couples than acculturation because it implies that both partners need to adapt rather than just the ethnic minority partner.

Summary

Despite having literature available on interethnic couples and even on Latina/o-white couples, there is still more investigation needed. Past literature on interethnic couples is inconsistent and cannot provide an answer as to whether these couples have different outcomes than monoethnic couples in regards to relationship satisfaction and other relationship variables. Research on Latina/o-white couples is limited and is primarily qualitative at this point. It is apparent that there is still more to learn about what Latina/o-white couples experience that make them unique and how it affects their relationship. The present study aims to do this using a human ecology theory lens to focus on the context in which these couples live that may provide further direction as to what variables are relevant in future investigations.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

Phenomenology. Phenomenology is one of several strategies used in qualitative research. Moustakas (1994) explains phenomenology as, "...a scientific study of the appearance of things, of phenomena just as we seem them and as they appear to us in consciousness" (p. 49). Phenomenology seeks to describe how one adapts to their lived experience by paying close attention to what appear to be the insignificant details of everyday life (van Manen, 1997). Moustakas (1994) adds that perception becomes the main source of information and the focus is on the appearance of things as they are, without biases and judgment. Various perspectives are required to understand the life-world, how a person imagines their world, and the phenomena as a whole. This strategy helps to find meaning and themes in phenomena and is designed to spark curiosity in the topic. Past research is inconclusive on the outcomes of these Latina/o-white couples; phenomenology may better explain these couples by using a fresh perspective that is focused on their lived experience.

Researcher. I identify as a fifth generation white American of European descent. Both of my parents are white Americans. I grew up in Wisconsin and completed a bachelor's degree in human development and family studies and Spanish. I am currently obtaining my master's degree in marriage and family therapy and plan to seek licensure as a marriage and family therapist. My education in Spanish is what initially sparked my interest Latin culture. During my undergraduate education I entered into a relationship with a Latino man and was friends with several Latina/o-white couples. Though this relationship did not last, I became interested as to how Latina/o-white couples were able to create their identity through

combining cultures. I continue to expand my knowledge of Latin culture in order to better work with Latina/os in a therapeutic setting.

Participants

Recruitment. Requirement criteria for the couples to be in the study include: dating for at least 1 year, one partner identifies as white, and the Latino/a partner self-identifies with Latin identity and culture. These requirements are in place so that the couple has had time to create their identity as an interethnic Latino/a-white couple and there is cultural contrast between partners. Acquaintances of the researcher and thesis chair were sent an email about the study and asked to forward it to couples that met the criteria and lived close to the Twin Cities area. In addition, snowball sampling was used; couples that participated were asked to recommend other Latino/a-white couples for the study. Participants were given several flyers about the study and asked to give them to couples they knew that met the criteria. Those that participated in the study were put in a drawing to win a \$50 Target gift card.

Description of participants. Six couples were interviewed for this study; of the six, four couples were married, one couple was engaged, and one couple was dating. Five couples lived in Minnesota and one couple lived in Wisconsin. Five couples consisted of a Latino male and white female and 1 couple was a white male and Latina female. The age range for participants was 23-55 with the average age for female participants being age 33 and age 38 for male participants. For the Latina/o participants, three were from Colombia, and one person each from Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Ecuador. All Latina/o participants report being a first generation immigrant with the exception of the Puerto Rican participant, in which it was not applicable, because Puerto Rico is considered part of the United States. All white participants

were from the United States and range from 1.5-5th generation immigrant. Two of the six couples report having children; one couple had children together and another couple, the children are the white mother's children with a Latino man from a previous marriage.

Individual descriptions include religion, level of education, and number of years spent with their partner. In regards to religion, six individuals identified as Catholic, five identified as Christian, and one identified as Lutheran. There is a range in highest level of education completed among the participants; one individual completed high school, two completed some college, seven completed bachelor's degrees, one completed a master's degree, and one completed a professional degree. In regards to number of years spent together, seven individuals report 0-5 years, three report 5-10 years, and two report 10-15 years.

Table 3.1

Demographic Information for Participants

Variable	M	Range	n	%
Age	35.4	23-55		
Race/Ethnicity				
Hispanic/Latino/a			6	50
White/Caucasian			6	50
Religion				
Catholic			6	50
Christian			5	42
Lutheran			1	8
Education				
High School			1	8
Some College			2	17
Bachelor's Degree			7	59
Master's Degree			1	8
Doctorate/Professional Degree			1	8
Time Together				
0-5 Years			7	58
5-10 Years			3	25
10-15 Years			2	17

Table 3.2

Couple Description

Couple #	Female Immigrant Generation	Female Country of Origin	Male Immigrant Generation	Male Country of Origin	Children?	Married?
1	5	USA	1	Mexico	No	Yes
2	3	USA	N/A	Puerto Rico	Yes	No
3	1.5	USA	1	Ecuador	No	No
4	3	USA	1	Colombia	No	Yes
5	5	USA	1	Colombia	No	Yes
6	1	Colombia	2,4	USA	Yes	Yes

Human Subject Approval–Institutional Review Board (IRB)

This study was approved by the St. Cloud State University Institutional Review Board on February 11, 2015. The IRB number is 1411–1722.

Instruments

Couples that were interested in the study contacted the researcher through email. An initial email was sent to confirm that the couple met the requirements and was willing to have their interview audio recorded. For those that meet the criteria, one partner of the couple was emailed the consent form, list of interview questions, and demographics questionnaire prior to the interview and asked to share it with their partner. This was to insure that couples were comfortable with the questions and willing to answer all questions during the interview. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researcher in a face-to-face meeting; all interviews took place at the home of the participants and lasted between 1 and 2 hours. The interviews were audio recorded once each individual in the couple signed the consent form and filled out the demographic questionnaire. Each couple was interviewed together. The interviews were transcribed for continued analysis of the data collected. The interview

questions are informed by those used in a qualitative study on black-white interracial couples by Rosenblatt, Karis, and Powell (1995). These questions were used as a base to start conversations with the couple, rather than to look for specific information. This writer asked follow-up questions based on the conversations led by the couples. Interview questions are as follows:

1. How did you meet each other and start dating?
2. How do you identify yourselves as a couple? What words would you use?
3. How do you think this relationship is different from dating within your own ethnicity?
 - a. What unique experiences have you had?
 - b. What has been going well?
 - c. What challenges have you had?
4. If you wanted the larger society to know something about interethnic relationships, what would it be?
5. What kind of concerns/support, if any, have been raised by your family (parents, siblings, etc.) or friends about your interethnic relationship?
6. What language do you speak with each other and when?
7. How do you partake in your partner's culture? (For example, celebrating each other's holidays or visiting their home country?)
8. When do you prefer to maintain aspects of your own culture?
9. How do you feel about your partner when they are partaking in your culture? How do you feel when they are not?

Following each interview, this writer took field notes to provide a summary of the interview, comments on how the interview went, themes that appeared relevant, and feelings and opinions I had during the interview. After conducting the interview and writing the field notes, I transcribed each interview as well as kept notes in a reflexive journal on my hypotheses for overall themes.

Research Design

The analysis of phenomenology is a four step process: epoche, transcendental-phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of composite descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). Epoche involves removing bias and judgment to look at things as if you are seeing them for the first time in which everything has equal value. In transcendental-phenomenological reduction, the researcher starts with horizons, statements that stand out as qualities of the phenomena, and groups them into themes. Themes are found in each individual participant and then all individual themes are integrated into universal themes. The third step, imaginative variation, consists of taking different perspectives of the phenomenon in order to understand the structures of it. This includes looking for the factors that cause the phenomenon to be experienced and how the universal themes came to be. The final step, synthesis of composite descriptions integrates the themes and structures of the phenomenon to understand the meaning behind it.

To provide consistency of analysis for each interview this writer used the modifications of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data suggested by Moustakas (1994). The first step is to obtain a description of your own experience of the phenomenon; for this, I used my field notes from the interview and reflexive

journal notes written while transcribing the interview. The second part is to record all relevant statements from the transcript, condense them into nonrepetitive statements, known as horizons, cluster the horizons into themes, and then synthesize themes and direct quotes from the interview into a summary format. Following the summary, I wrote a short reflection on the analysis of the interview. Following this process the themes in each interview were combined into universal themes common among a majority of the couples.

Trustworthiness of data. Unlike quantitative research, validity and reliability cannot be measured when doing a phenomenological study. However, Lincoln and Guba (1982) explain that researchers can still measure the trustworthiness of the data by testing credibility in place of internal validity, transferability in place of external validity, dependability in place of reliability, and confirmability in place of objectivity. To assure credibility, Moustakas (1994) recommends sending copies of individual syntheses of the interview to the participants and requesting that they provide corrections to the data if necessary. One partner in each couple was emailed a summary of their interview that included themes and direct quotes; they were asked to provide feedback or corrections if they would like, however none responded with feedback/corrections.

To assess dependability and confirmability, Lincoln and Guba (1982) propose using an audit trail in which an external auditor evaluates how the data was collected and analyzed to ensure reliability and absence of bias in the data. The current study used two audit trail methods: first, the researcher kept a reflexive journal in which perceptions, procedures, methodological decisions, personal introspections, and developing hypotheses were recorded; second, my thesis advisor acted as an auditor by comparing the analyzed data with the

original transcriptions of two randomly selected couples. She concluded that this writer was able to capture the “essence” of the interviews and did not skew the analysis in a particular direction.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

There were a variety of responses surrounding what was important for these interethnic Latina/o-white couples. Many of the couples had not had a conversation around the topic of being an interethnic couple prior to their interview. The following themes developed from the analysis via the process outlined in the methods section:

(1) interethnic couple identity, (2) combining languages, (3) external support of the relationship, (4) external stressors of the relationship, and (5) partaking in the partner's culture. All of the themes are reinforced through direct participants' quotes. In order to identify the quotes from participants, there is an identifying number and an M or F, which indicates male or female.

Interethnic Couple Identity

Couples explained that being an interethnic couple was not something that they paid attention to; most explained that all couples are bringing together two different backgrounds, and they are not unique in this. Those that discussed individual differences within the relationship felt that they complemented each other in that each partner had their own strengths. In addition, there were couples whose identities revolved around other life experiences including being long-distance, having a blended family, and going through the immigration process.

“I don't feel like we're inter-anything.” Couples identified that what they have gone through is similar to monoethnic couples; for them the interethnic piece does not seem to

stand out. Couples refer to choosing a partner because they want to be with them, not just because they are a certain ethnicity.

...ethnicity plays a role but at the end of the day, the essence of people is still in them... (4 M)

Most couples felt that being interethnic was a normal part of everyday life; it was not out of the ordinary for them.

...it's just become part of the fabric of our life I mean I don't think about it. I do not. This is our life and yes, I understand it's different than many people that live in the US but this is what we do and I don't give it a second thought. (6 M)

Several mentioned that whenever two people get together they are coming from two different cultures regardless of ethnicity. Within any culture there is variation, many explained that every family is different.

...I don't think it's as big of a deal like the ethnicity or race or whatever because even from like Anglo families, white people you'll find one family and another family are very different even though they are from the same country and they have their own, their own culture and their own things, way of doing things and so it's the same thing... (4 M)

Some participants felt that society emphasizes the interethnic differences for couples more than they do.

There is an unnecessary stigma to, attached to it. I mean it's like it's a relationship, you know? ...Everybody's different in their own way no matter if you are the same color, everybody is so different within themselves. (3 M)

If you fall in love with someone, you fall in love with someone, that's it. Race, sex, gender, politics, religion, it's too much attention to it and we're made to believe that there should be and we keep harping on that, like we keep putting roadblocks in front of ourselves to not allow ourselves to just be free and be happy. (3 M)

One participant mentioned that not only is the interethnic label unnecessary, but it is often incorrect as there is confusion around “Latino/Hispanic” which is considered an ethnicity and not a race.

...when I hear interracial I’m like, I close up. I’m like, no that’s not me, you know? When I hear interethnic then I go, oh yeah, that’s us. (6 F)

Interethnic couple identity. Couples found that they were attracted to each other based on having similar values and personalities. Besides their core similarities, it was their differences that complemented each other and helped them to grow in their relationship. Differences were viewed as positive and negative at times; however, they did not attribute their differences to being different ethnicities.

I think there’s a few core things that to me need to be similar or the same in order for it to work and I think it’s: family values, moral values, and religion. (6 F)

...all the other differences add to the relationship, all the other differences really open your mind to so many different things and so many different possibilities, so many different opportunities, it’s great, it’s awesome... (6 M)

I consider us almost like a power couple, we are really strong together, you know? Like there are things that I possess that she does not necessarily...and there are things that she possess that I do not and we complement each other in that way... (3 M)

Some differences included communication style and stress levels.

I’m very calm and quiet and he gets loud and that’s not something I’m used to. In my family nobody ever got loud, ever. But we have learned each other’s ways and have grown from that. (3 F)

...I’m a very patient person but sometimes a person will go straight to the situation. She’s more emotional, she’s more, more in the mood to respond so I don’t, I’m very patient with people; sometimes it can be annoying... (5 M)

Some couples discussed “playing to their strengths” (6 M). They find that they have different roles in the family which are equally important.

I would say overall we are 50-50 in the relationship, but on any particular task we're not 50-50. We're not 50-50 on bringing money into the household, we're not 50-50 on dealing with the kids um we're not 50-50 on any particular task but overall we're 50-50... (6 M)

Additional identities. Additional identities include being long-distance, having a blended family, and going through the immigration process. The first two identities could fit interethnic or monoethnic couples; however, going through the immigration process appears to be a unique experience for couples in which one or both partners is a first-generation immigrant. For one couple, a year of maintaining a long-distance relationship impacted their communication and improved their friendship.

I'm looking back, I'm like wow; long-distance, not seeing each other for a year, but it ended up I think being a really positive thing as far as communication goes because I think we are really like in tune with each other. (1 F)

Two couples were part of blended families and explained that it made the dating process and parenting more challenging; however, this was unrelated to being an interethnic couple.

...I would say our challenges are not really cultural...I don't think it makes any difference what culture we are from, our challenges are just challenges of having been married before and combining families. (2 F)

Lastly, two couples discussed the hurdles and stigma associated with the immigration process.

One couple felt that it would be beneficial to their relationship to have the husband's undocumented status changed. They described their dating process as relatively short, which impacted how friends and family members viewed the relationship.

I mean we could have waited for another 6 months [to get married], but in order to have a better life we did need to get some paperwork in order... (5 F)

Combining Languages

Each couple had their own unique way of how they combined English and Spanish in their communication. It appeared that couples had one primary language that they would use with each other, for five couples, it was English and one couple used Spanish. In addition, couples had the opportunity to learn their partner's language, they faced communication barriers, and for two couples, they had to decide what language to use with their children.

One primary language. All couples discussed that there was one primary language that they spoke with each other, which happened for a variety of reasons. Some reasons include: the white partner did not speak Spanish, they thought it was more important to improve the Latina/o partner's English, or they knew that both partners were understanding each other in that language. For one couple, even though they were both bilingual, they spoke English when they first started dating and found it difficult to change to Spanish.

...we started then that interaction in English and so I personally sometimes, even though I know she would understand it in Spanish, I have a hard time, a hard time going back to Spanish cuz it's like...the way we started was in English. (4 M)

This same bilingual couple makes a distinction between discussing important matters and daily conversation when deciding between Spanish and English.

...what we do most is English especially if it's just the two of us, like we're talking about something important and if it requires attention than we'll do English and then if it's whatever else, like grab me an apple type of deal than it can be in Spanish or English, doesn't matter. (4 M)

Learning the partner's language. Individuals that were not bilingual expressed an interest in learning their partner's language. For one couple, they enjoyed helping each other learn their native language.

...we help each other out with that too, like she'll learn Spanish from me and like when I don't know something I'll learn it from her too so language plays a role... (4 M)

For individuals that were not bilingual prior to their relationship, they found it challenging to consistently use the other language.

...I would really love to learn Spanish, it's always when we travel and have been around his family I've learned a lot really quickly but then we don't use it. I don't use it. (3 F)

...I've tried. I've taken one class, I've listened to tapes I've done all that kinda stuff and um I don't know. I mean there's lots of reasons why I could speculate why I haven't learned Spanish better than I have but I haven't and it really, when we're in the US it doesn't really affect me too much, when we go to Colombia, that's when it affects me. (6 M)

Communication barriers. In regards to communication barriers, couples expressed difficulty with verbal and nonverbal communication between them as well as with their partner's family members. For one couple, verbal communication was challenging due to language barrier.

...it's difficult to be sarcastic, it's difficult to be meaningful, it's difficult sometimes... (5 M)

In regards to nonverbal communication, use of eye contact and tone of voice were different for one couple. For example, 6 F discussed giving her husband "the eyes" which means their children are about to ask for something and he is supposed to say "no." She explains that instead he will look back at her and ask, "What? What are you saying?" In regards to tone of voice, if 6 F is speaking loudly in Spanish, her husband will interpret it as something is wrong when in fact, she is usually laughing about something or telling a story. They felt that some communication challenges were comical and similar to those on the television show, *Modern Family*.

In regards to communicating with relatives, many individuals expressed sadness that they could not communicate with them.

I never had the experience... of not being able to communicate freely and easily in English and so that's been an experience for me that I've just got kinda used to of course. (6 M)

...when we are with your family, they don't speak English, I don't speak Spanish and family is so important to me wanting to be able to communicate... You're [my partner] always having to be in the middle and google translate isn't sufficient. (3 F)

Language with the children. For couples with children, it appeared that they were very deliberate about what language they used with them and what school they attended. Some expressed that they wanted the Spanish language to carry on for generations.

...I want them [my children] to speak Spanish so actually, on purpose, I ask 2 M to, he's actually more helpful with their homework than I can be, it's nice...so it's a part of our household. (2 F)

...when we go to schools we want to say also that they speak Spanish at home, that they, that I'm Colombian, that they're bilingual, one of them trilingual, just because it's important to me or to us um that they keep that you know? [It's important] that my grandkids will speak Spanish again. (6 F)

One couple planning to have children in the future, struggled with finding baby names that would translate across Latin culture, US culture, and the European culture of the wife. They wanted their children to grow up knowing three languages but could not find a name they liked that would fit into all three.

External Support of the Relationship

Circle of friends. Many couples discussed how they have been able to surround themselves with other interethnic Latina/o-white couples. They explain that this normalizes their relationship and allows them to feel supported to share Latin culture with others. They

appreciated having other interethnic couples as friends so that they could easily combine US and Latin culture.

...our mutual friends are Colombian or Colombian-American couples um so we spend a lot more time with Colombians than with Americans unless we're with my family..." (5 F)

I think that's what overall I think is a good thing for our relationship too because I think we can go out with other couples that we have a lot in common with. I get along really well with the wives and you know, he feels really comfortable with the guys, they speak Spanish you know, they're like very like bicultural too, like Spanish and English. (1 F)

Familial support. Most couples expressed that their family is supportive of their relationship and that they feel comfortable being with their partner's family. More time is spent with the white partner's relatives because the families of the Latina/o partners live in their country of origin.

...after I meet them no concerns at all, it's like race never been an issue, never you know? Not my accent or the way I look, the way we look, you know? (2 M)

...I've talked to them on the phone and they are sending me posts all the time, it's very welcoming. I don't think, they haven't had an issue with me because I'm a white lady. (2 F)

You know, on my side, my family was super supportive, all my family loves 6 F to death ...I don't think my mom ever looked at you as being anything other than who you are, don't think she thought about it, she in fact went to Colombia with us one year which was awesome. She embraced it totally and supported you...all my siblings, they all loved 6 F to death. (6 M)

External Stressors for the Relationship

Several couples mentioned the strain that society adds to their relationship. This includes the idea that interethnic Latina/o-white marriages are "for the papers" and the discrimination that Latina/o partners feel from others. Additionally, there were instances in which discrimination was coming from the relatives of the white partner.

“For the papers.” Three of the couples talked about how others think that their relationship, or other Latina/o-white marriages are “for the papers.” They felt that society looked upon their relationship as not a real marriage and were making assumptions in doing so. 1 F and her husband were married in Mexico and moved to the United States; they both have been asked several times if their relationship was “for the papers.”

...you are basically saying that we’re not like a legitimate...or like he didn’t marry me because of me but because of the papers, that’s kind of an intense thing to assume, or to impose, right? (1 F)

...when a [Latina] woman marries a guy from the states that’s the first thing that comes to their mind, they’re looking for papers... (2 M)

...when we did start going to things where all your acquaintances were at, to see the stares and the questions behind your back, and it’s hard and now that we’ve been married for more than 5 years all these people who, in the very beginning here, were very two-faced about everything they were like, oh, she’s not going anywhere I guess I better talk to her... (5 F)

To avoid this stereotype, couples recommend getting to know a couple first before making judgements.

...from the outside you can’t see, you can’t understand what happened inside that relationship and just give it the opportunity and know that person first before you start making deductions... (2 M)

Discrimination of Latina/os. Due to discrimination, Latina/o partners have faced stress on many occasions, for example, at the workplace, at the airport, and it has affected where they choose to live. Responses from white partners regarding discrimination vary. For one individual, he sometimes feels he is treated as a “bad person” in the workplace. Others have felt discrimination at the airport. Additionally, one couple chose to live in a metropolitan area because they felt better “protected” than if they lived in the country. They suggest that going outside of a metropolitan area and travel north, a Latina/o might feel “punished” for

speaking Spanish. Many attributed discrimination to stereotyping and not getting to know an individual first.

We are not a bad persons and I can say, quick example, in my job, everybody treat me like, “Oh, he’s Mexican? He’s trouble” I don’t know why. (1 M)

Even though when we were flying together, if my blue passport was not on top of your red passport, we would get asked different questions.” (5 F)

...when somebody goes straight with the stereotypical way it was like, you are missing the good parts, you are missing the...like take a soup and only drink the top of the soup, don’t taste nothing, it’s water, until mix it, pull it out, put some sauce, taste it, give it the flavor... (5 M)

White partners reacted differently to hearing instances of discrimination. Some were able to recognize that society views their Latina/o partner differently. On the other hand, others were less aware that society views them differently.

2 M: ...you know like the way you don’t care I think is because you are from the states.

2 F: ...oh, that’s true, I have white privilege, I’m used to: I can do what I want and nobody cares.

3 M: ...everybody’s different in their own way no matter if you are the same color, everybody is so different within themselves.

3 F: And I feel like I don’t even sense a stigma though.

3 M: There is though...there is, and that’s, it’s just unnecessary.

From the family. Two couples discussed issues of discrimination from family members of the white partner. Comments were either subtle and did not affect the couple, or they were serious enough to affect the connection with those family members. For one couple that used Spanish as their main language of communication, they were often scolded by the white parents for not speaking English to each other to help the Latino partner practice his

English. Similarly, one couple recalled that the white partner's parents expressed concern that their future children would not be able to speak English. In addition to Spanish use, subtle jokes were made to regarding immigrant status and border patrol.

1 M: ...it's a police car putting by my foot, "1 M, migra!"

1 F: Oh yeah, our little cousin that has his police car for Christmas, he's like well watch out for the migra, so lots of those like off key notes, or off key jokes...

They [my uncles] are still under the impression that I have an uneducated, Mexican husband. (5 F)

Partaking in the Partner's Culture

Interview questions surrounding culture lead to discussions about cultural differences as well as how individuals react when their partner does or does not partake in their culture. Most individuals mentioned that one needs to be open-minded to explore these differences. Culture for the Latina/o partner was most often referred to as that of their country of origin; for example, "Colombian culture" rather than Latin culture. White partners varied on whether they identified their culture as that of the United State or the culture of European countries, for example, "Finnish culture."

Cultural differences. Couples talked about many cultural differences and most often referred to the differences in celebrations.

Colombian is a very bright culture. It's just kind of...I think even the colors of the, that are worn in the country but even here the personalities are bright, the language is bright, the tones are bright...compared to the Scandinavian culture in Minnesota. It's kind of plain and dark... (5 F)

Many couples highlighted that celebrations are different between Latin and US cultures.

Latina/o partners emphasized that Latin parties are louder, more active, and more touching is involved.

We don't party, we kitchen party. Everybody wants to cook something, everyone wants to serve something, everyone wants to offer something. It's, it's really a different mix of feelings at the same time, but Americans go straight to the table or they're sitting or, I mean, it's boring, they put a lot of space between them...us, we are always together in the kitchen. (5 M)

Along with the differences, couples worked together to blend their cultures. This appeared especially important to those couples with children.

Christmas is probably the thing that we can mix were you know, I grew up with baby Jesus and more of a religious thing um whereas in the United States it's Santa Claus and a hundred gifts, so we try to blend that, you know, the thought of Santa Claus, and we put stockings and then we talk about baby Jesus... (6 F)

When they partake... Most couples appeared to enjoy partaking in their spouse's culture. Individuals admired and were interested in their spouse's culture, which seemed to increase their participation. When their partner partook in their culture, individuals felt happy and proud.

...being able to go outside of your ethnicity, your culture, your country and embrace others, I mean it's a great thing, we love it! (6 M)

...we both are very much interested and intrigued by each other's backgrounds so that adds a completely different piece to the game because it's like our lives realistically should never be boring, they just shouldn't be... (3 M)

Proud but I also say happy, like it makes me happy that you're interested in my family and our culture and our different traditions, and it makes me happy that you like it, it's not like I'm forcing you to do it but it's something that you want to do and that you want to be a part of so it's fulfilling in that way. (3 F)

When they do not partake... When one partner did not partake in the other's culture there was a mix of responses. Those that expect participation but do not get it feel frustration, while some were understanding of their partner's actions.

You know, there's expectations on us to involve ourselves in these things um and when they don't come they're like, oh, they didn't come again and I'm like well, no, he's working or you know, whatever is going on. (5 F)

In contrast, some realize that their partners may get overwhelmed at partaking in her culture due to language barriers. In addition, individuals were understanding because they were appreciative that their partner did participate in the past.

...especially at first before you really get the language piece, it's like overwhelming to be at an event where you're the only person that doesn't have this history in common with people. (1 F)

...sometimes he says, you know what I stay here with the kids, you go um, and I'm fine, so I'm fine that he supports me and I'm fine that he goes with me and tries new things and different things, and sometimes he says you know what? I've seen it, I'm ok without it, you go. (6 F)

Couples generally had more examples of partaking in each other's cultures than not partaking. They had to work harder to find opportunities to partake in the Latina/o partner's culture as they were not in their home country.

Summary

In comparing these results with what one may hear from monoethnic couples, there are a few similarities and differences. In regards couple identity, couples felt that they were complemented by their differences and/or identified with being long-distance, living in a blended family, or struggling through the immigration process. These couple identities appear to fit both interethnic and monoethnic couples. In regards to language choice, each couple had to figure out how to combine English and Spanish which appears to be a unique interethnic Latina/o-white couple task. External support and stressors are likely to occur in any couple relationship; however, there may be additional stressors that the Latina/o partner faces due to being a minority, which the white partner can validate or not. This may be unique to couples in which one partner is a minority and the other is not.

The last theme, partaking in the partner's culture may be applied to any couple as both partners work to combine their cultures of origin. However, the choice to partake or not can appear as a reflection on how one feels about the partner's culture of origin, rather than simply how they feel about their partner. Thus when one spouse partakes they are demonstrating that they are accepting of their partner's culture, in addition to spending time with their partner.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

Six interethnic Latina/o-white couples participated in semi-structured interviews to find what makes their relationship unique from monoethnic couples. The five themes discovered include interethnic couple identity; combining languages; external support of the relationship; external stressors of the relationship; and partaking in the partner's culture.

Using a Human ecology lens is helpful in understanding what makes these couples different and similar to monoethnic couples. At the microsystemic level, the couple forms an identity and determines how to best communicate with each other through combining languages. Combining two languages may be unique to these couples but forming an identity as a couple can happen in any couple relationship. These couples receive external support as well as stressors coming from the mesosystem and exosystem level; this happens to couples regardless of being interethnic. Further investigation is needed in regards to how Latina/o-white interethnic couples handle language choice, discrimination, and perceptions of participating in their partner's culture.

Discussion and Conclusions

Human ecology theory. Partaking in two different cultures can be viewed as the macrosystem of each individual's culture coming together in the relationship, but it appears more beneficial to understand their culture at the macrosystemic level. The macrosystemic level is based on overall cultural context, and for each individual, they are raised in a different context (White & Klein, 2008). The context in which they were raised appears different for these couples, because they have grown up in different countries. However, thinking about a

couple's shared culture from this level makes it appear as though couples are combining two different ways of life which will bring continuous challenges. From this view, the focus remains on each partner fighting to maintain parts of their own cultural context rather than working together with the resources in their surrounding environment to create something new. Those who ascribe to the macrosystemic lens include researchers, many in quantitative research, in the social science field and the larger society (Harris & Kalbfleisch, 2000; Hohmann-Marriott & Amato, 2008; Ibrahim & Schroeder, 1990; Kenney & Kenney, 2012; Negy & Snyder, 2000; Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005)

After analyses of these couples' stories, it makes more sense to view their sharing of cultures at a microsystemic level. The microsystem in human ecology theory consists of the direct interactions an individual has with significant others; this could be an individual interacting with their partner, or an individual talking with a friend or family member (White & Klein, 2008). At this level, sharing cultures is viewed as having a culture that the couple has co-constructed, which becomes part of the everyday life of the couple. For example, an individual teaches their partner how to cook a traditional dish from their home country, now that dish becomes part of their tradition and co-constructed culture and no longer belongs to one partner. This co-constructed culture is encouraged by Kim and colleagues (2012) through use of narrative therapy; it allows partners "to move more freely" (p. 284) between the two cultures that they brought into the relationship. By looking at their cultural differences from the microsystemic level, it becomes something that occurs in any couple relationship regardless of being interethnic. Past qualitative research on interethnic couples appears to

ascribe to the microsystemic lens (Bustamante et al., 2011; Rosenblatt et al., 1995; Wieling, 2003).

Theme 1: Interethnic couple identity. The first theme that emerged from the couples' interviews was that they preferred to think of themselves as coming from different backgrounds, as all couples do, that merged together in a positive way. They felt that their differences were able to fit together nicely and were not conscious of being interethnic, as it was a part of normal everyday life. Similar results were found with interracial black-white couples who reported they were only aware of their partner's race when an outsider brought up the topic of race; many felt they were not different from any other couple (Rosenblatt et al., 1995). Additionally, Wieling (2003) found that Latina/o-white couples suggest that they are "normal" for the most part, and it is society that believes they are different. In regards to inconsistencies in past research, this theme suggests Latina/o-white couples are similar to monoethnic couples. These couples acknowledged that they are different from their partner, but they did not have a problem with it. Those that believe these differences will bring up issues for these couples will likely lean towards the notion that Latina/o-white couples are different from monoethnic couples.

Theme 2: Combining languages. The theme of combining languages is consistent with results found in bilingual English-German couples, which provide explanation for why couples often use one primary language (Teutsch-Dwyer, 2004). In her review of the book, *Bilingual Couples Talk: The Discursive Construction of Hybridity*, Teutsch-Dwyer (2004) explains that language choice for a bilingual couple is complex and not the same for all couples. However, couples will choose one language to communicate in based on "habit."

They will continue to use the same language in which they had their first interactions, which is also influenced by where they met. For the five English-speaking couples in this study, they met in the United States and had their first interactions in English. For the one Spanish-speaking couple, they met and dated in Mexico where their interactions were in Spanish. This study also found that bilingual couples were very committed to their children's bilingual education which was reflective of the two couples with children that made sure Spanish and English was a part of the household and school setting.

Themes 3 & 4: External supports and stressors of the relationship. Couples shared their stories of support from their family and friends as well as stressors from society and family members based on stereotypes about the Latina/o partner's ethnicity. Overall, couples experienced more support than concern in this study. It seems that for any couple, family members can be a source of support or stress. In regards to discrimination, interethnic Latina/o-white couples are unique in that the Latina/o partner will experience more discrimination than the white partner, based on their minority status. It appeared that some white partners were aware that their experiences were different from their Latina/o partner and some were not. Rosenblatt and colleagues (1995) found that some white partners, in interracial black-white relationships, were still learning how to notice and respond to racism and were possibly unaware that they could view racism differently from their partner. This led the white partner to not respond to instances of racism or offer support to their partner.

Though there were instances of discrimination by members of society and on occasion, family members, in several interviews, there was no evidence for hegemony theory at the couple level. Hegemony theory purports that the dominant class, white individuals,

encourage assimilation of American national ideas based on Anglo-Saxism and whiteness onto minorities, such as Latina/o individuals (Johnson & Frombgen, 2009). Hegemony theory acknowledges that society attempts to have all different populations come to a consensus of values, in the United States, these are based on white supremacy. It did not appear that any white partners were pushing dominant class values onto their Latina/o partners; this may be in part due to the interview questions, which focused more on couple identity than larger societal influences.

Theme 5: Partaking in the partner's culture. The final theme of partaking in a partner's culture in some ways resembles the concept of "cultural deference" proposed by Bustamante and colleagues (2011). Cultural deference refers to one partner accepting the cultural perspective of another, which both Latina/o and white partners were able to do in this study. Being that participants live within US culture, there is a tendency for the Latina/o partner to defer to the white partner's culture more often. Interestingly, there appeared to be a difference in how individuals perceive their partner's ability to defer to their culture. Some participants viewed partaking in their culture as something that they appreciated while others thought of it as an expectation of the relationship. For those that appreciated when their partner partook, they were understanding when they did not want to partake. For example, one Latina woman was comfortable going salsa dancing without her husband, because she appreciated the times when he did accompany her. For individuals who expected their partner to partake, they experienced frustration when they did not want to partake. For example, one white woman expected that her husband would attend a family wedding with her; however, when he declined she only felt frustration and was unable to recognize how many family

events that he did attend with her on a regular basis. With these interethnic couples, if one partner partakes, this may reflect that not only are they accepting of their partner, but also their partner's culture of origin. Thus, partaking in the partner's culture may hold more weight than partaking in the partner's culture for monoethnic couples.

Couple Dynamics

It is important to consider how ethnicity, gender, and power intersect in these couple relationships (Crenshaw, 1991); however, this writer was unable to observe these complexities as there was only one couple in which the woman was Latina. It is noteworthy that there were instances in which the person from the dominant culture had opportunities to speak up against their own family members in response to discrimination of their partner but chose to either justify or ignore these comments. It appears this was done in order for the couple to maintain a positive relationship with the family members. In these instances, white partners may have used the power they have as being part of the dominant culture to maintain family connections at the cost of supporting their partner, who has less power in these instances due to being part of the minority culture.

Limitations

Given the small sample of six couples, there are several limitations. First, it was not made clear to prospective participants that they were able to use English or Spanish during the interview. Had that been clearer, participants that were not as fluent in English may have been more represented in the current sample. Second, the majority of couples had been together for 1-5 years; discussions may have been different if couples had been together longer and more couples had children. All Latina/o participants were first generation immigrants; this lead to

more contrast in cultures but may not be as reflective of couples in which the Latina/o partner is second generation and higher. In regards to methodology, the choice of advisor as auditor was chosen due to resource constraints, yet a person with less involvement in the thesis may have proven more objective. Lastly, based on the clinical experience of this researcher thus far, these couples appear to be more resilient than what one would find in a clinical population—for example, more communication barriers due to language differences, more extreme mental health symptoms, safety concerns in the home, and lack of support systems.

Recommendations

There are several clinical implications for these couples. Primarily, it is important not to assume that interethnic Latina/o-white couples are at a disadvantage, because they are in an interethnic relationship. Being interethnic may be viewed as enriching a couple's life rather than making it more stressful. Additional implications include coping with discrimination, therapists using the correct terminology, and addressing the primary language used in session with these couples.

In regards to discrimination, it is important the white partner is able to provide validation and support for their Latina/o partner no matter if the discrimination is very evident or more subtle (Torres et al., 2011). White partners may be more or less able to do this based on where they are at in their white racial identity development (Sue & Sue, 2013). Those that have developed a non-racist identity may be more aware that their experiences are different from their Latina/o partner. In addition to understanding white racial identity, it may be beneficial to assess the stage of minority identity development that the Latina/o partner is currently in. If a Latina/o partner is in the conformity or dissonance stage, a therapist could

ask about what they like about their country of origin and what the couple enjoys doing when they travel there, if they have the opportunity to do so. In addition, the therapist must be aware of their own stage of identity development so as to not take sides with one partner based on having similar cultural values.

Additional implications for clinicians include making sure the couple is comfortable with the terminology and language being used in session. It is important to remember that this Latina/o-white couples are not interracial but interethnic as Latino/Hispanic is an ethnicity and not a race. This researcher made the mistake of writing “interracial couples” on the recruitment flyer thinking the term would be more well-known, however, this only confused couples or made them upset that the distinction was not made.

It is important to know how each partner self-identifies; especially for the Latina/o partner, they could prefer to be referred to by their country of origin, Latina/o, or Hispanic. Therapists can also identify this by paying attention to what words they use to describe themselves. In addition to terminology, a therapist should identify if there is a primary language that the couple uses. If they prefer a language that one partner is not fluent in, the therapist should be receptive if one partner enquires about using an interpreter or bilingual therapist. This way there are not any communication barriers in the session.

Future Research

As far as areas of future research, more information is needed on language choice, coping with discrimination, individual’s perceptions of participating in their partner’s culture. There are still questions as to how language choice impacts the couple relationship. Perhaps there is a relationship between being able to understand a partner’s language and relationship

satisfaction. Additionally, more research is needed on how interethnic Latina/o-white couples experience discrimination and support each other in the couple relationship. This may be influenced by ethnicity, gender and power; additional research may shed more light on how the use of power is be beneficial or detrimental in the relationship. Lastly, further investigations may focus on perceptions attributed to one partner participating in the other's culture to determine if perception is likely to increase or decrease participation in a partner's culture. Perceptions could include participating in a partner's culture based on obligation versus out of enjoyment.

Summary

Using Human ecology theory, interethnic relationships can be similar or different to monoethnic relationships based at which level their cultural differences are viewed. Couples view their co-created culture at a microsystemic level, making it a normal part of daily life and personal to them. If instead individual cultures are focused on at the macrosystemic level, it seems hard to believe that two people could be together based on different cultural ideologies and values. Past research appears to focus on the individual cultures of these couples at the macrosystemic level, which often presents as a challenging, abnormal relationship. Many of the findings of this study are reflective of previous qualitative research on interethnic couples (Bustamante et al., 2011; Rosenblatt et al., 1995; Wieling, 2003). Additions to the literature include focusing on language choice in the relationship, understanding how couples handle discrimination, and individual's perceptions associated with sharing in their partner's culture.

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Appendix A: Consent Form

The Relationship Experience of Latina/o-White Couples

Dept. of Community Psychology, Counseling & Family Therapy, St. Cloud State University
Principal Investigator: Dana Nixon, Masters Student
Advised by Dr. Jennifer Connor

What is this study about?

This study is about the strengths and challenges of Latino/a-white interethnic couples. Latino/a-white marriages are becoming the most common type of interethnic marriage, yet little is known about this population. The purpose of this study is to learn more about what works for interethnic Latino/a-white couples.

What will this interview consist of?

You will receive the interview questions prior to the interview. You will meet with Dana Nixon as a couple, and individually. Each interview will take about one hour together and another half hour individually. During the interview, Dana will ask each of you about your experiences as a Latino/a-white couple, including the strengths and challenges in your relationship and what makes your relation unique as a Latino/a-white couple. You will be asked to provide the names of other potential participants, but have the right to decline to provide this information. Dana will contact you sometime after your interview and ask that you approve the synopsis that she has written about your experience.

Who are the researchers conducting this study?

This study is being conducted by Dana Nixon, a masters student in the Department of Community Psychology, Counseling and Family Therapy at St. Cloud State University. She is doing this study as part of her requirements towards earning her masters degree in marriage and family therapy. Dana is being advised by Dr. Jennifer Connor, from the Department of Community Psychology, Counseling and Family Therapy, St. Cloud State University.

What are the risks of being in the study?

It is possible that some of the questions in the interview may make you feel uncomfortable because they are about your intimate relationship. You may decline to answer any question that you are uncomfortable with or discontinue participation at any time without consequences. If you choose to discontinue the interview, the information that your partner provided can still be used for the study.

It is also possible that your partner may speak about feelings that you are currently unaware of, or react to what you are reporting during the interview in ways that you do not expect, and

this may also cause emotional distress that may influence you individually or as a couple. A list of local therapeutic resources can be provided, if you would like assistance with any resulting distress.

Will my privacy be protected?

Participation is confidential. Identifying information gathered in this study will be separated from the content of the demographic questionnaire and interviews and kept private. Only Dana Nixon and her advisor will have access to your personal information. Any writing that results from this project will not include any identifying information, such as name and occupation. Information that may be included in future writing include a synopsis of your experience in an interethnic relationship and ethnic background.

Who can I contact for more information or questions?

This study is being carried out by researchers at the St. Cloud State University. If you wish to ask questions before deciding to participate, you can reach Dana Nixon at (262) 498-9386 or nida1301@stcloudstate.edu. If you would rather raise your questions or concerns with someone other than the researcher, please contact the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at (320) 308-4932 or osp@stcloudstate.edu.

I know that I can e-mail or telephone the researchers with any questions now, during, or after the completion of the study. I consent to participation in the study.

____ Yes

____ No

Signature

Date

Printed Name

Signature

Date

Printed Name

Signature of Investigator

Date

At the completion of the interview, a synopsis of what you have told us may be sent to you, with your consent. The purpose of this synopsis is to check to see if we understood your story and feelings correctly. You may choose not to participate in this portion of the study. Please indicate if you would like to receive this synopsis, and how you would like to be contacted.

I consent to be contacted after the interview

Yes

No

Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire

In the following questionnaire, we are interested in understanding a little bit about your family and spouse.

- 1) What is your biological sex?
 - a. Female
 - b. Male
 - c. Other

- 2) What is your current age (in years?):

- 3) How would you best describe your ethnicity?
 - a. Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
 - b. White, European origin
 - c. Other: _____

- 4) How would you best describe your religious background? : _____

- 5) What is the highest level of education you have completed?
 - a. No formal schooling
 - b. Elementary school
 - c. Some high school
 - d. High school diploma or GED
 - e. Some college
 - f. Associate's degree
 - g. Bachelor's degree
 - h. Master's degree
 - i. Doctorate or Professional degree (e.g., MD, JD, DDS, DVM, PhD)

- 6) What is your current state of residence? _____

- 7) What is your current relationship status?
 - a. Single
 - b. Married/Partnered
 - c. Divorced/Separated
 - d. Widowed

- 8) What is the biological sex of your current partner?
 - a. Female
 - b. Male
 - c. Other

- 9) How long have you been with your current partner?
- a. 0-5 years
 - b. 5-10 years
 - c. 10-15 years
 - d. 15-20 years
 - e. More than 20 years
- 10) What is your total annual gross household income from all wage earners that reside in your household?
- a. Less than \$10,000
 - b. \$10,000-19,999
 - c. \$20,000-29,999
 - d. \$30,000-39,999
 - e. \$40,000-49,999
 - f. \$50,000-59,999
 - g. \$60,000-69,999
 - h. \$70,000-79,999
 - i. \$80,000-89,999
 - j. \$90,000-99,999
 - k. \$100,000-150,000
 - l. \$150,000-199,999
 - m. \$200,000 or more
- 11) How many children do you have?
- a. 0 children
 - b. 1 child
 - c. 2 children
 - d. 3 children
 - e. 4 children
 - f. 5 children
 - g. 6 children
 - h. 7 children
 - i. 8 children
 - j. More than 8 children
- 12) Were you born in the United States?
- a. Yes
 - b. No

13) What generation immigrant are you?

- a. 1st generation
- b. 2nd generation
- c. 3rd generation
- d. 4th generation
- e. 5th generation

14) What is your country of origin: _____

Appendix C: Recruitment Email

Dear Mr. /Mrs. (Last Name),

My name is Dana Nixon, and I am an (acquaintance of ...). I am a masters student at St. Cloud State University, receiving my degree in marriage and family therapy. I am conducting a study on Latino/a-white couples to look at what makes this relationship unique and what strengths and challenges they face. To collect this information, I am doing interviews with Latino/a-white couples. The interview process is 1-2 hours in which the couple will be interviewed and audio recorded together and separately in a confidential location, such as the participants' home. If you are interested in being a part of this study and would like further information, please contact me at nida1301@stcloudstate.edu or by phone at 262-498-9386.

Best,

Dana

Appendix D: Recruitment Flyer



Are you in an *Interracial* Relationship?



You could win a
\$50 Target gift card!

**Take a short
survey
about your
relationship:**

- 1.** email nida1301@stcloudstate.edu for your survey access code & link*
- 2.** you and your spouse complete the survey (separately, but with identical access code)
- 3.** automatically be entered to win gift card (winners will be notified via email)

Requirements:

- 1.** partners must be **married**
- 2.** partners must be an interracial **Latino/a & Caucasian** couple
- 3.** both partners must complete survey to be eligible for drawing



ST. CLOUD STATE
UNIVERSITY.

*official survey of the St. Cloud State University Dept. of Community Psychology, Counseling and Family Therapy. All responses are anonymous.

Appendix E: IRB Approval



OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND
SPONSORED PROGRAMS
ST. CLOUD STATE UNIVERSITY

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Administrative Services 210

Website: stcloudstate.edu/osp Email: osp@stcloudstate.edu

Phone: 320-308-4932

Name: Dana Nixon

Address: 2130 County Road E West #105

New Brighton, MN 55112

USA

Email: nida1301@stcloudstate.edu

IRB Application Determination

Exempt

Co-Investigators

2/11/2015

Advisor: Jennifer Connor

Project Title: The Relationship Experience of Latina/o-White Couples

Comments:

The Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application to conduct research involving human subjects. We are pleased to inform you that your project has been APPROVED in full accordance with federal regulations. Please note the following important information concerning IRB projects:

- The principal investigator assumes the responsibilities for the protection of human subjects in this project. Any adverse events must be reported to the IRB as soon as possible (ex. research related injuries, harmful outcomes, significant withdrawal of subject population, etc.).
- For expedited or full board review, the principal investigator must submit a Continuing Review/Final Report form in advance of the expiration date indicated on this letter to report conclusion of the research or request an extension.
- Exempt reviews only require the submission of a Continuing Review/Final Report form in advance of the expiration date indicated in this letter if an extension of time is needed.
- Approved consent forms display the official IRB stamp which documents approval and expiration dates. If a renewal is requested and approved, new consent forms will be officially stamped and reflect the new approval and expiration dates.
- The principal investigator must seek approval for any changes to the study (ex. research design, consent process, survey/interview instruments, funding source, etc.). The IRB reserves the right to review the research at any time.

Good luck on your research. If you require further assistance, please contact the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 320-308-4932 or email lidonnay@stcloudstate.edu. All correspondence should include your SCSU IRB number as indicated on this letter.

For the Institutional Review Board:

For St. Cloud State University:


Linda Donnay

IRB Administrator

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs


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