Dirty linen should be washed at home: Ethnic communities perceptions of family violence and child sexual abuse - Phase 2, Latin American communities

by T. Kaufman and A. Seitz

Carlton: Victorian Health Promotion Foundation 1994

In recent years, a sizeable number of immigrants to Australia has come from Latin America. Of these, a large proportion have left families in their homeland, in flight from intolerable conditions and repressive regimes. Life in Australia is a culture shock. The immigrants have left hierarchical, Catholic countries where strict family values govern personal relationships. They come to an alien land, characterised by egalitarian philosophy, loose family relationships and individualistic life styles. Their children grow up quickly, learn English faster than they and assimilate much more easily. Battered and traumatised by their homeland experience, they bewilderedly grapple with the new order. Their children become rebellious, promiscuous, and dismissive of their home cultures. And they cannot turn to their extended family for support as they used to for it does not exist here.

Vic. Health, in the second of its reports into the way in which ethnic communities perceive and cope with family violence and sexual abuse, has surveyed four Latin American communities in Melbourne. They are those of Colombia, Guatemala, Chile and El Salvador - all Spanish-speaking, two from South America, two from Central America. The authors' methodology was to interview, in Spanish, 80 immigrants. The majority of the sample were Chilean and Salvadorean. It is notable that Chile and El Salvador are countries with particularly turbulent histories. Indeed, this report asserts that in El Salvador violence has been institutionalised since the Spanish Inquisition, while modern Chile has seen great violence, especially in the years following the overthrow of the Allende regime.

It is a myth to regard Latin America as a homogeneous entity. Values differ markedly from country to country. But what is common to each is a strong belief in the patriarchal family. Yet it is encouraging to note that these values are not so entrenched that they cannot be modified. It is interesting in this report to observe the manner in which some of even the male interviewees had changed their machismo perceptions. The majority of adults, and all the young people interviewed, regarded it as abhorrent for the husband to use physical force on his wife.

Yet even where such a view prevails, it is far less likely that a female victim of domestic violence will seek outside support. The view remains that these matters should be settled by 'the family'. And who can blame them for their disenchantment with the Australian legal system? It is shown that 91% of such victims are without effective court protection in Victoria, despite the *Crimes (Family Violence) Act*, 1987 (p11).

The Report highlights an interesting dilemma. While it unreservedly recommends greater community services for Latin-Americans, it is not unequivocal on whether these should be separate Hispanic entities, or whether they should be provided by mainstream Australian organisations. Cultural preservation or assimilation? The authors come down in favour of the latter for, in their experience, specialist ethnic organisations lack political clout and tend to become marginalised by the narrow constituency.

Latin American attitudes to sexual licence are very different from those of Anglophones. But it is intriguing to note the conflict between the traditionalists and the, generally younger, progressives. Certainly, with some interviewees, there is an almost aggressive advocacy of extramarital sex, and indeed of less patriarchal family values - on the ground that it was precisely these values that prevailed in the countries they have abandoned!

This is a most valuable tract. It is sensitive, balanced and non-polemical. Thoughtfully presented, well tabulated and interestingly written, this Report considerably aids a balanced understanding of the difficulties of adjustment to a new culture. For policymakers, it provides factual data and tabulated polls, which dispel cultural misconceptions and provide clear insights into an issue often obfuscated by bias, prejudice and ignorance.

Reviewed by J. Neville Turner
Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Law, Monash University

Child protection - Messages from research

by R. Bullock, M. Little, S. Millham & K. Mount

UK: HMSO 1995 ISBN 0 11 3217811

This report, prepared by the Dartington Social Research Unit, looks at key messages from 20 recently completed research studies and the implications of the findings for the development of child protection services.

These studies attempt to:

1. Define child abuse in the context of normal childhood experience and to estimate the incidence of different types of maltreatment.
2. Identify who gets caught in the child protection process and how the child's safety is achieved.
3. Focuses on what conclusions can be drawn in relation to good practice.

Studying what normally happens within families provides information about what society may reasonably consider to be abnormal. Many children experience events which in some circumstances are considered abusive; many parents hit their children when they cannot cope. Support is as important as protective intervention for these families. Thresholds are used to