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Gustavo Carlo

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, carlog@missouri.edu

Silvia Koller

Instituto de Psicologia, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil

Marcela Raffaelli

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, mraffaelli1@unl.edu

Maria Rosario de Guzman

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, mguzman2@unl.edu

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Culture-Related Strengths Among Latin American Families: A Case Study of Brazil

Gustavo Carlo
Silvia Koller
Marcela Raffaelli
Maria R. T. de Guzman

SUMMARY. We provide an analysis of culturally-specific strength characteristics associated with families in Brazil. The focus is on familism and familial interdependence, the role of the extended family, cooperative and prosocial tendencies, a collective orientation, and the closing

Gustavo Carlo is Professor of Psychology, 320 Burnett Hall, Department of Psychology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE 68588 (E-mail: gcarlo1@unl.edu). Silvia Koller is Professor of Psychology, Caixa Postal 9001, 90040-970, Instituto de Psicologia, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil (E-mail: silvia.koller@pesquisador.cnpq.br). Marcela Raffaelli is Professor of Psychology and Ethnic Studies, 321 Burnett Hall, Department of Psychology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE 68588 (E-mail: mraffaelli1@unl.edu). Maria R. T. de Guzman is Adolescent Development Extension Specialist and Assistant Professor of Family and Consumer Sciences, 256 Mabel Lee Hall, Department of Psychology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE 68588 (E-mail: mguzman2@unl.edu).

Address correspondence to: Gustavo Carlo.

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gender gap. The article is divided into four sections. First, we provide some background information on the demographics and history of Brazil. Second, the family strength characteristics are discussed. Third, case studies are briefly presented to illustrate the protective role of the characteristics. And fourth, we discuss the implications of the strengths-based approach to studying families for theories, research, and program development. doi:10.1300/J002v41n03_06 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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INTRODUCTION

The family unit serves multiple purposes in societies and families are defined in varied ways across cultures (LeVine, 1988). However, the central role of the family in the health and well-being of children has long been acknowledged by scholars. Today, as in the past, families help to shape and define the unique characteristics of cultures worldwide. Culturally-shared beliefs and practices continue to evolve to provide children and families optimal and adaptive chances for success.

The present chapter provides an analysis of culturally-specific characteristics associated with families in Brazil. Though the focus is on Brazil, many of the cultural features are also evident in families from other Latin American societies (and some non-Latin American societies as well). Although there are other unique characteristics of Brazilian families and society, we chose to focus our analysis on familism and familial interdependence, the role of the extended family, cooperative and prosocial tendencies, a collective orientation and the closing gender gap. We view these characteristics as strengths—characteristics that are adaptive and serve to enhance optimal success for individuals in those societies. These characteristics can also be conceived as resilience or buffer factors (i.e., factors that protect individuals from high-risk environments or adverse conditions).

The article is divided into four sections. First, we provide some background information on the demographics of Brazil. Second, the family

strength characteristics are introduced and discussed. Third, case studies of real families are briefly presented to illustrate the protective role of the culture-specific characteristics. And fourth, we conclude by discussing the importance for theories, research, and program development of the strengths-based approach to studying families.

BACKGROUND AND SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

The Context of Families in Brazil

Brazil is an immense country that covers 3,285,618 square miles and spans four time zones (CIA, 2005). It has the world's fifth largest population (over 172 million) and eighth largest economy (in terms of GNP). Brazil's present-day characteristics reflect events that occurred over 500 years, since the arrival of the Portuguese in 1500. Reflecting generations of intermarriage between European settlers, indigenous tribes, and enslaved Africans, as well as large-scale migration from Europe in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the population is racially diverse. In the 2000 Census, 54% of the population self-identified as White, 38.5% as mixed, 6% as Black, and 1.5% as other (Japanese, Arab, indigenous).

Brazil shares borders with every South American country except Chile and Ecuador, and is divided into five regions that are geographically, culturally, and economically distinct (PAHO, 2001). The seven states of the Northern region are the most sparsely populated (3.3 inhabitants per square kilometer), encompassing the Amazon basin, and occupy 45% of Brazil's national territory. The Northeast region consists of 9 states (18% of the nation's territory and 28% of the population), and is characterized by high levels of poverty. In the center of the country, three sparsely populated states and the federal district (established in 1960) make up the Central-East district. The four states of the industrialized Southeastern region, which includes Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, are characterized by the nation's highest population density (77.9 inhabitants per square kilometer). Finally, the Southern region encompasses just three states and is characterized by a temperate climate (contrasting with the rest of the nation, which is tropical) and a relatively high standard of living. The five regions have experienced different histories, settlement patterns, and economic development that profoundly affect the experiences of families.

In part because of regional disparities, Brazil is a country of contradictions. Its major cities possess modern infrastructures, including state-of-the-art transportation systems, advanced medical and educational systems, and technology- and service-oriented industries. On many social indicators, Brazil's citizens are comparatively well off. For example, life expectancy is 68 years, adult literacy for both men and women is 85%, fertility rates are 2.2 (lower than the regional average of 2.6) and 95% of children attend primary school (UNICEF, 2004). The country has a well-established public health system; as a result, vaccination rates are high (over 95%), 86% of pregnant women have prenatal care, and 88% of births are assisted by a skilled birth attendant (UNICEF, 2004). Women are not disadvantaged compared to men in terms of life expectancy or secondary school enrollment, and the maternal mortality ratio (annual number of maternal deaths per 100,000 live births) of 160 is lower than the regional rate (190), although still far higher than is seen in industrialized nations (12) (UNICEF, 2004).

Despite these relative advantages, many Brazilian families experience serious challenges. Some are in situations of pervasive poverty that result from high levels of income inequality and lack of government-sponsored welfare programs. In 2000, the poorest 40% of the Brazilian population received just 8% of the nation's total income, whereas the richest 20% received 64% of the nation's wealth (UNICEF, 2004). Another challenge stems from Brazil's extremely high external debt, which has resulted in a succession of economic measures to curtail spending. Brazil's debt service (expressed as a percent of exports of goods and services) was 78% in 2000, which was considerably higher than the regional average (34%), is the highest in the world. As a result of family poverty, many young people do not complete their education. Only two-thirds of primary school entrants reach grade five (UNICEF, 2004), just over a third (35%) graduate from secondary school, and fewer than 10% of the working age population has any postsecondary education (World Bank, 2003).

Other challenges to Brazilian families of all socioeconomic levels are high urbanization rates, linked to rapid and often uncontrolled growth of mega cities in the past few decades (Gilbert, 1996). Rural migrants are attracted to large cities by the possibility of jobs but often find themselves working in the informal economy as street vendors or day laborers while living in the areas surrounding the slums that are controlled by drug gangs and characterized by high levels of violence (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002). In 2001, 81% of Brazil's population lived in urban areas, compared to the regional av-

erage of 76% (UNICEF, 2004). Poverty and lack of economic opportunities have been linked to high levels of urban violence in Brazil (Balán, 1996). In reaction to heightened levels of violence in Brazilian cities, the rich are increasingly segregating themselves in gated communities, venturing forth only in armored cars. Rich families are increasingly using secure spaces for leisure, such as malls, recreation settings, or clubs that are protected by armed guards. In contrast, the children of the poor typically play in the streets. The division of the country into rich and poor, and increasing separation of families at different socioeconomic levels during work and leisure represent major threats to the health of the nation.

The current situation of Brazilian families must be understood in light of the country's recent past. In 1964, a military dictatorship was established that shaped the country's political, social, and economic systems for over two decades. Brazil's political system under military rule was characterized by repressive measures intended to preserve order and discourage expressions of discontent (Diversi, Moraes & Morelli, 1999). The rigid controls resulted in policies that undermined the quality of life for most Brazilian families during that historical period. Although many policies have been modified or eliminated, their legacy continues to impact the quality of life for families even today.

There are at least two reasons for the continued impact of past policies. One major factor is that the economic situation in Brazil continues to fluctuate since the restoration of civilian rule, and although the economy is improving, investments in social programs have not been substantial enough to bring about significant improvement in families. A second related factor is the lack of an organized welfare system to deliver services. For many years, the Brazilian government never developed a social welfare system to help families and individuals who could not take care of themselves. Instead, non-governmental organizations and religious agencies formed the basis for the social welfare system (Diversi, *et al.*, 1999). Improvements in government policies are slow to change the situation. For example, in some locations families can apply for scholarships so children are able to attend school rather than work to help feed their families. However, despite the development of such programs, in many parts of the country families are little better off than they were under military rule.

One tragic consequence of the poverty conditions, inadequate government policies, and ineffective social welfare programs in Brazil (as well as in some other Latin American countries) is the large number of street children. Nearly half of the world's street youth are found in Latin American

countries (Raffaelli, Koller, Reppold, Kuschick, & Bandeira, 2000). In many families, poverty creates strong pressures for children to live on their own or to work on the streets under high-risk conditions. Although economic and demographic factors are often cited as causes of street and homeless children, family circumstances are also relevant. For example, family disruptions such as parental death or absence, job loss, rural-to-urban migration, and family violence have been associated with street children and homelessness (see Raffaelli, 1997).

In summary, Brazil is a complex society. There is abundant wealth, industrialization, and modernization, as well as advanced educational and medical systems (especially in major cities). However, there is also much poverty throughout the country and there are large rural, less structurally developed regions in the country. The challenges of families in Brazil are many and multifaceted; however, there are a number of culturally-related resources that protect and buffer many children and adolescents from maladjustment and factors that threaten family well-being.

CULTURE-RELATED STRENGTH CHARACTERISTICS

Despite the multicultural heritage and the diverse demographic of families in Brazil, there are pervasive strength themes that are common to many Brazilian families. These themes are common throughout many other Latin American countries as well. Most importantly, these themes serve to protect and buffer many Brazilian children and adolescents from the possible adverse conditions of their communities. The present chapter will focus on five of the commonly identified themes: familism and familial interdependence, the role of the extended family, cooperation and prosocial behaviors, a collectivist group orientation, and the closing gender gap.

It is important to note that although there are unique characteristics associated with specific Latino and Latin American populations, most of the existing research that focuses on Latinos (in the United States) has been conducted with Mexicans and Mexican Americans (Raffaelli, Carlo, Carranza, & Gonzalez-Kruger, 2005). Furthermore, in many studies, Latinos from different countries of origin are grouped and not differentiated. Finally, for the present article, we use the term Latino in the broadest sense—individuals from Latin American countries. This is distinct from other terms such as Hispanics, which are often used to depict individuals from Spanish-speaking countries. As will be noted,

there is sparse research that directly examines the central role of the family in the well-being and adjustment of Brazilians. In light of these limitations, the bulk of the research reviewed here should be interpreted with much caution.

Familism and Familial Interdependence

Family plays a central role in shaping Latinos' experiences (Azevedo, 1994; Carlo, Carranza, & Zamboanga, 2002; Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999; Knight, Bernal, & Carlo, 1995; Korin, 1996). One of the hallmark characteristics of many Latino families is the strong value of family unity and connection. This value is reflected in familism the strong identification with, and attachment and loyalty to, one's family, which has also been well-documented among Latinos in other studies (e.g., Sabogal, Marin, Otero-Sabogal, Marin, & Perez-Stable, 1987; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995). A somewhat distinct but related notion is familial interdependence, or the notion of developing and maintaining close physical and psychological family ties (see Knight et al., 1995; McDade, 1995; Zayas & Solari, 1994).

Relative to other societies (such as the United States), Brazilian and Latino parents strongly guide and encourage their children to stay physically and psychologically close to family through frequent social interactions and close physical proximity. Research indicates that Brazilian youth do not show individuation from parents or increased conflict during adolescence, and report a continued high rate of social support from both parents and peers (Van Horn & Marques, 2000). In many Latino families, older and extended family members maintain active roles in family activities. There is an emphasis on the importance of contributing to the family by assigning responsibility for household chores and tending to young children (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; Zayas & Solari, 1994). Young family members might be raised not only by parents but by siblings, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. Respect toward adult family members is strongly reinforced and there are usually clear rules and consequences (e.g., social disapproval, shame) when respect is violated. Moreover, even when children enter adulthood, parents (and grandparents) are sought as sources for financial, instrumental and emotional support. These socializing actions and behaviors serve to strengthen an orientation towards familial interdependence, which serves as the basic foundation of a social support network.

There is a strong theoretical basis to expect that familial interdependence should bolster the well-being of family members (especially

children). Attachment theorists suggest that the development of a close, nurturing parent-child relationship fosters a positive internal working model (see Thompson, 1998). Internal working models reflect the sense of security about one's self and their social world. Securely attached, as opposed to insecurely attached children, are likely to develop positive developmental outcomes as a result of their ability to explore and interact successfully with their social environment. Furthermore, maintaining close and supportive family relationships undoubtedly impacts parent-child relationships beyond childhood and adolescence. Moreover, researchers on parenting styles and practices suggest that close and supportive parenting styles are associated with social competence and well-being (Baumrind, 1991; see Eisenberg & Murphy, 1995, and Maccoby & Martin, 1983).

Somewhat surprisingly, despite the preponderance of scholarly discussion of the importance of familial interdependence and familism among Latino families, direct research is relatively sparse. There is some research that shows that Latinas (relative to Latinos) remain closely monitored by their parents and maintain close relationships with their parents (see Carlo Fabes, Laible, & Kupanoff, K. (1999). Suárez-Orozco and colleagues (Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, & Louie, 2002) also reported that Latinos strongly endorse the notions of familism and familial interdependence. Recently, de Guzman and Carlo (2004) showed that family adaptability was associated positively with prosocial behaviors in a sample of Latino adolescents. Laible, Carlo, and Roesch (2004) found that close, supportive relationships with parents were associated with self-esteem in a sample of mostly Latino college students. The finding suggests that, among Latinos, families who are flexible in their roles and in responding to the youth's specific circumstances may be more adept at fostering prosocial behaviors. Perhaps more importantly, there is research that suggests the important role of strong familial interdependence in fostering well-being in Latino families. Furthermore, studies suggest that parents may still be influential even in adolescence (Carlo et al., 1999; Laible et al., 2004) and this might be particularly true among some Latinos.

There is other research that shows that positive family relationships can help protect Latino adolescents from becoming involved in problem behaviors. A number of studies have shown that higher family support, strong family connectedness, and higher parental monitoring is associated with lower alcohol and substance use and less gang involvement among Latinos (Frauenglass, Routh, & Pantin, 1997; Kerr, Beck, Shattuck, Kattar, & Uriburu, 2003). A study with Latino

adolescents revealed a significant relation between familism and lower levels of lifetime marijuana use (Ramirez, Crano, Quist, Burgoon, Alvaro, & Grandpre, 2004). Although we might expect similar findings in Brazilian samples, as is evident from the review, research directly relevant to Brazilian families is sorely lacking (see also Carlo & Koller, 1998).

The Role of the Extended Family

Closely tied to the notions of familism and familial interdependence, is the prominent role of extended family members. For Brazilians (and many other Latinos and Latin Americans), the notions of familism and familial interdependence extend to family members other than the nuclear family (Fonseca, 1991). Furthermore, extended family members have major roles and responsibilities in various aspects of domestic life. The encouragement of maintaining and valuing close family ties is often manifested in life decisions regarding careers, family planning, education, and childcare. Usually, strong familism tendencies result in more consideration to maintain close proximity in choosing schools and careers. It can also impact decisions to have children (and the timing of children) and there might be a strong pull to ask extended family members to assist in childcare.

Scholars have long acknowledged the central role of social support in buffering and protecting individuals from adverse, high risk conditions (Barrera & Li, 1996; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Sarason, Sarason, & Gurung, 1997). One important source of social support for Latinos is parents and family (Raffaelli et al., 2005). As noted earlier, attachment theorists note the powerful affective, cognitive, and behavioral systems responsible for the development of secure caregiver-child attachment relationship. Although the systems function mostly between caregivers and their children, there is reason to believe that similar mechanisms foster secure relationships among siblings and extended family members. Clearly, frequent contact with extended and nuclear family members provides ample opportunities for multiple attachment relationships to develop.

There is research that shows that Latinos report stronger obligations and more support from their family than European Americans (Freeberg & Stein, 1996; Fuligni et al., 1999). Evidence on the impact of attachment and supportive relationships on well-being and health among family members in Brazilian families is scant. However, research on North American samples of Latinos suggests links between secure attachment

and children's empathy and social competence (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998; Thompson, 1998).

Cooperative and Prosocial Tendencies

The development and maintenance of close positive family relationships is facilitated by frequent cooperative and prosocial behaviors among members. Prosocial behaviors are defined as actions designed to benefit others (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998). Prosocial behaviors are varied but include behaviors such as altruism (i.e., behaviors whose primary intention is to benefit others while often incurring a cost to the self), compliant (i.e., asked for helping behaviors), dire (i.e., helping under emergency situations), and cooperative (i.e., behaviors that mutually benefit individuals). For example, sharing, nurturance, and comforting behaviors are two types of behaviors that foster close family relationships. Frequently, prosocial behaviors trigger reciprocal prosocial behaviors and promote trust and positive affect, basic characteristics of close, intimate relationships.

What is of particular interest, however, is that despite the almost universal propensity and strong biological basis for prosocial tendencies (Braten, 1996; de Guzman, Edwards, & Carlo, 2005; Zahn-Waxler, Friedman, & Cummings, 1983; Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, & King, 1979; see Carlo, 2005; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998), wide individual and group differences in prosocial behaviors are also evident. The evidence for variation in frequency and types of prosocial behaviors across cultures is also evident. For example, in one of the early cross-cultural studies of socialization practices, Barry, Child, and Bacon (1959) showed that agricultural-based economy societies valued nurturance and cooperation (compliance) more so than hunting-fishing based economy societies. Other early studies (Munroe & Munroe 1977; Shapira & Madsen, 1969, 1974; also see Whiting & Edwards, 1988) and more recent observational and self-report investigations corroborate those findings, both cross-nationally and cross-ethnically (Suzuki & Greenfield, 2002; Knight & Kagan, 1982; Rotheram-Borus & Phinney, 1990). What accounts for these cultural variations?

Although there are undoubtedly complex interactions between biology and environment that help to account for variations among families, cultural psychologists have noted socialization practice differences by people from different societies that shape children's development (Edwards, Knoche, Aukrust, Kumru, & Kim, 2006; Whiting & Whiting, 1975). For example, in some societies, young children are assigned

household duties and responsibilities that foster social responsibility and prosocial behaviors. In other societies, prosocial behaviors are encouraged through formal curriculum requirements in early education programs. Even across early education programs, there are differences in the aspects of morality that are emphasized: some might focus on empathy and respect and others might focus on reasoning and problem solving (Whiting & Edwards, 1988). The impact of these and other wide-ranging socialization practices and experiences on prosocial development in different societies, however, is little understood.

In their classic study of six cultures, the Whiting and their colleagues found cultural variations in levels of exhibited prosocial behaviors (Whiting & Whiting, 1975; see also Whiting & Edwards, 1988). For example, cultures that exhibited higher levels of prosocial behaviors tended to have larger families, placed greater importance on the nurturing role of women, had less specialized careers, and less centralized governments. In addition, gender differences in prosocial behaviors were more pronounced in those cultures. The gender differences favoring women were attributed to greater responsibility for the welfare of the family (e.g., younger siblings) and to the assignment of responsible, household chores early in life. Although direct research on Brazilian families is sparse, Brazilian families are characterized by relative large families (although this has declined in recent years; Marteleto, 2005) and by the central role of women in the welfare and responsibility of the family.

Several studies of prosocial and care-based moral reasoning and motives also suggest an emphasis on cooperation and prosocial tendencies among Brazilian families and youth (see Carlo & Koller, 1998). For example, recent investigators of cooperative behaviors found greater emphasis on cooperative behaviors and less emphasis on competitive behaviors among children from Brazil than among children from the US (Carlo, Roesch, Knight, & Koller, 2001). Furthermore, researchers have found that Brazilian children and adolescents frequently report needs-oriented and empathic and internalized modes of prosocial moral reasoning (Carlo, Koller, & Eisenberg, 1996; Eisenberg, Guthrie *et al.*, 2002). Perhaps more importantly, these same researchers showed that prosocial moral reasoning was positively associated with prosocial behaviors. In a study of late adolescents, Brazilians frequently rejected hedonistic forms of prosocial moral reasoning (i.e., self-oriented concerns) in resolving moral dilemmas (Carlo, Roesch, & Koller, 1999). Finally, among institutionalized Brazilians, low SES Brazilian adolescents reported higher level prosocial moral reasoning than delinquent or orphaned Brazilian adolescents (Carlo, Koller, &

Eisenberg, 1998). Taken together, these studies suggest that cooperative and prosocial behaviors are highly valued by many Brazilian children and adolescents.

Collectivist Orientation

One aspect of many Latino societies including Brazil is the strong collectivist orientation. Collectivism refers to an emphasis and focus on consequences to the broader social group, including family and community (Triandis, 1994). Many scholars have noted that collectivist-oriented societies value cooperative behaviors more than individualistic-oriented societies (Hofstede, 2001; Knight, Bernal, & Carlo, 1995; Triandis, 1994). The emphasis on cooperation and maintenance of close family relationships in agricultural based societies is thought to be adaptive for the enhancement of the community. Based on the work of several scholars (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1994; Schwartz, 1992), many individuals from Latin American countries, including Brazil (Gouveia, Albuquerque, Clemente, & Espinosa, 2002) are considered oriented toward collective goals and concerns. Collectivist tendencies would be expected to foster and nurture close, strong relationships with others, which provide an important source of social support.

Consistent with this notion, there is evidence that Brazilians are oriented, and concerned with, collective goals and issues (Bontempo, Lobel & Triandis, 1990). Moreover, there is an abundance of empirical evidence that shows relatively high levels of cooperative behaviors among individuals from Latin American countries as compared to individuals from individualistic-oriented countries (Carlo et al., 2001; see Knight et al., 1995, for a review). For example, Carlo and colleagues (2001) found that children from Brazil exhibited higher levels of cooperative behaviors than children from the United States. Furthermore, among college students, Brazilians frequently reported empathic and internalized modes of prosocial moral reasoning (though relatively less than European Americans; Carlo et al., 1999). Thus, the existing research suggests that many Brazilians endorse a collectivist orientation and are cooperative with others; however, research on the direct impact of cooperative tendencies and a collectivist value orientation in Brazilian families is lacking.

The Closing Gender Gap

Similar to many countries around the world, there is a long tradition in many Latino countries for gender-based inequities based on strong

gender-based stereotypes. The tradition stems in part from practical economic considerations and strong religious beliefs that advance somewhat narrow conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Masculinity and femininity are associated with notions of instrumentality, agency, expressiveness, and communion (Huston, 1983). At the extreme end of masculinity is the notion of *machismo*—commonly referred to as a strong societal expectation that men dominate social relationships (DeSouza, Baldwin, Koller, & Narvaez, 2004). Closely related to *machismo* is the notion of *marianismo*, that women should be submissive, a good mother and wife, and self-sacrificing to men. These notions are transmitted across generations and are powerfully maintained, at the macro-societal level, by social, economic, and educational forces. They are also promoted by more proximal socialization agents such as parents, siblings, peers, and the media (e.g., television, radio, magazines, books, the Internet). In a recent study of gender equality in 58 countries around the world, using five indicators (political empowerment, educational access, health and well-being, economic participation, economic opportunity), Brazil ranked 51st (Lopez-Carlos & Zahidi, 2005)—ranking lower than other Latin American countries such as Venezuela, Chile, and Argentina.

Like many other Latin American countries, gender-typed notions have been characterized as strong and rigid in Brazil (e.g., the notion of a *machismo*-oriented society). Although some scholars have pointed out that there might be some positive consequences of *machismo* (e.g., honor, responsibility, protection of the family), strong, stereotyped, gender-based conceptions can seriously limit and restrict the role of women and men (DeSouza, Baldwin, Koller, & Narvaez, 2004.) For example, the traditional feminine-typed expectation that women are nurturant, expressive and communal might restrict career aspirations and opportunities for women. Similarly, masculine-typed notions of lack of expressiveness might limit opportunities for care-related career opportunities and hamper the development of healthy intimate relationships for men. These restrictions might have consequences for long-term health and well being.

However, Brazilian families are quite varied and corresponding gender roles are equally complex. Traditional patriarchal families are still common but there are increasing numbers of single-parent families and there are scores of co-equal couple families (Azevedo, 1994). These different family systems are linked directly to economic and socio-demographic factors (e.g., urbanization, industrialization) (Bock, Iutaka, & Berardo, 1975; Fonseca, 1991). For example, co-equal couple families endorse less traditional gender-role stereotypes and are more likely to

agree that there are equal rights between the sexes. Furthermore, women in single-parent households (e.g., when husbands leave the home to work in other regions) and women in middle-class households tend towards matriarchy (Azevedo, 1994). Thus, it is possible that the closing gender gap is most relevant in specific sociodemographic demographic parts of Brazil. Unfortunately, the scarcity of research on these varied family structures seriously limits our understanding of possible changing gender roles in families.

To date, there is mixed evidence on whether strong gender-typed notions are becoming diluted and that the gender gap is closing among Brazilians. At the societal level, ongoing sociopolitical movements (e.g., the feminist movement) and new government laws and policies have expanded sociopolitical, educational, and economic opportunities for women (DeSouza et al., 2004). Researchers have noted that Brazilians are no more likely to endorse gender stereotypes than individuals from other countries (see DeSouza et al., 2004, for a review). For example, Hutz, Koller, and Biaggio (1992) found evidence that Brazilians might be rejecting the rigid gender-typed notions and more accepting of flexible gender typologies. However, other researchers noted that strong gender-role stereotypes and gender differences are still prevalent among Brazilian children and adolescents (Carlo et al., 2001; de Guzman, Carlo, Ontai, Koller, & Knight, 2004). Raffaelli and Koller and their colleagues (2000) noted that although street girls and boys did not differ on many family circumstances, girls were more likely than boys to have left home because of family violence and more negative relationships with their parents. Fonseca (1991) reported that most Brazilian slum women cited their responsibility to their children as the primary reason for not seeking employment.

Although there is promise regarding a rapidly closing gender gap in Brazil, caution is needed in over-simplifying or over-generalizing the impact of those changes (see Sturm, 1991). It is likely that the somewhat mixed findings are due to differences in the study populations and the specific topic of study. Therefore, more research examining gender-role disparities across different behavioral domains and with different populations is needed. Furthermore, it is also important to note that there will likely be a time lag in observed changes as a result of expanded opportunities for women. Moreover, similar to the situation in many other countries around the world, gender-based prejudice and discrimination (e.g., pay inequities) and family violence mostly directed at women still exists. Nonetheless, a closing gender gap holds great promise for the future well being and health of Brazilian families.

BRAZILIAN FAMILY CASE STUDIES

The next section presents two case studies of families in different situations. As will be seen, each family brings their own unique talents, skills, and resources to deal with challenges and demands. However, there are pervasive cultural-related strength characteristics that serve to protect and enhance the individuals' well being and health.

A Situation of Challenge: Maria's Family

Maria was born 33 years ago, in a rural city and moved to the capital with her family when she was nine years old. Due to the family's financial difficulties, she went to live with an upper-middle-class couple. It was not an adoption; Maria performed domestic chores in exchange for a place to live. She remembers that the couple gave her affection and offered the possibility to have a career, but these opportunities were not valued by her at that time. When she was 16 years old, she abandoned the fourth grade and the home where she was living due to a pregnancy. She started to live with her son and relatives in the slums. At that time, she held sporadic jobs until her 24th birthday, when she became involved with a man who was 20 years older and her life changed dramatically.

Maria separated from her child and went to live with this man, a drug dealer who pretended to be a taxi driver to hide his real occupation. The atmosphere was characterized by violence and constant police inspections. In the beginning, there was a seductive involvement between the partners; however, in due course, and culminating with Maria's second pregnancy, the relationship became more and more violent. Beatings with pieces of wood and iron marked her body, and kicks revealed that her pregnancy was not wanted by the father. Although Maria did not use or traffic in drugs, she experienced increasing stress from drug-related death threats and the possibility of arrest and imprisonment. She started to have heart problems that resulted in a bypass operation when she was 28 years old. Maria continued to be abused by her partner. After several violent episodes, she shot and killed him in self-defense. Although acquitted of the killing, Maria was not free. In spite of his death, her husband continued to threaten her well-being: Maria had been infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. This could have been the end of Maria's story; however it is just the beginning of the story of a new and resilient family.

Today, Maria lives with her eight-year-old daughter Ana and two orphan nieces, Tereza (age nine) and Joana (age seven), in a small cottage

in a slum community in the state capital. The cottage has three rooms—a bedroom, a kitchen and a bathroom—and there are no internal doors. Although their home is rudimentary, the family keeps it clean and organized. Maria also teaches the girls to take care of themselves and to value personal hygiene. Despite the cold winter weather and lack of central heating, family members bathe every day. The children are responsible for domestic tasks such as cooking, washing, and organizing the house; for example, Ana was taught to prepare meals at the age of five. The three girls study at a public school, and Maria says that education is essential to have a career in the future. Ana now knows how to read and says that she will be a confectioner when she is older. Maria's 16-year-old son frequently visits the family and his presence is always a reason for happiness.

Tereza and Joana are the daughters of Maria's sister. The girls' father was murdered at age 19 in an assault. Two years ago they lost the mother, 26 years old, to meningitis—she was also infected with HIV. After their mother's death, the girls went to live with a couple of uncles in an environment characterized by conflict and physical aggression. During this time, Tereza went to school, and her school performance was low. The family decided that the girls should be moved to Maria's home. The nieces have lived with their aunt for less than one year. This change transformed their lives in a positive way. Today, they are good students, their grades are above average, and they amicably share tasks and the family atmosphere. In spite of the difficulties that Maria faces—her body weakened by the terminal disease, the responsibility for her daughter's and nieces' education, and the lack of financial stability—she is optimistic and happy. Maria knows that she is preparing her girls to have a better life than she had. She says that her family cannot be considered to be dysfunctional, because she is a vigilant caregiver and the needs of her daughter and nieces are the main focus of her everyday life.

In the path of life for Maria, Ana, Tereza and Joana, it is possible to identify many risk factors such as poverty, low level of education, the loss of significant people, Maria's physical disease, the restricted space of the home, and exposure to chronic violence and drugs in the slum community. In the past, Maria faced many challenges as she moved from a rural area to the state capital, as she yearned to create intimate relationships, and as she struggled through an adolescence marked by pregnancy and an unstable and violent relationship. Maria's daughter, Ana, bore witness to these conditions. Maria's nieces, Joana and Tereza, experienced the loss of their parents. Moments marked by vulnerability and high risk were constant in this family.

Despite the great hardships, there were many strength characteristics associated with her culture that benefited Maria's family. Maria has restructured her life armed with a set of personal and environmental characteristics that have resulted in a strong will and conviction to supercede her challenges. She has thrived under the rubric of her personal characteristics (e.g., autonomy, self-control, and self-efficacy) and her social support and family cohesion. Her social support network, including her family, friends, and her religion, supplies the material, emotional and spiritual comfort necessary so that the family may face daily difficulties. Within the family, with her daughter and nieces, the dialogue is constant. The most painful themes, such as the losses of family members, are openly approached. This attitude is only possible because there is strong cohesion in the family group.

Positive changes have resulted from Joana and Tereza's transfer to Maria and Ana's home. Maria has created a relatively safe environment that nurtures and protects her daughter and nieces. The strength and closeness of the group reinforces in each one of them positive values of themselves and of the world. Maria encourages the girls to share, learn, and study in preparation for a career. She promotes the healthy aspects of mutual cooperation and values that favor adaptation and trust among family members. The girls are being prepared to manage their lives without the presence of their terminally-ill caregiver.

Maria could have abdicated her nieces' care to improve her financial conditions; however, she opted to care for her family and to work to maintain a strong family connection. The positive and nurturing environment rewards reciprocal practices by her nieces and has become an affirmation of family acceptance. In this family, the structuring of their relationships favors resilient aspects that reduce the impact of the risks to which family members are exposed. This can be observed, for instance, in the girls' concern with Maria's medication schedule and her well-being. The mother receives the children's affection, is fortified emotionally by this affection and care, which in turn strengthens her will to battle her disease.

The many protective factors that increase the resilience of Maria's family are evident in the quality of their interactions and relationships. Maria's family has benefited from strong familism and familial interdependence, a collectivist orientation towards the good of the group (i.e., family), support of extended family members, a desire to overcome rigid gender-stereotyped submissive behaviors, and frequent prosocial and cooperative behaviors that serve to constantly reinforce and maintain their strong bonds. In this family, it is possible to observe these

strength characteristics. Maria, Ana, Tereza and Joana have formed a family built on the available strength characteristics that are nurtured and promoted by their culture.

A Family of Privilege: Jorge's Family

The Silvas are descendants of a Portuguese family that arrived in Brazil in the beginning of the last century. Jorge, 50 years old, is an administrator employed by a large company. His wife, Carmen, is 45 years old and is a nurse who works at the hospital of a public university. They met during their college graduation year and were married soon after, with the full support of their families. Two years later the first son Rodrigo was born. Today, Rodrigo is 20 years old and is studying to be a physician at an expensive private university. Rodrigo is an exemplary student and receives financial support from his parents so he can devote his time to his studies. Ana was born one year after Rodrigo and is getting ready to study psychology at a public university. She will also likely receive full financial support from her parents so she can dedicate her time to study.

The family is in a good financial condition. For example, before Rodrigo entered university, the family had built a nice and comfortable house. In addition, each family member has a car and the family spends vacations at a small beachfront cottage. The family usually gathers together on weekends for family lunches with the couple's parents, siblings, nephews and nieces. Since their home is very spacious and, at the same time, cozy, Jorge and Carmen insist on hosting these extended family gatherings. During these frequent gatherings, family members cook traditional recipes, sing Portuguese songs, and tell stories about the family.

Recently, due to the need to reduce expenses in Jorge's company, there was a mass dismissal of employees, which affected primarily the most senior employees. Jorge is quite frightened about this situation, because he has large responsibilities with his family and wants to maintain the good standard of living that they have always had. Carmen's job is relatively secure and she receives a good salary, but her salary alone would not be sufficient to maintain the family's current standard of living.

Jorge wanted to avoid showing the family his concern about the difficulties in his company, but his wife and the children observed that he had been somewhat depressed. Recently, Jorge did not want to host their family at home for the family's traditional lunch gathering, alleging physical fatigue. However, this unusual event generated a series

of phone calls from their relatives and friends inquiring about the well-being and needs of Jorge's family.

After some insistence by Carmen and the children, Jorge revealed his concerns during one of their family dinners. Immediately after he finished disclosing the situation, he heard his children's manifestation of solidarity and support. They said they could change their spending habits and get part-time jobs to help with expenses. Ana, his daughter, offered to sell her car. Carmen, his wife, suggested that they could get some money by renting the cottage at the beach instead of spending vacations at the cottage. Several options were discussed among the family members. This left Jorge feeling much more calm and at ease about their situation.

Coincidentally, during their conversation, Carmen's mother called to inquire about her daughter and her grandchildren. Hearing about the pressing family situation, she also offered her support and solidarity to the family and reassured them that they would also receive support from other members of their family.

The situation for Jorge's family was clearly very different than that of Maria's family. However, as in Maria's family, one could observe pervasive strength characteristics that serve to buffer Jorge's family from potential challenges. The strong family bonds reflective of their familism and familial interdependence, the supportive role of extended family members, the collectivist orientation toward the good of the group, the flexible gender-type orientation that promotes achievement, and the cooperative and prosocial practices of support and comfort, are all reflected to some degree in maintaining the well-being and health of the individual family members. Even in a relatively privileged family environment, these strength characteristics are reinforced and encouraged.

The Future of Research on Families: A Strengths-Based Approach

In the present chapter, we briefly summarized some of the strength characteristics of many families in Brazil. Although there are other strength characteristics (e.g., religion) that could be reviewed in more depth, it is important to note that all families have strength potential. That is, all families have individual and environmental resources that can potentially enhance and strengthen the well-being and health of families and their members. We attempted to show that strength characteristics can be manifested across families living in different, and sometimes challenging, circumstances. Moreover, strength characteristics can be culture-specific or they can be evident across cultures. There is a need for future

researchers to identify culture-specific strength characteristics—lest we assume that strength characteristics serve the same function across cultures.

Unfortunately, our understanding of strength characteristics among Brazilian (and Latin American) families is limited. There are many research gaps perhaps due to the traditional overemphasis on deficiencies and “deficit model” approaches in studying ethnic group families and individuals (McLoyd, 1998; Raffaelli et al., 2005). Similarly, there has been much research on negative and high-risk factors among families and individuals from ethnically-diverse groups in the U.S. (Raffaelli et al., 2005). This research has increased our understanding of these problem behaviors and conditions that stimulate problem behaviors and mental illness. However, we have little understanding of strength conditions and the strength conditions that stimulate positive social outcomes and well-being. As several scholars have noted (e.g., Raffaelli et al., 2005; The Consortium on Social Competence, 1994), our understanding of problem and high-risk environments do not necessarily further our understanding of positive and low-risk environments—studies are needed to focus on each set of behaviors and environments. We hope this chapter helps to invigorate research programs to examine the personal and environmental factors that contribute to health and well-being among families.

An approach that focuses and emphasizes the strength among families is not just an argument for scholars to view issues from a “glass half full” perspective. Rigorous and programmatic strengths-based research will be needed to provide critical information for more effective intervention programs. A strengths approach to studying families offers a qualitatively distinct approach and methodology. For example, furthering our understanding of strengths promotes the development of prevention programs aimed at enhancing and nurturing existing family strength characteristics rather than an emphasis on post-hoc intervention programs designed to fix manifested problems and pathology. Furthermore, we can develop diagnostic tools to identify existing strengths among individuals and families so that these strengths can be channeled more effectively.

In our increasingly global society, it is important to cross national boundaries in our research to further our understanding of families. Furthermore, at a time when much of the national and international media focus is on negative social behaviors, it is important for social science scholars to provide a balanced perspective on strengths as well as risks for families. Moreover, families, however they are defined, serve multiple functions and are complex systems shaped by the interplay of biology

and environment. A strengths-based approach offers an opportunity for scholars to adequately account for the multidimensional complexity of family systems. Ultimately, our theories, research programs, and intervention programs will need to fully account for the real-world complexity of families in order to adequately address the challenges and promote the promise and hopes of future families.

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