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Serving Rural Asian American and Latino Families and Their Communities: A Call for a Rural Paradigm Shift

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Abstract

The United States rural cultural tapestry continues to be redefined as the country begins a new millennium. In particular, the Asian American and Latino family populations have burgeoned over the last 10 years as the first and second fastest growing populations in the country. This article discusses a working paradigm that illustrates how Extension family consumer scientists and other family specialists can work collectively with rural Asian American and Latino family to promote family and community life.

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Introduction

Extension family consumer scientists and other family specialists are at a crossroads in serving rural populations. The rural cultural tapestry continues to be redefined as the country begins a new millennium. As populations continue to shift from rural and urban to suburban areas, Extension family consumer scientists and other family specialists are faced with developing appropriate practices in serving the new faces of rural America (Fluharty, 2001).

In particular, the Asian American (Wheelan, 2001) and Latino (Kohoe, 2001) populations have burgeoned over the last 10 years as the first and second fastest growing populations in the country. This article discusses a working paradigm that illustrates how Extension family consumer scientists and other family specialists can work collectively with rural Asian American and Latino families to promote family and community life.

When providing services to rural Asian American and Latino populations, it is important for Extension professionals and other family specialists to take an ecological and historical perspective. Asian American and Latino historical experiences and challenges can serve as a map to establishing culturally sensitive approaches, while providing effective outreach. Key lessons include the following.

- Learn the rural geographic region and its historical influence on these groups.
- Understand cultural resources and characteristics as they have evolved for these groups.
- Understand the relationship with local, state, and federal government.
- Understand the importance of the concept of time in these rural communities.

Working Towards Partnerships: Asian American and Latino Families in a Rural Context

Latino families have been described as an extensive familial support network. The network provides emotional, psychological, social, and financial support to family, extended family, and fictive kin. The family network reflects cultural values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, and reinforces the maintenance and transmission of culturally specific roles and values. This network serves as a resiliency mechanism for rural Latino communities.

Asian American families have been a part of rural American lives for generations. Asian Americans can be found in many rural communities and industries; however, the stories of Asian Americans are rarely recognized (Mejia-Giudici, 2000; Wurzburg, 1999). Similar to the Latino community, the Asian American community has recently been dramatically affected by new immigrants. These different Asian American communities also possess strong extended kinship networks.

There are several cultural resiliency mechanisms that specialists should understand and incorporate when developing partnerships with rural Asian American and Latino families and their communities. Specialists should understand:

- The importance of personal and social relationships and their impact on partnerships,
- Family socialization and its influence on developing strong partnerships,
- The importance of honoring the immigration experience of families through partnerships,
- Generational differences,
- The importance of religion and faith, and
- The family activist role of faith-based organizations.

Recommendations: A Call for a Rural Paradigm Shift

Serving rural Asian American and Hispanic families and their communities can be a puzzling experience for Extension family consumer scientists. However, a working paradigm based on the historical lessons and challenges of these families and an ecological wraparound perspective would benefit the partnership between the families and the specialists.

Specifically, this perspective is based on an assumption that families bring an expertise to their unique situation and that, when given the opportunity, they can competently define their needs (Handron, Dosser, McCammon, & Powell, 1998). Moreover, this perspective would explore family dynamics through a strengths-based systemic approach, which includes the individual, family, and community. Important factors that would contribute to the paradigm would include the following.

- Outreach would be culturally sensitive and family and community centered.
- Families would empower themselves and become equal partners.
- Faith-based centers would participate as rural social and family centers.
- Rural organizations and other social agencies/systems would develop coalitions to provide enhanced services.
- Schools would shift to school, family, and community partnerships.
- Universities would be innovators in serving rural families through specialists and technology.
- Rural corporations would develop family-sensitive models.
- Rural businesses, including ethnic stores, would become outposts for information.

Conclusion

Historical challenges and lessons to rural service providers and rural Asian American and Latino families can serve as a perspective lens to developing rural partnerships for the future. Thus, a rural paradigm shift that incorporates the factors discussed above would be instrumental in the transformation of rural communities.

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