Chapter 11
HIV–Positive Latino Immigrants: Long–Distance and Close–Distance Family Relationships

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ABSTRACT

Many immigrants have conflicting relationships with their families. Families can be an important source of support for immigrants facing challenges in new countries. For some immigrants however, families can also be a source of frustration and lead to feelings of being trapped in old roles. For immigrants who are men who have sex with men (MSM) the contradictions of families being sources of support or sources of frustration may be heightened. This study examines family relationships among Latino immigrants who are HIV-positive MSM who are currently residing in the San Francisco Bay Area. In particular, issues of disclosure around sexual orientation and HIV to families are explored.

INTRODUCTION

Juan immigrated to San Francisco for one reason only – he wanted to have open, sexual relationships with men and not have to hide. Juan felt an intense sexual freedom for the first few years that he lived in San Francisco. His family lived in Michoacán, Mexico and he spoke to them often by phone; he felt free not to tell them about his boyfriends and social life.

Juan discovered he was HIV-positive after becoming ill and going to the ER for urgent care. His life took a dramatic shift after being diagnosed. Instead of feeling free, he felt trapped by being HIV-positive. On one hand, he wanted nothing more but to tell his family and return to Mexico and have his family take care of him. On the other hand, he also feared their reaction and questions if he were to tell them he was HIV-positive. Juan felt that they would know then for sure that he was gay. Juan would talk to his parents and brothers and sisters who lived in Michoacán, Mexico. He would test them by bringing up

topics related to HIV when on the phone with them to see how they would react. He realized soon that his family had intense hatred for those with HIV and those who are gay. Juan wondered if his family would still love him if he told them he had HIV.

Juan felt alone in the United States (US) without his family. He felt even more alone in the US because he felt that other gay men would not want to be with him since he was HIV-positive. Juan sought out support groups, social workers and counselors who could help him both with the physical challenges of having HIV but also with the emotional challenges. He soon met other Latino men who were gay or who were men who had sex with men (MSM) and Juan came to confide in them. He formed a support network of men who are Latino immigrants and who have HIV. He learned from them how to survive and how to disclose his sexuality and HIV-status to only those who would be supportive. His support group has resources such as doctors who speak Spanish and who offer alternative medicines. Slowly Juan created a family of people in the US who support and care for him, while his family in Mexico remains in the dark about both his sexuality and his HIV status.

Juan’s story is a composite of a study of 127 HIV-positive Latino immigrants who were interviewed about their lives, health access and families. The purpose of the study was to explore the health access of HIV-positive Latino immigrants. In this chapter, the researchers will discuss the study findings and focus on the family relationships of HIV-positive immigrant men who have sex with men. Juan represents what many immigrants in the study experience with regard to their sexuality, their isolation and their experiences with their families. Latino immigrants who are HIV-positive navigate a complex world of changing and evolving norms relating to sexuality, the stigma associated with HIV and disclosure.

The family is one of the most important units of support for Latino immigrants but it can also be a source for stigma and lack of support. Navigating family dynamics among the myriad of issues faced by HIV-positive Latino immigrants can be challenging but can also be rewarding. The objective of this chapter is to present the complex story of HIV-positive Latino immigrant MSM and explore their relationships with their families. Specifically, the chapter explores how HIV-positive Latino immigrant MSM manage relationships with families when families live close to them (proximity) and when they live far from them (long-distance).

BACKGROUND

Latinos in the US are greatly impacted by HIV/AIDS. In 2013, Latinos represented approximately 17% of the US population, yet accounted for 23% of all new estimated HIV infections (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). Among Latinos who are HIV-positive, Center for Disease Control (CDC) data indicate that over a third of (36%) are tested for HIV late in their illness and are diagnosed with AIDS within one year of testing positive. By comparison, 31% of Blacks and 32% of whites test late (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007). Knowledge of HIV status among those already infected is very low (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007); thus, many Latinos are unaware their partners are infected. Higher rates of HIV prevalence is found among Latino MSM who are older, have a lower income, have a gay identity, and are born in the US or are established immigrants (Oster et al., 2013).

Latinos face challenges accessing health services including HIV care for a multitude of reasons (Cavaleri et al., 2010). Currently, there are 15.5 million uninsured Latinos, representing 32% of all uninsured individuals in the US, higher than any other racial or ethnic group (Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured, 2013). HIV-positive Latinos have increased mental health issues such as