

Hispanic Attitudes Toward Adoption

by Irma D. Herrera

I am not yet the parent of an adopted child. My husband Mark and I have just started on our quest for a baby. But I have spent a lot of time thinking about racially- and culturally- mixed families. I worked as a journalist for several years and this was one of my favorite subjects to explore. How do mixed marriages work? Can I love (mean truly love!) someone who is not Hispanic? My biggest fear in marrying someone from mainstream society was that I would become an outsider within my own family; afraid that my language, my culture would be ignored, or worse yet, even ridiculed.

Once, while visiting a museum in San Antonio, a group of school children were watching a woman making tortillas as part of an exhibit. The dark woman was dressed in colorful Mexican clothing, her hair in a long, thick braid. The teacher sought to engage the children. A little strawberry-haired girl raised her hand and said, "I have an aunt who's a Mexican and she makes tortillas." Her statement was innocent, but in it I heard my future child speaking of them - the Mexicans, the group my mother comes from, and she's not one of us (the real Americans).

Each of us is strongly tied to our group of origin. A voice inside says, "Be like me, be like me." I want my child to have dark skin and big black eyes with long eyelashes and to speak Spanish. I want my sons and daughters to grow up with a social conscience, concerned about fairness and justice, respectful of others.

During the past few months, my thoughts about adoption have been so numerous that I have a hard time keeping up with them. But one thing that has not concerned me is whether my family and my Chicano/Latino friends will accept and love my adopted children. There has always been a welcome place for adopted children in the Latino community. Recently, I was asked about the attitudes of the Hispanic community toward adoption and adopted children. I don't believe we can or should think of the Hispanic community in such monolithic terms. We are a very diverse community, perhaps as diverse as White middle-America. An Hispanic can be from any racial group, may or may not speak Spanish (but probably does); he can be a conservative Reagan Republican or a tax-and-spend liberal, a top executive for Coca-Cola, or a migrant

farm worker. Just as one wouldn't expect that one view about adoption shared by the entire White community, I don't expect that there is a consensus on the subject in the Hispanic community.

Nonetheless, I decided to poll a few Latinos regarding their views about adoption and what they perceived to be the attitude toward adopted children among their families and friends. In the South Texas community where I was raised (which was about half "Anglo" and half Mexican American and very segregated), there existed an informal system of intra-family adoptions that undoubtedly evolved in response to family and community needs. Friends who grew up in other parts of the country related the same experiences. It was not uncommon for a married woman with several children to "give" a newborn baby to a sister or sister-in-law who had no children, or whose own family was much smaller.

Where I grew up, many Mexican American families had six to eight children. We had limited resources. Few of the people in my parents' generation had completed high school. It was mainly a community of people who worked with their hands. Adoption was a way of distributing the burdens and benefits within a community. Back then, when having a child out of wedlock was viewed as a shameful tragedy that befalls a family, it was common for children to be adopted by friends of the family - someone in the neighborhood. These children were treated no better and no worse than those who were born to the family. My sense is that our families had a very accepting view of adoption as a way to build a family.

I had some vague recollections that my parents had talked about adopting a baby when I was growing up. I called my mother and posed the question to her. "Oh yes, we wanted to adopt a baby very much," she said emphatically. "Why did you want to adopt?" The answer was not obvious to me, since we had four children in our family already. "Because there were so few of you." That summed it up for me.

Irma Herrera, Esq., is Director of META, Inc., and organization offering multicultural education, training and advocacy. She is also a prospective adoptive parent.