Coping in the Barrio:
Case Studies of Mexican-American Families

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ABSTRACT: This paper reports preliminary findings of a study of coping abilities of Mexican-American families. The purpose of the study was to identify variables related to styles of behavior that can be characterized as adaptive. A complex of factors differentiated families who were judged to be dealing effectively with their environment ("copers") from those who were not ("noncopers"). The factors included the health status of the children, various child-rearing attitudes and practices, and patterns of decision making as they related to a more general ability of parents to conceptualize and organize time.

Work with freshman medical students in a pediatric clinic in a west-side barrio in San Antonio, Texas, spurred our interest in the coping or adaptive abilities of individuals and families living there. Students interviewed waiting mothers while their children were being seen by the clinic staff. Discussion of the interviews revealed that the women's characteristic ways of dealing with the world were strikingly different, despite the apparent similarity of their life circumstances. The varied patterns of adaptation that were observed led to a more systematic study of lower-class Mexican-American families.

The purpose of the study was to build an empirical base for hypotheses about the development of coping abilities as they are related to experiences in the family and, in particular, to child-rearing attitudes and practices. The study design was similar to that of Robert Coles [1] in Children of Crisis and Oscar Lewis [2] in Five Families.

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in that the investigation was not limited to families with identified problems (e.g., lower-class "disorganized" families, families with schizophrenic children, etc.). Rather, it was an attempt to document the ways people seem to cope and the ways in which they do not by studying a few families in depth. "Coping" came to include all efforts to deal effectively with one's environment, to increase feelings of personal satisfaction of family members. Although important, such conventional external indicators as whether or not a family was on welfare received relatively less attention. This paper does not illuminate all possible relevant factors but summarizes several key areas found to be related to styles of behavior that can be characterized as adaptive.

Method

Nine families, identified for us by the nursing staff at the health clinic, were approached and asked to participate in the study. One family declined; the remaining eight constituted the study sample. The clinic staff was told that we were interested in learning about the lives, including the attitudes, hopes, and fears, of families living in the neighborhood. The list of names we were supplied with included both families who regularly visited the clinic and those on whom repeated outreach efforts had failed to get their children in for an initial physical examination or needed medical follow-up. Thus, one dimension of coping—the utilization of a neighborhood health service—discriminated between families at the outset. The families are not representative of all families in the barrio.

Our work was not guided by specific hypotheses, although several broad areas of interest were outlined for possible exploration in an interview "guide." The areas were background factors (including information about place of birth and early socialization), marital history, employment history, and child-rearing attitudes and behavior. The guide allowed interviewers to approach the families informally and to conduct interviews in an unstructured manner, but it helped them to keep in mind topics to be explored in the course of the interviews.

All interviewing was done in the homes of the subjects by two Mexican-American medical students in order to minimize language barriers. A male-female interview team facilitated entrance into homes where a husband's jealous suspicions or a wife's reluctance to allow a male inside while her husband was away might have prohibited it.

The interviewers introduced themselves to the families as medical students working for the Department of Psychiatry at The University of Texas Medical School and explained that they were interested in learning about child-rearing practices in the barrio. It had been discovered in a pilot study that most families could not respond to vague questions concerning "coping" or what it takes to make children "successful," and our interest in learning about something more concrete—child rearing—helped us to gain entrance into homes and directed the observational focus of the interviewers.

The interviewers explained to the families how their names had been acquired, that their participation was not obligatory, and that the information they gave