



SECTION THREE

Building Cultural Knowledge

In this section you will find information about:

- ❖ Latino Cultural Values
- ❖ The Intersection of Oppressions and its Impact on Latinas/os

Understanding Latino Cultural Values

A basic understanding of traditional Latino values and norms that can influence the worldview of Latinas and Latinos is an important first step in gaining a better understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence within Latino communities. This is particularly important because **there are many Latino cultural values and community strengths that can be employed to promote anti-violence messages and to help Latinas and Latinos address violence in their lives.**

It is important to clarify from the onset, however, that while many Latinas/os share a common language and certain basic cultural beliefs and values, their experiences and worldview can differ substantially. Influential factors may include immigration status, level of acculturation or assimilation, class, race and gender identity, age, education, religion and sexual orientation, among others.

As such, an appreciation for *the diversity existing within and across cultures* is an essential prerequisite for domestic violence service providers and advocates.

"Latino culture, as with all cultures, carries both positive and negative aspects that must be recognized and named collectively so they can be used to construct models of identity that open up possibilities for liberation and fulfillment rather than oppression."

—Dr. Julia Perilla, Caminar Latino

Culture in Context

There is no shortcut or formula that can be followed. When working with individuals, it is important to ascertain the influence discrete cultural beliefs may have upon the individual, taking into account the specific context and point in time in which you encounter the person.

Understanding culture requires one to examine the beliefs, values, behaviors, customs and norms of a group. However, this is a daunting challenge because culture is always in flux, encompassing both continuity and discontinuity, lasting traditions and constant change.⁴⁷ It is an ongoing attempt by peoples to adapt to changing circumstances and because it is so dynamic it defies accurate description.

Yet cultural knowledge is critical to building cross-cultural understanding and cultural proficiency and so, with the above caveat in place, a summary of key, traditional Latino cultural values and norms are described below:

Familismo/The Central Role of Family

Generally, Latinas/os view family as a primary source of support (and identity). Traditional Latino families tend to be close knit providing emotional and financial support to nuclear and extended family members. The concept of family is broadly defined within the Latino culture incorporating not only extended family but also individuals not related by blood or marriage.

It is not unusual for extended family members to reside with the family or visit for extended periods. Extended family members often assume caretaking responsibilities for children, the elderly and other frail family members. As mentioned earlier, the concept of family also incorporates individuals not related by blood or marriage, such as *hijos de crianza* (children taken in and raised as the family's own), *compadres* and *comadres* (godparents and marriage witnesses) who often become a life-long social support network providing ongoing advice, assistance and resources.

A comparison of Anglo and Latino cultural values and family structures reveals major differences. In the Anglo culture, the function of the family is to serve the development of the individuals who comprise it, whereas in the traditional Latino family, the individuals serve the development of the family. Family members are expected to actively work towards family unity and preservation. Members' accomplishments are viewed primarily as a reflection on the strength and caliber of the family, more so than the individual. Conversely, individual failures or transgressions can bring shame upon the family name.

Members' ongoing efforts towards unifying and preserving the family, in turn, allow the family to invest much energy in providing nurturance and support to its members. This is a critical function as it is usually the family which serves as a buffer between the Latina/o and the larger society which can often seem hostile towards Latinas/os (e.g. police brutality, anti-immigrant sentiment, increasingly stringent immigration laws, English only movement, etc.).⁴⁸

However, social and economic forces have had a major impact on the unity and preservation of Latino families. Extreme poverty has forced many Latinas/os to leave their homelands and seek employment in the U.S., sometimes separating family members for many years, engendering a sense of loss and trauma for many Latino families. Similarly, for Latino families living in the U.S., seeking out better job opportunities has often meant relocating to other cities thereby diminishing ties to extended family members that stay behind.

It is important to note, that in domestic violence situations, batterers have often manipulated their partners' desire for family unity and preservation to justify their abusive behavior, imploring their partners to stay with them despite the violence. This is especially evident, during the "*honeymoon period*" in which the batterer shows remorse and often seeks forgiveness, only to begin the cycle of violence again. In these circumstances, extended families can serve as a very powerful influence and agent of change, serving as an important refuge and source for healing, with the potential to hold batterers accountable for changing their behavior and helping family members to heal from the domestic violence. Conversely, the family may collude with the batterer if not well informed about the dynamics and dangers of domestic violence. That is why community education is so important in working toward social transformation, since family and friends can often have a greater influence than organizations or institutions.

Gender Roles

At one end of the spectrum, traditional Latino culture is characterized by a patriarchal family structure and adherence to traditional sex role definitions (typical of earlier agrarian societies and colonized nations). At the other end of the spectrum, Latinas have often challenged those traditional sex roles. In fact, Latinas have played instrumental leadership roles in national liberation struggles throughout Latin America. For example, female soldiers known as "*soldaderas*" fought alongside men in the Mexican Revolution of 1910, and in 1993, the first uprising by the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) or Zapatista movement was led and won by women.⁴⁹

As illustrated above, gender roles vary and continue to change rapidly, especially as more Latinas enter the workforce, achieve higher educational status and become economically and socially independent. Within more traditional families, the father or eldest male is considered the protector, provider and authority or primary decision maker. In accordance with the ideal of family unity and preservation, Latinas in traditional households are often groomed since childhood to become good wives and mothers, often placing the needs of the family over their own. For many Latinas, identity and self-esteem have been intertwined with the ability to fulfill the ideal of being a good daughter, wife and mother. As such, domestic violence and family disruption often engenders in Latinas a sense of failure and emptiness.

While remnants of traditional gender roles for women continue to exist, many Latinas have been fearless defenders of their families and communities, and Latino history is replete with examples of courageous Latina leaders revered not only for their accomplishments but also for defying conventional gender roles.

A few examples include Lolita Lebron, who took up arms in defense of the independence of Puerto Rico in 1950, and Dolores Huerta, mother of 11 children who together with Cesar Chavez, co-founded the United Farm Workers. Dolores was a principal leader of the historic National Grape Boycott. As leaders of the farmworkers union, after many years of difficult organizing, numerous marches and protests, massive voter registration drives, and successful boycotts, they were able to gain dignity and respect for farm workers and create safer working conditions. Moreover, spurred by the role of women's organizations and leaders in human rights struggles all across the Americas, Latin American feminism is thriving.⁵⁰ Presently Latinas play leadership roles in a variety of struggles, including anti-war, human rights, student, and workers' rights movements.

Male gender roles or concepts of masculinity within Latino culture have often been intertwined with the notion of machismo. One definition of machismo is a strong or exaggerated sense of masculinity stressing attributes such as physical strength, courage, virility, domination of women, and aggressiveness.⁵¹

However, Latino academics and service providers working in batterers' intervention programs note that the true meaning of being a macho was historically that of protector and provider for the family and community; someone who is responsible, hard working, honorable — a man of his word.⁵²

Within the domestic violence field, particularly in the last decade, a new crop of progressive Latino men have been working in collaboration with women advocates to end intimate partner violence in Latino communities through the development of culturally based programs for Latino abusers (see section on batterer intervention programs). These new modalities help Latino men to understand, proactively address and heal from the multiple oppressions they and their communities encounter (e.g. racism, anti-immigrant sentiment, poverty and unemployment, etc.). Moreover, they employ cultural values and strengths to help men unlearn violent and abusive behaviors.

Personalismo

Latinas/os place utmost value on relationships with individuals rather than institutions. Latinas/os are more likely to trust and cooperate in situations where rapport has been established with an individual and tend to avoid interacting with institutions that are perceived to be impersonal, formalistic and bureaucratic.⁵³

Domestic violence shelters with bureaucratic rules that close their doors to women who do not speak English or restrict eligibility based on the number, age and sex of the Latina's children will serve to breed distrust and deter many Latinas from seeking domestic violence services from mainstream institutions.

Respeto and Simpatía

Respeto or respect is manifested in many ways within Latino culture. First and foremost is the acknowledgement of the inherent value of all persons. Secondly, the belief that special consideration, deference and respect should be paid to elders and authority figures or leaders within and outside of the community.⁵⁴ Thirdly, *respeto* is conferred as an acknowledgement of the fulfillment of obligations and trustworthiness, such as when a man is respectful to his family, and serves as a good example to his children.

Simpatía is a preference for smooth social relations based on politeness and respect and the avoidance of confrontation and criticism, which is considered rude behavior.

Overt disagreement is not always considered appropriate behavior, which may sometimes lead to confusion and misunderstanding among non-Latinas/os. For example, out of politeness and respect for authority, a Latino/a may nod his/her head affirmatively but this does not necessarily signify agreement or that compliance will occur; silence may mean disagreement or failure to understand what is being said and embarrassment about asking for clarification.

These types of interactions are often incorrectly viewed by service providers and the criminal justice system as a form of passivity, submissiveness, manipulation or dishonesty rather than culturally driven, nuanced interactions holding several possible meanings which must be explored further.

The Role of Spirituality and Religion

Spirituality is a powerful and pervasive influence for many Latinas/os, and it takes many forms. About 70% of Latinas/os in the United States are Catholic, reflecting the colonization of Latin America by Catholic countries (Spain and Portugal).⁵⁵ Catholicism continues to play a central role in the lives of many Latinas/os. It is not uncommon for Latinas/os to be named after Catholic figures such as María (Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ), Guadalupe (the patron saint of Mexico), Jesús

(Jesus Christ) and José (Joseph, Mary's husband) as well as numerous Catholic saints. Latinas/os will often seek the advice of a priest or engage in *oraciones*, special prayers seeking guidance and divine intervention.⁵⁶

Life transitions and resolutions to change are often accompanied by religious ceremonies. For example, at Caminar Latino, a program for Latinas/os who have a history of domestic violence, male participants of Mexican origin have been known to make a *Juramento* or solemn promise to Jesus or the Virgin of Guadalupe to give up alcohol or drugs which is often witnessed by a priest.⁵⁷

However, Dr. Julia Perilla, a researcher and domestic violence survivor herself, points out that the church has played a central role in silencing Latinas' concerns about domestic violence:

The emphasis placed on the family and the indissolubility of marriage, at whatever cost, is found in Catholic, as well as fundamentalist churches, the denominations to which most Latinas/os belong. Although it is slowly changing, the salient message that Latinas receive from many members of the clergy and religious representatives is that domestic violence is at best a miscommunication between the couple and at worse the fault of the woman who must amend her ways to safeguard the family. Using the Virgin Mary or biblical passages to support their assertions, church representatives often silence the voice of women who have taken the difficult first step to tell the truth regarding their relationships. For many Latinas who still subscribe to traditional beliefs and values regarding the church, the message they receive often has lasting and dangerous consequences.⁵⁸

At the same time, recognizing the profound changes brought about by the theology of liberation movement, Latino service providers also point to the affirming role individual Catholic priests have played and can continue to play in helping individuals, families and communities to heal. Latino service providers have reported independent Catholic priests have welcomed unmarried couples to their church, blessed gay marriages and divorces and denounced sexual abuse and domestic violence, among many other progressive actions.⁵⁹

The number of Protestants has also grown considerably reaching 23% in 2000, primarily due to the influx of missionaries in Latin America commencing in the 1950's - 1960's, as well as greater exposure to Protestants here in the United States. Christianity among some Latinas/os has also been influenced by the spiritual beliefs of Africans who were brought to Latin America and the Caribbean as slaves. *Santería*, which ascribes names and traits of African gods to Catholic saints is one such example.

Other religious and spiritual practices observed by some Latinas/os include Espiritismo as well as Native American religious practices which continue to coexist in the United States and throughout the Caribbean, Mexico, Central and South America.

Santería and Espiritismo, are less familiar to many Americans and lack of information about these practices has sometimes generated misunderstanding and fear. For these reasons, a brief summary is provided.

A Brief Look at Santería and Espiritismo

Santería is an Afro-Caribbean religion derived from traditional beliefs of the Yoruba people of Nigeria, based on worship of nature. It is a syncretic religion based on West African religions brought by slaves taken to the Caribbean to work on sugar plantations. These slaves' religious traditions include possession trances for communicating with ancestors and deities, the use of animal sacrifice and the practice of sacred drumming and dance. Most slaves taken to the Caribbean, Central and South America were converted to Catholicism, but preserved some of their traditions by fusing together various elements of their own religion with Catholic beliefs. Specifically, they represented their dieties (strongly associated with the forces of nature) as Catholic saints. In Cuba this fusion evolved into what is now recognized as *Santería*. This fusion also gave way to the name *Santería*, originally a pejorative term based on the worshipers' seeming overdevotion to worshipping saints, rather than God.

Today hundreds of thousands of Americans participate in this religion. Many are of Hispanic and Caribbean descent but as the religion moves out of the inner cities and into the suburbs a growing number are of African American and European American heritage. Many practitioners of *Santería*, especially in Cuba, also consider themselves to be Catholics and have been baptized. People practice *Santería* throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, especially in Panama, Venezuela, Colombia, Argentina, Puerto Rico, Mexico, as well as the United States. A similar religion called *Candomble* is practiced in Brazil as well. *Santería* beliefs do not center around good and evil but see all things as having positive aspects and negative aspects. Nothing is completely good or evil; all things have components of both. Similarly no actions are completely wrong or right but must be judged within the context and circumstances in which they take place.

Espiritismo is the Latin American and Caribbean belief that good and evil spirits can affect health, luck and other elements of life. Many *Espiritistas* (*Espiritismo* practitioners) gather to communicate with spirits in misas, which are similar to the séances of American-style Spiritualism. However, many *Espiritismo* practices have elements of magic ritual which are not present in Spiritualism. A main tenet of *Espiritismo* is the a belief in an omnipotent God and creator of the universe. *Espiritistas* also believe in a spirit world inhabited by unembodied spiritual beings who gradually evolve intellectually and morally. These beings can influence the corporeal world in various ways. *Espiritismo* has never had a single leader or epicenter of practice, so practices vary among individuals and groups in different places. In all cases, *Espiritismo* has absorbed various practices from other religious and spiritual practices in Latin America and the Caribbean, such as Roman Catholicism, curanderismo or folk healing, *Santería* and Vodou.⁶⁰

Designing Culturally Proficient Programs

Addressing the Intersectionality of Oppressions

Designing culturally proficient programs requires more than an understanding of cultural values. It also requires an understanding of the historic and contemporary social, economic and political forces that impact cultural groups and how these forces help to shape attitudes, behaviors and worldview. Therefore **domestic violence providers must not only become mindful of Latino cultural norms but also, must seek to understand the convergence of oppressions, as a daily occurrence in the lives of many Latinas/os.** Latinas and Latinos experience multiple and simultaneous forms of oppression based on class or socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and immigrant status. As such, domestic violence counselors and advocates need to understand how these multiple oppressions intersect in the lives of Latinas/os — in order to develop effective short and long term strategies to address Latinas' needs and circumstances and help Latinos who batter change their behavior.

Social Economic Stress (SES)

From an economic standpoint, Latinas/os are more likely to be concentrated in the lowest paying jobs,⁶¹ and are disproportionately represented in sweatshops and workplaces where labor protections are violated on a routine basis.

It is estimated that Latinas earn 54 cents for every one dollar earned by White women. Latinas are exploited not only economically but also face sexual harassment in their place of employment, do not receive competitive wages, have limited opportunities for advancement and are forced to work longer hours trying to make ends meet (oftentimes unsuccessfully). Moreover, Latinas are the least likely of all workers to enjoy job related pension or health benefits,⁶² and in fact, more than 52% of low income Latinas lack health insurance.⁶³ For undocumented Latinas who work in the informal economy (e.g. housecleaning, childcare, garment industry and other factories) labor protections are practically non-existent leading to inhumane treatment including failure to pay wages, unsafe working conditions and sexual exploitation.

The combined effects of gender and ethnic discrimination are made apparent by the fact that *a Latina with a college degree earns less than a white woman with a high school diploma*. In light of these glaring inequities and abuses, it should come as no surprise that Latino children account for almost one third of all children living in poverty in the U.S. As such, Latina battered women often feel they will not be able to earn enough money on their own to financially provide for their children and fear leading their families into homelessness.

Moreover, even when she earns enough to sustain her family, the option of leaving the batterer often requires the Latina to leave her existing job to avoid confrontations with and harassment by the batterer. Yet, factors such as the high Latina unemployment rate, lack of marketable skills, low literacy, poor English language proficiency and undocumented immigrant status or pending application for citizenship can make it difficult for Latinas to consider leaving.

Compounding this problem is the gender discrimination faced from within the culture. A leading Latina human rights scholar, Berta Esperanza Hernández-Truyol, has introduced the concept of *gendered underclass*. She argues that the centrality of family and traditional sex and gender roles within the Latino culture serve to create a Latina underclass in which Latinas' needs are continually subordinated to those of the men and family members in her life.⁶⁴

Latino men are also discriminated in the workplace, earning 63.2 cents for every dollar earned by White men.⁶⁵ They earn only about 80% of what White men with the same level of educational attainment earn.⁶⁶ Latino men are more likely to be unemployed or out of the labor force than White men. They are also more likely to be concentrated in low-wage occupations that are physically demanding and/or lack pension coverage.⁶⁷

Only 46% of Latino men have health insurance, less than any other ethnic group. Many are concentrated in jobs requiring physical labor and therefore prone to injuries, yet they are less likely to visit a physician than White men. In fact, 55% of Latino men do not have a doctor they see regularly.⁶⁸ Additionally, only 16% of Latino men receive private pensions, and are less likely than all Whites or Blacks to receive any type of pension support.⁶⁹

Furthermore, it is estimated that 81% of undocumented workers in the U.S. are of Latin American origin and, of these, 59% are men,⁷⁰ many of whom earn minimum wage or less. Because of their undocumented status many mistakenly assume that workers' rights such as overtime pay, safety training and worker's compensation do not apply to them.

Homophobia

A recent report on domestic violence in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) communities, published by the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP) reported that Latinas/os had the second highest domestic violence report rate (15.1%) of any group.⁷¹ Homosexuality remains a taboo subject within Latino communities, breeding isolation of LGBT members and rendering LGBT domestic violence survivors invisible. In a case reported by the National Latina/o Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Organization (LLEGO), a Latina lesbian, Juana Gloria Vega, was killed at the hands of her partner's brother who claimed Juana had turned his sister into a lesbian.⁷²

Cultural norms that support strict gender roles, patriarchal family structures and religious teachings condemning homosexuality contribute to high levels of heterosexism and homophobia within Latino communities. Because of the intense homophobia encountered, many LGBT Latinos/as choose not to reveal their sexual orientation to family members. Even when Latinas/os do come "out" to their families, family members may be insensitive and unsupportive providing little or no acknowledgement or affirmation. Few programs for Latino/a LGBT domestic violence survivors exist and utilizing mainstream domestic violence services is often tantamount to being "outed." Latino LGBT communities tend to be smaller and close knit, thus, it can be hard to get away from the batterer and his/her friends and without family support LGBT domestic violence survivors can experience acute isolation.

Nativism and Anti-immigrant Sentiment

Since the 1980's, and accelerating in the 2000's, the United States has witnessed a resurgence of anti-immigrant sentiment and heightened xenophobia, defined as fear or contempt for strangers or foreigners.⁷³

Many claims have been made against undocumented immigrants in particular, including claims that they place a drain on U.S. resources. However little attention has been paid to the fact that **undocumented immigrants contribute at least \$300 billion to the U.S. gross national product annually.**⁷⁴ In fact, it is estimated that each new immigrant generates a positive contribution to the country of roughly \$1800 annually.⁷⁵

Moreover, the vast majority of Latino workers in the U.S. pay into the Social Security system, but are less likely than their White and Black counterparts to receive benefits. Many also work in the informal economy in positions such as domestics or childcare workers, and may not earn credits qualifying them for retirement benefits, particularly if their employers fail to pay into the social security system on their behalf.

For several decades now, Latino immigrants have been made to feel unwelcome; they have been discriminated against, maligned and attacked. In the mid-1980's, the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) sought to control "illegal" immigration by increasing border enforcement and making it illegal for an employer to knowingly hire an immigrant without permission to work in the United States.⁷⁶ In 1994, a fiscal crisis in California propelled the passage of Proposition 187, one of the most xenophobic ballot propositions ever introduced, in the state with the largest Latino population. The opening text of the Proposition 187 stated:

The People of California find and declare as follows: That they have suffered and are suffering economic hardship caused by the presence of illegal aliens in this state. That they have suffered and are suffering personal injury and damage caused by criminal conduct of illegal aliens in this state. That they have the right to protection of their government from any person or persons entering this country unlawfully.⁷⁷

Proposition 187 sought to prohibit local and state agencies from providing publicly funded social services, education, welfare and non-emergency health care to those who were not U.S. citizens or lawfully admitted to the United States. In fact, Proposition 187 would have resulted in the expulsion and exclusion of hundreds of thousands of undocumented children from schools. Despite its potentially devastating impact on immigrant communities, Proposition 187 was in fact passed by California voters by 75% of the vote, but was subsequently declared unconstitutional.

However, the attack on immigrants did not stop there. The very next year, the Senior Editor of *Forbes*, Peter Brimelow, authored a book entitled *Alien Nation* in which he argued for the sealing of America's borders, the issuance of national identity cards, the imprisonment and deportation of all unauthorized immigrants and the complete elimination of humanitarian categories such as refugees and asylees.⁷⁸

Shortly thereafter, in 1996, Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), accomplishing on a national scale much of what Proposition 187 intended to do at the state level. After PRWORA, undocumented immigrants were barred from 31 DHHS programs they had been eligible for prior to PRWORA.

Moreover legal immigrants became ineligible to receive food stamps and non-refugee immigrants were banned from receiving Medicaid and TANF during their first five years of residency, among other prohibitions.

Other manifestations of anti-immigrant sentiment include the development of the English Only movement, the dismantling of bilingual education and the surge in community protests and hate crimes against immigrant laborers.⁷⁹ These attacks leave an indelible impression in the minds and hearts of immigrants throughout this country that many U.S. Americans neither welcome them nor value their contributions to this society.

Immigration policies mean that undocumented immigrants and legal permanent residents who are arrested for domestic violence offenses are easily deported. Consequently, Latina battered women are oftentimes reluctant to seek help outside of the family and community, fearing that disclosing the violence may reinforce stereotypes, jeopardize their immigration status or simply that they will be either denied services or mistreated.

Anti-immigrant sentiment has escalated at an unprecedented rate as evidenced by numerous beatings and murders of immigrant laborers in recent years and the **introduction of over 1400 immigration measures (almost all are anti-immigrant) before state legislatures in 2007 alone.**

Local governments are engaging in a new level of anti-immigration activism. For example, in Prince William County, Virginia, the County Board of Supervisors passed a resolution denying many public services to all undocumented immigrants.⁸⁰ Most recently, Republicans in the Virginia legislature also proposed legislation that would bar all undocumented immigrants from attending public universities in Virginia, even if they had attended public high school and lived most of their lives in the U.S.

Finally, in 2006, Congress passed legislation calling for the construction of 700 miles of new fencing along the U.S.-Mexico border. About 15 miles of fencing have been built, according to the Department of Homeland Security. **Sadly, it is estimated that since 1993, more than 3,800 Mexicans have died trying to cross the Mexico-U.S. border.**⁸¹ Additionally many Mexicans caught attempting to cross the border suffer at the hands of Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Amnesty International has reported persons detained by ICE have been subjected to cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment, including beatings, sexual assault, and denial of food, water and medical attention.⁸²