Latino Culture and Implications for Counseling

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Abstract

Latinos, the most rapidly growing population group in the United States, now comprise the nation’s largest minority group. The U.S. Census Bureau projects that one of every four U.S. residents will be of Latino origin by the year 2050. This paper examines the rapid increase of Latinos in the U.S., the diversity of Latino culture, and difficulties that Latinos face in the United States. Lastly, this study examines Latino cultural considerations and their potential implications for counseling Latino clients. Familismo, personalismo, and male-female relations are among the considered factors.
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Overview of the Latino Population

Who are Latinos?

In the United States, there seems to be widespread confusion when differentiating between the terms “Latino” and “Hispanic.” In fact, prior to the year 2000, the United States Census Bureau did not include the term Latino. Beginning in the year 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau identified people from both of these groups as “Hispanic or Latino of any race.” According to Granados (2000), based on a survey of 1200 registered Latino voters, people who prefer the term Hispanic are generally more assimilated, conservative, and young, while those that prefer the expression Latino tend to be more liberal, older, and sometimes radical. The terms Hispanic and Latino have been used inconsistently and sometimes interchangeably. The difference between the two terms depends on personal differences and preferences. For purposes of this paper, the term Latino will be used broadly to include all individuals that are characterized by the U.S. Census Bureau as “Hispanic or Latino of any race.”

Knowing the Population

Latinos originate from more than 20 different countries, speak several different dialects of Spanish, and have varying socio-cultural backgrounds (Rolon, 2005). Latinos often come to the United States for a variety of reasons, including social or political instability, violence, and lack of job opportunities in their countries (Rolon). While some Latinos are newly arrived immigrants, others have been in the United States for several generations. Someone who has a Latino surname does not indicate that Spanish is that person’s dominant language. In fact, while 72% of first-generation Latinos speak Spanish
as their primary language, 78% of third and older generations use English as their dominant language (Rolon).

Population Statistics

According to the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau, of the 281.4 million residents of the United States, excluding the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Island areas, 35.5 million, or 12.5% were “Hispanics or Latinos from any race.” For the first time, the Latino portion of the population surpassed the African American population as the largest minority group in the United States. From the year 1990 to the year 2000, the Latino population grew from 22.4 million to 35.3 million, an increase of nearly 58 percent. Furthermore, according to the more recent American Community Survey presented by the U.S. Census Bureau, there were 40.5 million U.S. residents identifying as “Hispanic or Latino of any race” in 2004. Based on this 2004 statistic, the Latino population accounted for 14.2% of the U.S. population – nearly a 2% increase as a proportion of the entire population in only four years. By the year 2050, it is projected that one in every four U.S. residents will be of Latino origin (Roncevic, 2005). With a 3.6% growth rate, Latinos are the fastest growing population group in the nation (Rolon, 2005).

The Latino population is extremely diverse, coming from various backgrounds. Based on the 2000 census statistics, 58.5% of the United State’s Latino population originates from Mexican descent, 9.6% from Puerto Rico, 4.8% from Central America, 3.8% from South American countries, 3.5% from Cuba, 2.2% from the Dominican Republic, .3% from Spaniard descent, and the remaining 17.3% of the population is classified as “all other.”

Within the United States, the Latino population is more heavily concentrated in some
regions than others. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, just over 75% of the Latino population resides in Southern and Western United States. Nearly 15% of the Latino population inhabits the Midwest, while the remaining 9% live in the Northeast. Almost 77% of the Latino population lives in only seven states: California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, Arizona, and New Jersey. The two states with the greatest volume of Latino inhabitants are California, 11 million, and Texas, 6.7 million. The state with the greatest proportion of residents identifying as Latino is New Mexico. Slightly more than 42% of New Mexico’s populace identify as Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

**Difficulties for Latinos**

*Power Inequities*

Torres (2004) contends that perhaps the greatest deception in the United States is that of overestimating the power of individual self-determination and the breadth of an individual’s opportunities. That is, if an individual is able to succeed in U.S. society, we attribute the success to the individual’s hard work, talent, and determination. Conversely, if an individual fails to succeed it is due to their laziness, ineffectiveness, or overall incompetence (Torres). In reality, opportunities are unequal for individuals based on one’s gender, race-skin color, national origin, first language, socioeconomic status class, age, and sexual orientation among other factors.

There are many difficulties associated with being a Latino or Latina in the United States. Torres (2004), who identifies as Latina, states that there is an unequal distribution of political, economic, social, and symbolic power in the United States. As a result of the unequal distribution of power there are unequal opportunities among varying ethnic and cultural groups. The dominant power, Caucasian males, create “serviceable others” based
on their perception of those “others” (Torres). Serviceable others are people who serve the needs, interests and values of the dominant group and help advance its world view. When the perception of others refers to Latinos, even more specifically, Latinas, the circumstances are alienating. According to Torres, Latino women or Latinas, earn only 52% of what Caucasian male, full-time, year-round workers with equal educational credentials earn. This figure falls well below what comparable Caucasian females earn, which is approximately 72% of their male counterparts. Torres strongly argues that the inequity of power largely determines the opportunities, or lack there of, for the Latino population.

Even though Latinos are not a distinct racial group, according to Aguirre (2004), Latinos are oftentimes victims of racial profiling. For example, African American and Latino motorists have an 11% likelihood of having their vehicles searched, while only 5% of Caucasian drivers have their vehicles searched during traffic stops. Additionally, 8% of persons from African American and Latino backgrounds undergo a physical search versus only 4% for Caucasian motorists (Aguirre). Moreover, African Americans and Latinos are more likely to be victims of police physical force. Aguirre asserts that police rationalize the use of profiling by arguing that minorities commit more crimes than whites and are more likely to have weapons and illegal contraband. Furthermore, the media’s portrayal of such minorities as violent and ruthless individuals reinforces the structurization of minority group social relations by defining expectations for minority group behavior (Aguirre).

*Having a Voice*
With Latinos representing the most rapidly growing segment of the U.S. population, James Mehring (2004) argues that America's future economic success will increasingly correlate with the success of future generations of Latinos. While Latinos become increasingly important to the U.S. economy, Latinos continue to be underrepresented and underserved in many important societal segments. For instance, Latinos have been underserved and underrepresented in education, the political domain, popular media, and business.

Latinos are the most undereducated population in the United States (Davison-Aviles, 1999). According to Mehring (2004), when a Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas economist examined educational attainment over multiple generations, it was found that the high-school dropout rates for Latino immigrants was 44.2% in 2001, while only 7.4% for all non-Latinos. The dropout rate for first generation Latinos reduced to 14.6% but remained at 15.9% for following generations. This figure is still well above the dropout rate for non-Latinos (Mehring). Mehring further contends that the gap may be attributed to language barriers and low quality schooling in inner cities that leads to student discouragement. It is imperative that Latino children get assistance early on to help narrow this gap. For example, Mehring suggests creating more English language programs that do not interfere with students’ regular classroom instruction. Furthermore, Roncevic (2005) reported that the volume of Latino students graduating from institutes of higher education is alarmingly low.

The Latino population is grossly underrepresented in the political domain, as there are very few Latino politicians. While the mayor of Los Angeles and the governor of New Mexico are both Latino, the total number of Latino politicians can be “counted on
two hands and there would still be some fingers left unused (Roncevic, 2005).” There needs to be an increase in the proportion of Latino political representatives in order to combat existing inequities.

Latinos have been vastly ignored by popular media. While Latinos constitute the largest racial/ethnic minority group in the U.S. at over 12.5% of the population, Latino actors and actresses represent only 1% - 3% of primetime television (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005). Additionally, when depicted, Latinos have historically been narrowly and oftentimes negatively categorized. Among common depictions, Latinos are often portrayed as criminals, law enforcers, Latin lovers, Harlots, or used for comic relief.

Similarly, Latinos are underrepresented in the business world. According to Roncevic (2005), very few Latinos are small business owners and even fewer Latinos head major corporations. Roncevic contends that full integration in the business sector can only occur when the business sector fully supports and embraces Latino entrepreneurship. There is undoubtedly a correlation between lack of education and under representation in the business sector.

Latino Culture and Implications for Counseling

*Familismo*

According to Galanti and Geri-ann (2003), one characteristic of the Latino culture is familismo. Familismo refers to faithfulness, reciprocity, and unity within the immediate and extended family. Because Familismo differs from characteristics of the American medical system, when Latino patients seek medical services within the American medical system, decision making often becomes an issue. For instance, the American medical system typically expects patients to make decisions autonomously regarding their own
health. Patients from traditional Latino cultures value interdependence and collaboration (Galanti & Geri-ann). Therefore, Latino patients are more likely to include their families when making medical decisions or even defer the decision making to members of their family.

When counseling Latino clients it is imperative to determine whether your client’s family should be part of the decision making process. It may be wise to directly ask your client their preferred style of communication. For instance, there may be a designated family member with which you discuss the client's condition. These decisions may affect limitations of confidentiality and even the interventions used throughout the counseling process. For example, the counselor may employ interventions that require the assistance of the client’s family member(s). While some Latino clients may prefer that their family be involved in the decision making process, as per Latino tradition, other clients may not abide to that standard. It is important to meet the needs of each individual and to avoid making assumptions.

*Personalismo*

Galanti and Geri-ann (2003) also describe the importance of personalismo, another characteristic of the Latino culture. Personalismo refers to intimate, personal relationships. As a result, when seeking health care, persons from Latino cultures often expect a high degree of intimacy and concern while they or their family members are receiving medical services. When working with persons from Latino cultural backgrounds medical professionals should interact in a warm, friendly, and personal manner. Interacting with Latino patients in a personal manner will likely earn their trust.
and increase their likeliness of compliance, thereby allowing medical professionals to provide better care (Galanti & Geri-ann).

Personalismo has great implications for the counseling relationship. When counseling a Latino client it may be beneficial to put extra time and effort into building rapport and a therapeutic alliance. This may indicate that you spend more time in the initial stage of counseling in order to better know the client. Several counseling skills can be used in order to build the therapeutic relationship: Displaying empathy, warmth, attentive listening, and genuineness among others. Additionally, it may be to the counselor’s advantage to use more self-disclosure than they might typically use with other clients. By using more self-disclosure, the therapist is allowing the client to see a personal side of their life. By building a strong therapeutic relationship with your Latino clients, you may be increasing the likelihood of realizing positive counseling outcomes.

**Gender Roles**

Characteristics of the male-female relationship among the Latino culture vary depending on age, education, and time in the United States (Galanti & Geri-ann, 2003). According to Galanti and Geri-ann, younger, more educated individuals who have spent most of their lives in the United States may portray more Anglo American male-female relationship characteristics. However, the remainder of this section will discuss traditional Latino gender roles.

Galanti and Geri-ann (2003) describe the traditional Latino male’s role of machismo and patriarchal authority. In other words, men are thought to work hard, protect, make decisions, and provide financially for their family. These are all the positive characteristics of machismo. Galanti and Geri-ann (2003) also discuss the negative
characteristics of machismo such as someone who can drink heavily and hold his alcohol. These traits are both socially acceptable and proof of manhood within the Latino culture. Patriarchal authority is also a characteristic of machismo indicating that men are the head of the family. In traditional Latino families, mothers might make the day-to-day decisions, but defer decisions of importance to their husbands.

Female roles in traditional Latino families include taking care of the family (Galanti & Geri-ann, 2003). Specifically, a good wife cooks, cleans, and takes care of the children. In addition, she is submissive, follows through on what her husband commands, and stands behind her husband’s decisions. Children and marriage are also a large part of traditional Latino culture. A woman’s status is highly correlated with her ability to bear children.

When counseling Latino clients, it is vital to recognize your client’s cultural context in regards to male-female relationship and patriarchal values. It is also important to refrain from forcing Anglo-American values onto your client. It is unethical for a counselor to assimilate the client to Anglo-American values. Behaviors that may be regarded as sexist by U.S. societal standards may not be seen in the same light by Latinos. Counselors can use information about traditional gender roles in Latino culture in order to better understand clients’ perspectives. For instance, a Latina who appears to be displaying passive tendencies may not be abnormally passive; rather, she may be following traditional Latina style of communication. Conversely, a Latino male may appear overbearing, when in fact his behavior is socially appropriate given his culture.

Summary of Latino Culture and Counseling Implications
The terms Hispanic and Latino are often used inconsistently and sometimes interchangeably. Some feel the term Latino is more inclusive; however, the difference between the two terms is most commonly differentiated by personal preference. Latinos are the fastest growing population group in the United States. Recently, Latinos surpassed African Americans as the nation’s largest minority group. The Latino population is extremely diverse and comes from varying backgrounds from over 20 different countries. Latinos immigrate to the United States for numerous reasons such as escaping the instability of their country, or for the purpose of seeking employment opportunities.

There are many difficulties associated with being Latino in the United States. Latinos are subject to power inequities and racial profiling. Additionally, they and underserved and underrepresented in many important societal segments including education, the political domain, business, and popular media.

Traditional Latino values vary from traditional U.S. societal standards. Familismo, personalismo, and male-female relationships are among Latino cultural values that a counselor should understand. Considering familismo, a counselor may want to clarify with a client whether family members need to be included in important decision making. With personalismo in mind, a counselor may want to spend extra time and effort building a therapeutic alliance with Latino clients. Lastly, the counselor should think about traditional male-female relationships prior to making false assumptions about clients’ thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. While some Latinos may hold some or all of these values, others will not. In order to maximize counseling outcomes, a counselor needs to gain an understanding of each individual client and their preferences.
References


