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Working with Latinx Youth & Families

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Cultural Competency: Working with Latinx Youth and Families

"To be able to understand how to help, we need to understand the diversity of experiences in culture."

Cultural & Linguistic Considerations:

Cultural Background:

Latinos/as/x or Hispanics in the United States are a fast-growing population, expanding from a small, regionally concentrated group of fewer than 6 million in 1960 to a now widely dispersed population of well more than 50 million (or 16 percent of the nation's population). Latinos are a diverse community. There are many misconceptions and stereotypes about who Latinos are and about the history and presence of Latinos in the United States, including the difference between Latinos and Hispanics.

The term Latinx is relatively new. It refers to a person of Latin American origin or descent (used as a gender-neutral or nonbinary alternative to Latino or Latina). Latinx are a growing academic, political, and financial force in the U.S. One -in -four newborns are Latino. Never in this country's history has a minority ethnic group made up such a large share of young Americans. By the force of numbers alone, the adults these young Latinos become will help shape American society in the 21st century.

The term 'Hispanic' refers to a language and those whose ancestry comes from a country where Spanish is spoken, including Iberia and Latin America; Latinos is a term which refers to the geographical area of Latin America which consists of people from the Caribbean, South America, and Central America. Latinos also include the indigenous people who reside in those regions.

Language:

Spanish is the most common language spoken through Latin America and the Caribbean. However, it is essential to recognize that there are significant dialectical differences among

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Spanish speakers, mostly based on the individual's native region. English, French, and Portuguese are also spoken in specific Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean (e.g., Haiti, Brazil, Jamaica). Indigenous populations speak their own native tongues (e.g., Quechua, a Native South American language family spoken primarily in the Andes, derived from a common ancestral language).

There are other aspects of language communication that are also important to consider when working with Latino communities.

- Use the term undocumented rather than illegal. Illegal should be considered an offensive and insensitive term to be used when referring to another human being.
- There is a potential that recent immigrant parents may have had no or minimal education and, as a result, may not know how to read or write. Be selective about handouts given to be completed independently and ensure that your client can do so. Review all materials given with the client to ensure comprehension.
- Handing out a list of resources is rarely useful as pride and shame may keep the individual from accessing the resources. In addition, language barriers or fear of communicating may keep them from contacting those resources. Taking time to make phone calls with them (Warm Hand Offs) or following up with clients to ensure that resources were used is ideal.
- Avoid engaging in any language related to insanity or crazy. Mental health stigma within the Latinx community and a general misunderstanding of mental health issues lead the Latinx community to associate normal reactions to trauma and stressors as signs of a serious mental illness.
- The label of "Crazy" carry significant weight and can push away individuals seeking services. Their family members may contribute to this. 'Avoid labeling yourself as a "Psicologo" or "Terapeuta." While these terms may accurately describe your level of education or title, they may contribute to the mental health stigma mentioned above. It is best to present yourself as a "consejero" (Counselor or advice-giver) as this is more culturally acceptable.

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- Beware of misunderstandings of mindfulness and yoga-related practices within the Latinx community, which may be interpreted as spiritual practices. This may result in a reluctance to begin meditative and mindfulness practices and must be clarified before making interventional suggestions.

Engagement:

Establishing and sustaining rapport will be an essential part of the therapeutic relationship. When working with Latinx clients, Clinicians should consider the events which influenced the community and contextualize assessment and treatment. In addition to the standard areas you might cover in a traditional bio psychological assessment, when working with Latinx children/ youth and their families also remember to address the following domains:

- Country of Origin and Region
- Political History of the Country of Origin
- Religion
- Exposure to Trauma
- Level of Education
- Prenatal Medical Care
- Post-Natal and Pediatric Medical Care
- Abandonment
- Current family Nucleus
- Extended family and non-family living in household and relation with individuals living in the household
- Family Reunification
- Relational dynamics related to the new family system vs. former family system
- Understanding of familial separation and or reunification

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Family Dynamics:

Latino culture is known for its collectivist- family orientation. There is significant importance within a notion of "personalismo" (personal connectedness in interactions) and respect for authority. As Latinos reside longer in the U.S., they lose some of their culture's potentially protective effects. As much as possible, encourage parents to be participants in all these interactive interventions. Do not work with your client in isolation. Always encourage parents and or guardians to be present and be part of the process.

Latinx families are likely to be averse to engaging in services or expect "quick-fixes" to the issues they face. Psychoeducation, combined with an openness to discuss treatment plans, can aid in family engagement. Also, discuss ways in which the family or client has (or has not) begun engaging in social support and self-care. Focus on education and work may leave individuals reluctant to engage in self-care or social practices.

Conducting Culturally Sensitive Assessments:

When conducting an assessment with Latinx individuals, consider using a bio-psycho-social-cultural model of evaluation and treatment. Taking the time to develop a cultural formulation, which includes consideration for acculturation, community and family connection, immigration status/ history, and education, will be crucial to establish and to sustain rapport. Supporting collaborative care with Latinos is vital for the retention and success of care. Although this is a culture that respects authority, feeling misunderstood and not connected to a therapist often results in dropping out from treatment.

Before diagnosing, remember that you should be able to determine if the pattern of behavior is associated with cultural and language differences or the presence of a disorder.

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Considering the following will assist you in making that determination during the assessment process:

- Recent arrival vs. Established immigrant
- Age of migration
- Trauma: (a) Violence; (b) Political unrest; (c) Gangs; (d) Cartels ;(e) History of Colonialism and Systematic Racism; (f) Natural disaster; (g) War; (h) Terrorism; and (i) Human Trafficking.
- Family nucleus and family separation
- Cultural Bound Syndrome: It is essential to understand those "syndromes/symptoms" that are restrictive to the Hispanic Community. Some of the most common are: (a) ataque de nervios; (b) colera; (c) mal de ojo; (d) susto, miedo, pasmo, espasmo; and or (e) wind or cold illness.
- Social norm differences
- Parenting styles
- Religious differences and or beliefs
- Stage of acculturation
- Educational level
- Differences of education in the United States vs. Latin America
- Intellectual function vs. lack of exposure
- Poverty

Cultural Considerations during Treatment Planning & Interventions:

When applying the family teaming model toward your work with Latino families and youth, the following are key recommendations to ensure the application and success of these interventions:

- As a provider, your first goal should be to reach a point where your client no longer needs you anymore.

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- Clinical Supports vs. Natural Supports: involve everyone interested in the safety and wellbeing of the child.
- Be the positive force behind the client and the family.
- Meet regularly with people that want to support your client.
- Become the clinical facilitator and an expert on the needs of your client and the family.
- Be an advocate for your client and the family.
- Facilitate discussion but always leave the table with a plan.
- Ensure that everyone is working out of the same care plan.
- Start planning the discharge at the onset of treatment.
- Before discharging, ensure that your client has the support that they need.

Interventions:

The following is a list of interventions that we use with Latino children and youth as an alternative to traditional talk therapy and/or as an adjunctive intervention.

- Age-appropriate unstructured play therapy (Use traditional/contemporary games that can also be translated into your client's daily interaction. I always recommend not using video games; instead, use games that can promote interactivity and conversation such as...
 - Imaginative play with toys or dolls
 - Uno
 - Jenga
 - Candy Land
 - Spot it
 - Easy to play Board games or card games
 - Guessing games and or trivia games
 - Dressing up dolls, puppets or action figures
 - Roll Play
 - Reading with children is always a great tool to connect
- Expressive art
 - Coloring books

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- Guided drawing
- Competitive drawing
- Coloring mandalas
- Water coloring
- Building and creating Play-do or putty clay
- Ask your client to paint or draw how they feel or what they did for the day
- Design a superhero mask or another special crafting item representing the qualities that the client needs to grow emotionally
- Help your client develop emotive expressive collages and/or live journey collages depicting where I am and where I want to be.
- Cultural drawing - encourage your client to draw or paint things about their culture and teach you about it.
- Music Therapy
 - Singing with your client.
 - Composing with them a song about something that is relevant to them
 - Play an instrument and or learn to play an instrument with your client
 - Drumming (playing with a drum at the beat of how they feel)
 - Use music to help your client relax or feel happy (psychoacoustics)
 - Cultural music for emotive expression encourages your client to listen and/or teach you about their cultural and traditional music and explore how the music might reflect their cultural experiences.
 - Developing an emotive playlist of popular and or meditative music to elicit positive emotions and or relaxation.
- Mediation and grounding – Meditation and grounding takes many forms:
 - Slow breathing
 - Focus breathing
 - Guided breathing
 - Square breathing
 - Counting the breath
 - Guided imagery
 - Guided or unguided Progressive relaxation

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- Safe Space guided meditation
- You can always use selected YouTube resources or specialized phone apps to provide your client access to relaxation, mediation, and grounding experiences.
- A simple tool to teach mediation and grounding and measure intervention efficacy is the personal input pod. It is a great tool to help clients learn about their stress level and how mediation and grounding help them manage that stress.

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Helpful Resources & Considerations for Interventions (families; providers):

As mentioned before, when working with Latinx clients, it is crucial to recognize the role of their family in their treatment. As providers, there are many additional considerations that we must consider not only for the success of the treatment but also for ensuring continuity of support for positive long-term outcomes.

Parents:

- Mental health stigma and religion play a role in the reporting and addressing of suicidal ideation within the Latinx community.
- Adults may be less likely to report suicidal ideation out of fear of judgment from others in the community and their families. Shame and religious ideologies may also hinder discussion on suicidal ideation in the therapeutic setting.
- Children may struggle with many similar reservations about discussing suicidal ideation with the resulting shame leading to a lack of communication with parents and family.
- Revelations of suicidal ideations should be handled with care to prevent adding to the shame felt by the individual.
- Caution should be had when presenting to parents, a child's communication of suicidal ideation as there is a potential for them to react in shock and anger. Options should be given to the child about how their parents will be presented with the necessary information.
- Parents should be reassured using psychoeducation on suicidal ideation and by presenting ways to be supportive of their child.

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For Providers:

- Engagement in federally run financial assistance programs is usually barred for undocumented immigrants and should be avoided by green card holders seeking to naturalize unless otherwise advised by the legal counsel of the individual.
- Housing for the undocumented population is also a problematic need to meet due to many organizations' requirements of "legal immigration status." Church community groups will usually aid in meeting these needs.

Helpful Community Resources:

- Immigrant Legal Resource Center (ILRC.org).
- Latinx Therapy: Website and Podcast has various supplemental resources on mental health topics. The podcast is recorded in English and Spanish.
- Washburn.org: Translation and definition of various mental health-related terms to be used with and to aid in explaining various mental health terms to a Latinx population.
- Therapistaid.com: Many different worksheets on different modalities that have been translated into Spanish.
- InformedImmigrants.com: resources for clients and providers on mental health services and complexity of immigrant experience and mental health issues.
- Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC.org): Information on suicide prevention within the Latinx community.

Lessons learned

Within the Latinx culture, counseling is stigmatized. Many of your clients might have been taught not to talk about personal or family problems with strangers. The risk is high for any individual who is an undocumented immigrant. The resources available to these individuals are limited, and they have fewer opportunities to vocalize their needs out of fear of being reported to Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Clients and potential clients who are Latinx may be

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tight-lipped because they do not fully understand where information shared during counseling could end up. Many individuals within the Latinx community might not have a clear understanding of what counseling is and is not. Take time to educate your client and the family on your role, and how you will be helping the family, as well as what counseling is and how the counseling process works. It is best to emphasize confidentiality and the rules that are in place to protect clients, as well as the only times when confidentiality needs to be broken. Having Latinx clients understand the counseling process and what it entails can make all the difference in building good rapport.

Most Latinx identities are firmly rooted in being members of specific groups. Always ask clients where they are from to get a better understanding of who they are as individuals. Faith plays a crucial role in the lives of Latinx clients. Religion can set the tone for the family. Keep this in mind when treatment planning and seeking to identify natural support systems and or activities for your client.

Traditional Latinx families are brought up being very close to their immediate and even extended family members, where the entire family unit cares about each other equally. Many families live in multigenerational households. Sometimes extended family members may also reside in the home. The nuclear and expended families that often encompass the family system structure can be a great resource of support for the children and youth that you will serve. The best model to approach care for your clients is through a wraparound/family system approach. Sometimes when working with the whole family, the family may appear unresponsive to the counseling process. Be patient; the key is to treat and work with the family as a unit. Working with clients, in general, can be a new learning experience, especially if their cultural background is different from our own. Even with what is taught in multicultural classes, it is

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essential to keep in mind that there will be cultural variations amongst various Latinx families. The most crucial aspect of working with the Latinx community is understanding that they are a diverse group of individuals who have come to the United States seeking a better life for themselves and their children. Be humble and open to your approach in learning that not all Latinx people are the same when it comes to their culture and or experiences. Connection and empathy should drive all your interactions with this community as they should with any clinical care.

Many Latinx individuals might avoid counseling services due to the language barrier. When the clinician can speak Spanish, the family may feel more comfortable speaking with them; this will be advantageous for rapport and trust-building. Not being fluent in Spanish should not be a deterrent. There are steps you can take to bridge this language gap, including using digital apps or going to someone who can help you learn the language. An interpretation line or an interpreter is also an appropriate cultural approach. Researching the client's background can help strengthen the rapport between you and show the client that you are actively interested in what she or he tells you. To work with this community, it would be best to take Spanish-language classes and read as much as possible about the Latinx culture. Books and classes can certainly help, but the best way to truly serve these families and clients is through community engagement and familiarity with their cultural practices.

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