

# Cultura y Familia: Strengthening Mexican Heritage Families



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Family is a crucial aspect of Mexican culture; in fact, interdependence and strong affiliation with family seem to be cultural mandates. For people of Mexican ancestry, family can serve as a first resource for support. Further, connection to family is linked to positive mental health outcomes in people of Mexican descent (Castillo & Hill, 2004; Crockett et al., 2007; Morgan Consoli & Llamas, 2013; Morgan Consoli et al., 2016). Alas, there are many challenges faced by Mexican origin families in the United States including discrimination, internalized racism, issues related to immigration, and the acculturation gap. To overcome these challenges, Mexican heritage families must draw upon their assets--their cultural heritage, familial support, and religion and spirituality. This chapter is intended to provide the reader with a greater understanding of Mexican heritage families in the United States. Please note that I intentionally use the terms Mexican heritage, ancestry, or origin in an attempt to collectively address Mexican Americans (those born in the United States) and Mexican immigrants (those who have migrated to the United States). In cases when I speak of Mexicans, I will only be speaking of those born outside the United States and, similarly, when I speak of Mexican Americans I will be referring to those born in the United States. To gain a more thorough understanding of the Mexican origin community, it is essential that we present a brief history of Mexico and waves of migration to the United States, as this informs the conditions of modern Mexican heritage families. The reader will also be provided with a demographic overview of people of Mexican ancestry, including settlement patterns and salient sociopolitical indicators.

The main goal of this chapter, however, is to provide insights into the challenges faced and the strengths possessed by Mexican heritage families. Further, strategies for counseling Mexican heritage clients and families will be discussed. Through this

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chapter, I hope the reader gains a greater appreciation of Mexican history, culture, and the resilience of Mexican heritage individuals and families.

## **Mexican Historical Background**

Though a full exploration of Mexican history is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, to understand the culture and experience of Mexican heritage people in the United States, it is crucial to examine four periods of Mexican history: Spanish conquest and colonization, Mexican independence, American colonization, and the Mexican revolution.

### ***Spanish Conquest and Colonization***

To appreciate the modern Mexican heritage community in the United States, we must return to the genesis of this community in the conquest of the *Méxica*, more erroneously referred to as Aztecs, by the Spanish (Gonzalez, 2009). At the time of Spanish contact, the *Méxica* capital of *Tenochtitlán* was believed to be one of the world's greatest cities: Centered in Lake *Texcoco*, *Tenochtitlán* had beautiful architecture, a complex system of roads, and over six million inhabitants (Gonzalez, 2009). Despite being outnumbered by the *Méxica*, the Spanish victory was facilitated by plagues (diseases of European origin) that decimated the *Méxica* population, superior weaponry, and other indigenous tribes who sought independence from *Méxica* rule (Gonzalez, 2009; LaRosa & Mejía, 2007).

The Spanish conquest of the *Méxica* empire changed world history, ushered an era of colonization of the Americas by Europeans, created the mixed-race people who would become Mexicans, and left racial and social tensions that can still be felt in people of Mexican heritage (Gonzalez, 2009; LaRosa & Mejía, 2007). The Spanish would claim racial purity as Europeans to rationalize their position atop the racial hierarchy they imposed throughout colonial Mexico. The reverence for racial purity was maintained by the *castas* (Hipolito-Delgado, Gallegos Payan, & Baca, 2014), a racial cast system with proportion of European blood determining position of superiority. The legacy of the *castas* can still be viewed in Mexican standards of beauty with fair skinned and light-haired people considered the ideal and people with more indigenous or African features being seen as less desirable. Another consequence of the colonization was the Spanish imposing their language and Catholic faith, which are both major aspects of Mexican culture (Gonzalez, 2009). Though some indigenous languages and spiritual practices survived, they are not as prominent as they once were. A final consequence is that, though the image of the noble *Méxica* is still revered in Mexican culture, little consideration is given to the marginalization experienced by contemporary indigenous people of Mexico.

## ***Mexican Independence***

The Mexican war for independence was sparked by drought and famine that led to escalating tensions between the Spanish elite and peasant workers (LaRosa & Mejía, 2007). A major figure in the independence movement was a Catholic priest named Miguel Hidalgo who was disgusted by the treatment of the indigenous peoples of Mexico and issued the *Grito de Dolores* on September 16, 1810 (LaRosa & Mejía, 2007)—now marked as Mexican Independence Day. Through a bloody war and aided by revolution in Spain, by 1822 Mexico would gain its independence (LaRosa & Mejía, 2007). Understanding this period of history is also significant as it demonstrates the importance of Catholicism in Mexican history and begins a period of political turmoil that would lead to American colonization, the Mexican Revolution, and beginning of Mexican migration to the United States.

## ***American Colonization***

Mexicans are one of only two Latina/o/x groups who did not have to migrate to the United States, but rather had their territories invaded and colonized. However, Americans forget, conveniently, that the United States attacked Mexico and that Americans were invaders in Mexican territory (Gomez, 2007). Prior to 1848, the term Mexican American was devoid of meaning as only a negligible number of Mexicans lived in the United States (Gonzalez, 2009). It was the US colonization of northern Mexico that created Mexican Americans as an ethnic group (Gomez, 2007).

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the US colonization of the southwest, for our understanding of Mexican heritage populations, is the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo—that ended the US–Mexican war. The treaty led to the cessation of half of Mexican territory (what is now California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, and Colorado) to the United States and provided the Mexicans living in the north with the barest guarantees related to citizenship and property rights—Mexican Americans became second class citizens (Gomez, 2007). By the 1900s, most people of Mexican descent had lost any land they possessed in the colonized territory, either through force or fraud (Caldera, Velez-Gomez, & Lindsey, 2014). Sadly, today many people of Mexican heritage are treated as foreigners on what once were their native lands. Additionally, the rhetoric that was used to rationalize the denial of rights to Mexicans continues to exist today and perpetuates claims of Mexicans as lazy, uneducated, drunks, and violent criminals.

## ***The Mexican Revolution***

Frustrations with the Mexican dictator Porfirio Diaz, and his preferential treatment of the Mexican elite, led to revolution in 1910. Many important Mexican cultural figures, such as Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa, played prominent roles in the

revolution. The Mexican revolution would ultimately conclude with the adoption of the modern Mexican constitution in 1917. This historical period is significant in our understanding of Mexican heritage families in the United States as many individuals and families migrated to the United States to avoid the violence and governmental chaos in Mexico (Henderson, 2011). I would also argue that this period is significant in that the figures of Zapata and Villa continue to inspire revolutionary attitudes and a struggle for equity and rights in many Mexican heritage individuals.

## **Mexican Migration to the United States**

In discussing migration and settlement of people of Mexican ancestry in the United States, it is important to remind the reader that many Mexicans never migrated to the United States, but had their lands taken by the United States. The ancestors of many Mexican people have occupied the southwest for generations prior to it becoming part of the United States (Falicov, 2005). In fact, a good friend can trace his family roots in Arizona to prior to US occupation. Another challenge, in discussing Mexican migration to the United States is that Mexico is a large country and immigrants come from various Mexican states, some from large urban centers and other from more rural areas (Caldera et al., 2014). There are 31 states in the country of Mexico and each has its identity, set of industries, and history with immigration to the United States. As such, I will provide an overview of the topic, but will encourage the reader to do more research on Mexican migration in their particular community.

Most Mexican migration to the United States is influenced by financial hardship and political unrest in Mexico and perceived economic opportunity in the United States (Cervantes, Mejía, & Guerrero Mena, 2010; Falicov, 2005). Additionally, the complementary economies of Mexico and the United States have led to cyclical migration patterns: During periods of economic growth in the United States, Mexican workers are actively recruited, and these same workers are deported during periods of economic recession (Falicov, 2005; Henderson, 2011). What follows is a brief exploration of six periods of history that highlight the cyclical migration patterns between Mexico and the United States.

### ***The First Wave (1880s–1920s)***

During the first phase of migration, Mexican immigrants were primarily employed in railroad construction and agriculture—these workers were seasonal, typically coming to the United States for a specified period of time and then returning to Mexico (Caldera et al., 2014). Push factors for migration were the expansion of

Mexican railroads that led to a rise in commercial agriculture, a spike in land values, a rise in the price of corn, the loss of land by rural farmers, and increased unemployment (Henderson, 2011). The start of the Mexican revolution also served as a push factor for migration to the United States as migrants attempted to avoid the conflict.

There were also a number of pull factors attracting migrants to the states. The expansion of the railroad in the United States provided ample jobs for Mexicans (Henderson, 2011). Additionally, there was a high demand for agricultural workers and miners in the southwest (Henderson, 2011). During this period of time there were limited restrictions for Mexicans to enter the United States; in fact, the demand for Mexican agricultural workers was so high that recruitment programs, such as the *bracero* program, were introduced to ensure a steady stream of workers (Henderson, 2011). By 1900 there were approximately 100,000 Mexicans in the United States. (Caldera et al., 2014).

### ***The 1920s and 1930s***

Economic hardship and governmental corruption continued to provide a push factor for Mexican migration (Henderson, 2011). However, White nationalism, a product of World War I and the Great Recession, took hold in the United States and led to efforts to stop immigration (Caldera et al., 2014; Henderson, 2011). Additionally, labor unions sought to stop Mexican immigration, claiming that immigrants took jobs from US workers and suppressed wages (Henderson, 2011)—a claim that will be repeated throughout US history. Municipalities in the United States undertook “repatriation” programs, in 1931 Los Angeles county began the process of rounding up and deporting people of Mexican ancestry—approximately half a million people, both citizens and foreign born, were ultimately deported (Henderson, 2011).

### ***The Bracero Era (1940s–1950s)***

The US involvement in World War II created a need for agricultural workers and a second *bracero* program was enacted (Caldera et al., 2014; Henderson, 2011). This new *bracero* program would extend until 1964 and led to the participation of over four million Mexicans (Henderson, 2011). Due to a lack of penalties for illegal entry into the United States, many Mexicans entered without documentation and became “*braceros*” upon acceptance of jobs (Henderson, 2011). After World War II, White nationalism again took hold and led to a mass deportation effort, called Operation Wetback, which specifically targeted people of Mexican ancestry (Caldera et al., 2014; Henderson, 2011).

## ***1964–1986***

Continuing the trend of immigration control efforts, the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) of 1965 set limits to the number of visas provided to Mexicans (Caldera et al., 2014; Henderson, 2011). Alas, INA did not account for the US demand for Mexican laborers; therefore, Mexicans continued immigrating to the country. By 1970, fewer than one million Mexicans lived in the United States (Gonzalez-Barrera, 2015). In a second attempt to curb immigration, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 provided increased funding for Border Patrol and the chance for immigrants to legalize their status (Caldera et al., 2014; Henderson, 2011). These two acts would signal the start of an era of increased border and immigration control efforts. It would also lead to the establishment of a larger Mexican American community as some Mexicans gained citizenship and increased border security dissuaded others from returning home.

## ***The NAFTA Era (1990s–2000s)***

Another economic recession in the United States in the early 1990s led to more nativism and the progressive militarization of the US border (Henderson, 2011). During this period of time, high tech detection devices were installed along the border, walls and fences were erected (yes, we already have a border wall), and there was a dramatic increase in the number of Border Patrol agents (Henderson, 2011). During this period, Immigration and Naturalization Services was dissolved and enforcement duties were assumed by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) who, through a series of militaristic raids, then and now, have become symbols of terror in immigrant communities.

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) among Canada, Mexico, and the United States was also signed into law and cast Mexico as a junior partner, with the primary role of providing cheap labor (Henderson, 2011), for the creation of Canadian and American goods. Despite the increased difficulty in crossing the border, Mexicans continued to migrate to the United States as NAFTA has led to an increase in poverty in Mexico (Henderson, 2011). By 2007, Mexican migration reached a peak with approximately 12.8 million Mexicans living in the United States (Gonzalez-Barrera, 2015).

## ***Present (Late 2000s–2018)***

In the late 2000s, the United States experienced another great recession and has been slow to recover. This slow recovery has led to less job opportunities for Mexicans in the United States (Gonzalez-Barrera, 2015). As such, for the period of

2009–2014, there has been a net decline in immigration with approximately 140,000 immigrants returning to Mexico from the United States (Gonzalez-Barrera, 2015).

What I have tried to highlight through this review is that Mexican laborers came to the United States because there were jobs available for them. Now that these jobs are not readily available, Mexicans are returning home. Though border security might deter some migrants, if the US economy demands cheap labor—Mexican workers will find a way to fill these positions. History demonstrates that no amount of legislative action can stem the flow of ambitious, hard workers (Henderson, 2011).

### *Modes of Entry*

Despite the narrative that migrants from Mexico enter the United States illegally, about 45% of undocumented migrants arrived in the country through some legal means (Pew Hispanic Center, 2006). This group of migrants become undocumented if they remain past their visa date and/or if they are unable to obtain residential status (Pew Hispanic Center, 2006). Those who enter the United States without documentation do so under extremely risky circumstances—in 2017, approximately 294 people died crossing the US–Mexican border (United States Border Patrol, 2017). Reasons for death included traffic accidents, heat exposure, homicide, and drowning (Government Accountability Office, 2006). The journey often takes migrants to remote parts of the desert, on trips that can take multiple days of walking, women are at risk of sexual assault, and all are at risk of robbery or being abandoned by their guide.

### *Serial Migration: A Personal Accounting*

Many Mexican heritage families come to the United States through serial migration: The process where select individuals leave for the United States in order to establish a new home, leaving the rest of the family behind to immigrate at a later date (Cervantes et al., 2010). My family's migration story highlights the process of serial migration. My maternal grandfather and his brother were guitar luthiers (they built and repaired guitars). The brothers began building instruments in Torreón and, later, in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. Given the demand for their guitars in the United States, the older brother, Candelas, would ultimately open a guitar shop in Los Angeles. As is common in serial migration, Candelas would establish roots in the United States allowing for his family members to follow.

Due to the success of their business in the states, my grandfather Porfirio, joined his brother in Los Angeles. For 5 years my grandfather lived and worked in United States, while my grandmother stayed behind in Juárez with my mother and her siblings. Seeking to reunite with his family, impressed with the US educational system,

and being able to provide a better quality of life, my grandfather made the decision to move his family to Los Angeles. According to my mother, the family did not have advance notice of the move—this is also common in serial migration where the family must capitalize on an opportunity to reunite. Unlike modern migration stories, my grandfather was able to secure visas for the family one morning in El Paso and by the afternoon, he was in Juarez packing for the trip. Highlighting the process of serial migration, it would take three stages (great uncle, grandfather, and grandmother and mom) of migration for my family to make the move to the United States.

## Settlement Patterns in the United States

The vast majority of people of Mexican ancestry (51%) live in the western United States (López, 2015). In fact, 35% of people of Mexican ancestry live in California alone (López, 2015). Also, in the west, Arizona and Colorado are the states with the third and fifth largest number of people of Mexican ancestry accounting for approximately 5% and 2% of the total population, respectively (Ennis, Ríos-Vargas, & Albert, 2011). The south has seen a rising population of people of Mexican ancestry (particularly in Georgia and North Carolina), as the agricultural and the poultry industries attracts workers. It is worth noting that the majority of the Mexican population in the south (26%) is accounted for by Texas (Ennis et al., 2011). Approximately 10.9% of people of Mexican ancestry live in the mid-west, with Illinois being home to approximately 5% of all people of Mexican descent (Ennis et al., 2011). The remaining 2.9% of people of Mexican ancestry reside in the northeast (Ennis et al., 2011).

## Demographics of Mexican Origin Communities in the United States

As of 2013, there were approximately 34.6 million people of Mexican ancestry residing in the United States (López, 2015). Approximately one-third (11.5 million people) of Mexican ancestry are non-US born, with 42% of Mexican immigrants having been in the United States for over 20 years and approximately 26% of Mexican immigrants possessing US citizenship (López, 2015). In terms of language proficiency, approximately 68% of people of Mexican ancestry report speaking English proficiently and 73% primarily speak Spanish at home (López, 2015). In terms of language dominance, 26% of people of Mexican heritage reported being English dominant, 34% were Spanish dominant, and 34% reported being bilingual (López, 2015). Again, the narrative that Mexicans are a new immigrant group is flatly wrong—the data indicate that Mexicans are an established



community that has largely adopted the English language and have integrated into the US society at large.

The median age of people of Mexican heritage is 26 (López, 2015). In terms of educational attainment, 10% of all people of Mexican ancestry have a college degree (López, 2015). However, there is a large disparity in degree attainment based on country of birth as 15% of Mexican Americans and only 6% of Mexicans possess college degrees (López, 2015). The median income for people of Mexican ancestry is \$20,800 a year, with 26% of people of Mexican ancestry living in poverty, and 9.8% being unemployed (López, 2015). These educational and income statistics lag grossly behind the White ethnic group.

## Identity Labels

Prior to entering a discussion about challenges and strengths faced by Mexican heritage families, an examination of identity labels is prudent. Identity labels influence how a person understands themselves, how others understand them, and how cultural groups relate to each other (Malott, 2009). In her study on Mexican heritage youth, Malott (2009) found that identity labels were significant for youth as they indicated cultural traits, values, and traditions. Youth stated that family was the primary motivation in their cultural identity as they choose labels that maintained a close connection to their family's cultural history.

There are multiple ethnic labels adopted by people of Mexican ancestry, including Chicana/o/x, Latina/o/x, Hispanic, Mexican American, and Mexican. A full exploration of these labels is beyond the scope of this chapter, for a further exploration the reader is referred to Hipolito-Delgado and Diaz (2013). One label that requires some attention is Chicana/o/x as it is almost exclusively adopted by people of Mexican ancestry. However, Chicana/o/x should not be conflated with Mexican American (Hipolito-Delgado & Diaz, 2013). To be Chicana/o/x is to reject Eurocentrism, to connect with one's indigenous heritage, and be committed to the pursuit of civil rights (Garcia, 1997). Chicanos are thought to be militant and political radicals with far-leftist values (Garcia, 1997). I proudly identify as Chicano as it speaks to my cultural heritage and inspires my advocacy for equity.

In a survey conducted by the U.S. Census, most adults of Mexican ancestry (57%) preferred the ethnic label of Mexican (López, 2015). When asked to choose between Hispanic and Latino, over half of Mexican adults expressed no preferences (López, 2015). In terms of racial background, people of Mexican heritage (the *mestizo* product of European, Indigenous, and African bloodlines) do not neatly fit into U.S. Census categories. This is evident in the results of the 2010 census where 52% of people of Mexican heritage reported being White, nearly 40% identified as some other race, and 1.4% identified as American Indian (Ennis et al., 2011).

## The Post-migration Era

In the following sections, I will explore the challenges faced and the strengths that might be relied upon for Mexican heritage families living in the United States. I will begin by examining the challenges related to immigration, discrimination, internalized racism, access to mental health services, and the acculturation gap. This will be followed by a discussion of strengths including culture, familial support, and religion and spirituality.

### *Challenges*

**Immigration** The actual process of coming to the United States can be full of dangers, especially for those who cross clandestinely. The optimism that brings Mexicans to the United States can quickly dissipate as the stress of navigating a new culture, the loss of familial resources, and worries for safety are experienced. The loss of extended family can result in significant stress for immigrant Mexican individuals and families (Yznaga, 2008) as traditional sources of support are lost. What is worse, resources that claim to serve immigrants might prey on undocumented communities, taking their money and not fulfilling promised services (Cervantes et al., 2010). With the rescinding of deferred action for childhood arrivals (DACA), in Denver we have seen an increase in fraud as unscrupulous lawyers and notaries take advantage of undocumented individuals rushing to file their extension paperwork.

As was introduced earlier, serial migration is the most common method of migration for Mexicans arriving in the United States. However, the recurrent separation and reunions of families associated with serial migration creates tension within Mexican families (Cervantes et al., 2010; Falicov, 2005). The family members who migrate might feel a sense of isolation from those left behind and must form new support networks in the United States—this action might be viewed as betrayal by those left behind (Cervantes et al., 2010). In the absence of the father, the mother becomes like a single parent, forcing the family to adapt and individual members take on new roles (Falicov, 2005). When the family reunites, they are then forced to adapt again, much like when a step parent is introduced into the family (Falicov, 2005).

Mexican immigrant families, particularly adults, also face numerous challenges related to learning English, gaining employment, and changing familial roles in the household. It is not uncommon for a female partner to find employment faster than her male counterpart, at times leading to conflict and changing gender roles (Cervantes & Mejia, 2009). Older children might also be expected to take employment in order to help the family survive economically. Another challenge is when families have mixed citizenship, with children born in the United States being legal citizens and other family members being undocumented and potentially subject to

deportation (Cervantes et al., 2010). Following, the election of the 45th president of the United States, a wave of deportations were carried out throughout the country, including in my home city of Denver. Local activists worked with families to develop deportation plans, that included resources on how to respond to ICE agents and plans for child care should parents be detained. Though Denver has not officially declared itself a sanctuary city, local government officials' decision to not fully comply with ICE mandates has made the city the target of various immigration raids in 2017.

**Discrimination** Any illusions of safety and prosperity in the United States are typically replaced with feelings of fear due to discrimination (Cervantes et al., 2010; Falicov, 2005). Racism and discrimination inflicts pain and loss of community for people of Mexican ancestry (Flores-Ortiz, 1999; Niemann, 2001). Discrimination and oppression can lead to cultural and familial isolation. Flores-Ortiz (1999) argued that self-blame and self-loathing are product of living through oppression and discrimination and can ultimately manifest in familial violence.

Mexican and Mexican American youth have described experiences of discrimination in school, health, and community settings (Malott, 2010). Discriminatory beliefs and stereotypes have historically portrayed people of Mexican ancestry as less capable and intelligent. Incidences of discrimination lead youth to feel less capable than their Anglo peers (Malott, 2010). Males, in particular, described incidents of harassment from police (Malott, 2010). As a young man, I recall facing many incidents of discrimination. In one instance, my family was traveling to Juarez, Mexico, on the El Paso, Texas border, to visit relatives. We stopped at a fast food restaurant in Texas and an older White man came up to me and stated that there were bounties for the apprehension of "illegals." Though my family are all US citizens, and at the time I did not fully understand this man's statement, I was scared. What is more, this incident has stuck with me, and I now find myself being particularly aware of circumstances when I find myself in the ethnic minority—demonstrating the lasting negative impact discrimination has on people of Mexican ancestry.

**Internalized Racism** Many of the stereotypes faced by people of Mexican ancestry today (being lazy, uneducated, criminal, and violent) are derivations of the negative stereotypes used to characterize Mexican as culturally inferior and to rationalize their marginalization. What is worse, people of Mexican ancestry have internalized these stereotypes that might ultimately hurt their self-efficacy across multiple domains and leads to distancing from cultural heritage (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2014; Niemann, 2001). The internalization of racism is also likely to lead people of Mexican ancestry toward cultural assimilation—the denial of Mexican cultural heritage and full adoption of American cultural values. Though, this was thought to be the ideal, recent research (described below) highlights the importance of maintaining Mexican cultural values. People of Mexican ancestry who internalize racism feel that by cultural assimilation they can escape bias and discrimination. Unfortunately, many people of Mexican heritage are overdetermined by our physical

appearance—being unable to pass as Euro American. As such, if they face rejection from American communities they are left without cultural resources to rely upon for support.

**Access to Mental Health Services** Cultural barrier theory, a deficit-based approach, assumes that traditional Mexican cultural values conflict with values of counseling and, thus, keep Mexican Americans from seeking mental health services (Ramos-Sánchez, 2014; Ramos-Sánchez & Atkinson, 2009). In a study of Mexican Americans, Ramos-Sánchez and Atkinson (2009) found that that acculturation to US cultural values had no impact on mental health usage, and that greater association with Mexican cultural values was related to more help seeking. Given the correlation between maintenance of Mexican cultural values and help-seeking attitudes, Ramos-Sánchez (2014) encouraged mental health providers to move away from deficit frames of thinking.

Structural barriers, such lack of transportation, child care, Spanish-speaking counselors, mental health facilities near Mexican American communities, and culturally sensitive counselors result in Mexican heritage individuals and families' underutilization of mental health services. (Ramos-Sánchez, 2014; Yznaga, 2008). Further, Ramos-Sánchez (2014) noted that 31% of Mexican Americans lacked health insurance, which would require these individuals to pay out of pocket for mental health services—making accessing services financially unattainable. To address this challenge, mental health providers must take an advocacy role and creatively work to eliminate barriers to the usage of counseling services.

**The Acculturation Gap** In the context of US counseling and psychology, acculturation has come to represent the Americanization of ethnic minorities—that is the acceptance of dominant Euro-American cultural values (Hipolito-Delgado & Diaz, 2013). The acculturation gap describes a process by where children acculturate to US values at a more rapid rate than their parents (Hipolito-Delgado & Diaz, 2013); this is often due to children having more sustained contact with US cultural institutions. This process can lead to conflict in the family as parents feel that children are becoming too Americanized and are ashamed of Mexican cultural values.

Intergenerational tensions associated with the acculturation gap can be accelerated when parents, who can no longer rely on the watchful eyes of extended family and trusted community members, compensate with restriction on youth's social activities (Falicov, 2005). This can take the form of limiting involvement with after-school activities and requiring youth to speak only Spanish at home. I have often heard parents tell their children that inside their home is Mexico, outside is the United States.

Youth might also experience tensions between the cultural norms expected at home and more Americanized expectations of school, peers, and work (Falicov, 2005). In some cases, because of quicker mastery of English, youth will become translators for their family; as such these youth enter the parent sphere. The blurring of boundaries can become problematic when youth are then expected to conform to roles and behaviors associated with the child sphere. For example, being forced to

obey and being submissive to teachers' directives at school can be confusing for youth who take on more adult roles at home.

Intergenerational conflict can also be heightened by gender expectations; this is especially true as Mexican heritage females who seek opportunities outside of the home but are also expected to maintain familial obligations (Castillo & Hill, 2004; Niemann, 2001). The deviation of Mexican heritage females from cultural norms can be seen as the ultimate sign of disrespect in traditional Mexican homes. I most frequently observe this gender tension with young women who are pursuing college. It has been helpful for me to ensure the family that, if they have instilled important values in their daughter, she will maintain them. Further, I remind the families that they came to the United States to seek greater opportunities for their children and going to college will open many opportunities for their daughters—parents need to be affirmed.

## *Strengths*

**Cultural Pride** Several studies underscore how Mexican heritage youth described pride for their culture, as a source of strength and resilience (Malott, 2010). Similarly, Mexican heritage college students described taking strength in their cultural heritage (Morgan Consoli & Llamas, 2013). As such, counselors are encouraged to help Mexican heritage youth learn about their culture of origin. Further, counselors are encouraged to facilitate Mexican origin youth's participation in cultural traditions and celebrations (Malott, 2010). This might include participation in *ballet folklórico*, *mariachi*, or culturally specific clubs such as *El Movimiento Estudiantil Chicana/o de Aztlan* (MEChA).

Interestingly, being Mexican was defined, by these youth, as the ability to overcome hardships, being strong, and being tenacious in overcoming challenges—this definition empowered them to deal with environmental stressors (Malott, 2010; Morgan Consoli & Llamas, 2013). Morgan Consoli and Llamas (2013) equated these statements with the notion of *aguantando* which best translates as enduring or persevering. This definition of Mexicans as resilient, inspired Mexican heritage youth to face their challenges with ambition and determination to overcome (Malott, 2010; Morgan Consoli & Llamas, 2013). Therefore, counselors are encouraged to explore collective strengths of being Mexican and use these discussions as a way to inspire individual strengths in people of Mexican heritage they have the opportunity counsel.

Further, Morgan Consoli, Llamas, and Consoli (2016) found that affiliation with traditional Mexican cultural values predicted thriving in Mexican origin college students, and that traditional Mexican cultural values contributed to psychological well-being and positive mental health outcomes. Perhaps the reason that connection to culture buffers mental health ailments is that connection to traditional cultural values leads to more stability in the family and access to community resources (Falicov, 2005).

**Parental Support** Familial connection and interdependence are integral parts of Mexican culture (Caldera et al., 2014). The importance of family can be closely linked to the traditional values of *familismo*, familial interdependence including extended family members (Caldera et al., 2014; Falicov, 2005), and *respeto*, the notion of providing respect and deference to people of significant social position and older generations (Caldera et al., 2014; Morgan Consoli & Llamas, 2013). It is important to recognize that in Mexican culture, family is often extended to include grandparents, aunts/uncles, cousins, and close family friends. The notions of *familismo* and *respeto* might lead to longer states of interdependence in Mexican heritage families than would be viewed in more Americanized families (Falicov, 2005).

In Mexican families a hierarchy is common, with parents being high and children—even adult children—being low (Caldera et al., 2014; Falicov, 2005). Within the child sphere, older siblings receive more respect than do younger siblings. Related to familial hierarchy, the notion of *machismo* carries a bad connotation in the United States. Though some men will abuse *machismo* to defend sexist behavior and rationalize abuse, *machismo* should involve a father's dedication to their family and responsibility to provide for the family's well-being (Falicov, 2005). I learned *machismo* from my *Tio*: most of his life he worked as a mechanic and I remember him coming home from work tired with his hands stained by oil. He cared deeply for his family, he had two daughters—one adopted—that he treated equally with love and protected fiercely. My *Tia* and *Primas* were well cared for and wanted for nothing, meanwhile he made due with minimal possessions. He served as mentor for me and my brothers, teaching us how to navigate manhood, marriage, and fatherhood. Yes, he was always served dinner first—what I see as a sign of respect for all he did for his family—but he never abused his position of respect.

For people of Mexican ancestry, family might be the first resource they seek for emotional support. Further, family provides identity, a sense of security, and social and financial support (Morgan Consoli & Llamas, 2013; Ramos-Sánchez, 2014). Mexican origin youth described being inspired to achieve academically by the sacrifices and hard work of their parents (Malott, 2010) and the notion that family should come before all else (Malott, 2009). Research has also supported the importance of family in Mexican heritage individuals. A negative relationship has been found between familial support and psychological distress, acculturative stress, and delinquent behavior (Castillo & Hill, 2004; Crockett et al., 2007; Shah & West-Olatunji, 2015). Additionally, a positive association was found between familial support and emotional well-being, resilience, and thriving (Morgan Consoli et al., 2016; Morgan Consoli & Llamas, 2013; Shah & West-Olatunji, 2015). Later in this chapter, I will discuss how to leverage familial support in working with Mexican heritage individuals and families.

**Religion and Spirituality** Traditionally, communities of faith, particularly the Catholic church, have held a position of importance in Mexican heritage communities (Falicov, 2005). Religion can also provide a sense of community and priest can be both spiritual leaders and emotional supports. Familial celebrations and

important life markers are often associated with religious events. In my family, the Catholic celebration of sacraments, like baptism, and holy holidays, such as All Saints Day, are all observed. Though I am not a strict Catholic, so much of Catholicism is intertwined with Mexican culture—as such, recognizing Catholic holidays seems more like a cultural celebration. A prime example of this is *Día de los Muertos*, a blend of indigenous and Catholic holidays and a celebration and remembrance of loved ones who have passed, has become an important holiday for me and my family.

It is suggested that religion and spirituality be viewed as a resource for support and problem solving with Mexican heritage individuals. Mexican heritage college students described turning to faith in difficult times (Morgan Consoli & Llamas, 2013) and connection with faith was associated with thriving (Morgan Consoli et al., 2016). If they are sensitive to sociopolitical circumstances, priests can also provide support to Mexican heritage families—especially as it relates to existential concerns. It is also worth noting that the use of *curanderos* is still widely accepted in many Mexican heritage communities. A *curandera/o* uses a mix of prayer, herbs, and talk therapy to help clients through physical, spiritual, and emotional ailments. Many Mexican heritage families might be more inclined to see a *curandera/o* than to rely on counselors or western medicine.

## Success Stories: What Works

In this section, I will share strategies and considerations for successfully counseling Mexican heritage clients and families. An important first step to working with Mexican heritage clients and families is developing rapport. Falicov (2005) and Ramos-Sánchez (2014) called for counselors to be warm and personable in working with Mexican ancestry clients; a warm, friendly, and respectful environment capitalizes on the cultural value of *personalismo*. I am particularly put off by counselors who use a customer service approach to counseling, starting off a session by asking “what brings you in today.” Though an expedited approach such as this might be appropriate with my cell phone company, I want a counselor to get to know me personally.

Additionally, counselors will need to work to gain access to Mexican heritage clients. By working in churches, community centers, and schools, counselors can build relationships with stakeholders, learn about issues faced in the community, and begin to develop rapport with community members (Shah & West-Olatunji, 2015). I encourage counselors to offer free workshops to Mexican heritage communities, a popular topic is often facilitating communication in the family. By reaching out and offering services to the community, you will begin to develop trust and will likely see an increase in clients arriving for services.

## ***Genograms***

Widely used in family therapy, genograms might be particularly useful in alleviating acculturative stress and promoting culturally appropriate therapy with Mexican heritage families (Yznaga, 2008). The use of the genogram allows for more specific cultural understanding of the individual client and family and provides space for the client to tell their story. Yznaga (2008) recommends asking clients to identify the strengths and positive characteristics of family members diagrammed as this provides a way to metaphorically connect and adapt familial coping strategies. The genogram might also be a way to identify redundant family patterns and identify exceptions (Yznaga, 2008).

## ***Parental Support***

Given the importance of family, counselors are encouraged to incorporate family either as sources of support or as part of therapy when working with Mexicans and Mexican Americans (Castillo & Hill, 2004; Malott, 2009). Ramos-Sánchez (2014) goes further to assert that family should be at the forefront of treatment of Mexican origin clients. Including parents in counseling with youth allows space for open dialogue, it allows youth to gain parental support, it can normalize and validate feelings, and should ultimately encourage continued support outside of counseling (Shah & West-Olatunji, 2015). During challenging times, counselors should encourage family connectedness as a way of bolstering social and emotional support (Ramos-Sánchez, 2014).

Indirect or third person communication is common in Mexican origin families (Falicov, 2005). It is believed that this passive form of communication might be aligned with the cultural value of *simpatia*, or maintaining harmony (Falicov, 2005). Alas, this passive form of communication can be vague as to its intentions and can be misinterpreted. As such a counselor might need to serve the role of an intermediary, helping to clarify familial expectations and helping to translate cultural values between generations (Falicov, 2005). This tendency for *simpatia* and indirect communication can also impact how Mexican heritage families communicate with their counselor. Encourage Mexican origin families to express their reactions openly and to disagree with the counselor when necessary; inform families that this is not a sign of disrespect but will help the family in clarifying their values and needs (Falicov, 2005).

Another tool for fostering communication in Mexican origin families is through the usage of *dichos*—sayings or proverbs that are intended to provide important life lessons (Arredondo et al., 2006). Growing up my great grandmother and mom, used *dichos* as an indirect form of instruction to convey how they expected me to behave. A counselor might use *dichos* in counseling for various reasons: First, the use of *dichos* is culturally affirming. Secondly, encouraging Mexican heritage families to



share their favorite *dichos* allows the counselor to learn more about the family's values and beliefs (Arredondo et al., 2006). Finally, the discussion of *dichos* as a family can help clarify expectations and foster dialogue between generations.

### ***Debunking Stereotypes***

In order to avoid the internalization of racism, counselors can facilitate conversation with their Mexican heritage clients and families that lead to the realization that bias and stereotypes are rooted in flawed societal attitudes (Niemann, 2001) and the sociopolitical context that demonizes Mexican people. Counselors can help Mexican heritage clients' work through the dissonance of negative stereotypes (Niemann, 2001). The goal here is to help the client recognize that stereotypes and discrimination are not a reflection of the client, but rather the ignorance of the perpetrator. It is also helpful for clients to focus on the positive aspects of cultural identity and the resilience of people of Mexican ancestry in the face of a long history of oppression (Niemann, 2001). By focusing on the positives of culture, the counselor affirms the value of Mexican heritage and encourages the client to use this as a point of strength.

Malott (2010) not only encouraged debunking incidences of discrimination, but training clients on how to respond to discrimination. When one is faced with discrimination, there can often be shock and disbelief rendering one either incapable of formulating a response or leading to an angry outburst. By practicing responses to discrimination, Mexican heritage clients can be armed with tools to potentially defuse the situation and call the perpetrators actions into question.

### ***Empowerment***

Empowerment describes the ability to exert control over one's sociopolitical circumstances. Empowerment is particularly important for Mexican heritage clients and families given the years of oppression they have faced in the United States. Shah and West-Olatunji (2015) stated that empowerment could specifically help Mexican American youth deal with the stresses of discrimination. Although a full exploration of empowerment is beyond the scope of this chapter, the key aspects of consciousness-raising, positive identity development, and community action are briefly discussed.

**Consciousness-Raising** Healing from the injustices of oppression requires an active understanding of the realities of oppression and deconstruction of internalized "isms" (Flores-Ortiz, 1999). To this end, counselors can facilitate open dialogue about the experience of oppression and the negative psychological impacts it has on the family. Encourage youth and family to increase understanding the role society has played in the oppression of Mexican origin communities (Niemann, 2001)—how US policy has placed people of Mexican ancestry on the lower end of

sociopolitical structures. The goals of these dialogues are to highlight that the challenges faced by Mexican heritage families are rooted in larger systems of oppression, that the family is not to blame for their current sociopolitical circumstances, and to inspire the family to take action to improve their sociopolitical circumstances.

**Positive Identity** Do not assume a clients' ethnic label preference, discuss with clients their preferred ethnic identity label and the meaning associated with their preferred label (Malott, 2009). This discussion will illuminate aspects of your Mexican heritage clients' worldview and values and will allow you to identify potential strengths. Counselors work to empower clients by building on their cultural values, reconnecting them with their past, and in defining empowered identities (Cervantes & Mejia, 2009; Morgan Consoli et al., 2016). A positive identity grounded in the beauty of Mexican cultural heritage can protect against the negative effects of oppression. Further, positive cultural identity can inspire connection to family and community and, ultimately, a desire for sociopolitical change.

**Community Action** For empowerment to take hold, sociopolitical change must occur—this entails community organizing and action. Counselors can facilitate this process by encouraging Mexican heritage families to engage with local advocacy groups. For example, in Denver there is a group called *Padres y Jovenes Unidos* that does advocacy work related to education and immigrant rights. This will be an excellent place for Mexican heritage families to participate in community action. As families gain confidence, they might be willing to up their involvement in other community actions to help improve their and their community's sociopolitical reality.

## *Psychospirituality*

As previously discussed, religion and spirituality can be a source of strength for Mexican heritage families, thus, counselors and therapists are encouraged to consider how this can be better incorporated in counseling. Cervantes (2010) advocated for a psychospiritual approach he calls Mestizo spirituality when working with Mexican origin individuals. This approach begins with the assumption that “traumas, emotional/physical insults, joys, and sufferings of life are part of one's spiritual journey toward wholeness” (Cervantes, 2010, p. 532). Key principles include awareness and respect for the sacredness of one's life journey, renewal of spiritual beliefs and traditions, forgiveness for past wrong doings, reconnection to a larger cosmic reality, learning to speak from one's heart, and service to others. According to Cervantes, specific technique is much less important than the healing presence of the therapist who facilitates dialogue: first, about the client's life goals and existential dilemmas; then about the client's presenting issue in the context of their life; third, about forgiveness and recommitment to social and community networks; fourth, a movement toward increase self-awareness and being true to one's self; and finally, a commitment to a larger cosmic reality and being of service to others in

order to promote positivity. I was particularly drawn to this approach as not only did it include culture and spirituality but was consistent with goals of empowerment.

## Closing Thoughts

Since the presidential campaign of 2016, people of Mexican ancestry have faced a new wave of discrimination, public ridicule, and oppression. In the past, communities of color have reacted to marginalization by attempting to assimilate to Euro-American cultural values in an attempt to hide their difference—such a strategy has never been a good choice, and furthermore, it would be imprudent for Mexican heritage families. What should be clear from this chapter is that for people of Mexican ancestry, our cultural heritage and family are sources of strength; we do not have to compromise ourselves. As mental health professionals, it is incumbent upon us to promote healthy family connections and an appreciation of cultural heritage to promote the mental well-being of Mexican origin families.

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