

A Guide to Better Understanding of Latino Family Culture

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This NebGuide provides an overview of Latino culture, including history and immigration, the importance of culture and family, and how assimilation into Anglo culture occurs.

Latino Versus Hispanic?

Hispanic and Latino are both labels used to describe people who come from a variety of countries and cultural backgrounds. In their countries of origin, these people would not use either label to describe themselves. Instead, they would use a label that describes their country of origin or ethnic group identification. “They are Cubans, Chicanos, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Argentineans, Colombians, Dominicans, Brazilians, Guatemalans, Costa Ricans, Nicaraguans, Salvadorians, and all the other nationalities that comprise South America, Central America, and the Caribbean” (Garcia-Preto, 1996, p.142). It is when they come to the United States that the label of Hispanic or Latino is given to them.

“Hispanic” is the official designation of the United States Census used to track population changes and trends. Many Latinos do not like being called Hispanics. Others do not like the term “Hispanic” because it is an English word and does not identify their gender like the words “Latino” or “Latina” do. Some don’t like it because it refers to an old empire and Spanish conquerors. When a designation is necessary, it is most appropriate to use the term chosen by the individual or the group. (DeNeve, 1997)

History and Immigration

Besides country of origin, Latinos also differ in the length of time they have been in the U.S. Their history in this country goes back to the 1500s when Spaniards first settled in the southwestern United States. This history includes the various wars and struggles that occurred into the 1800s between Mexico and the U.S. There are families of Mexicans and Spaniards who have lived in the U.S. since before the Mayflower, but the majority of immigrants came after the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1920 and World War II. People

usually immigrate because of economic depression or political revolution in their home country and the desire for opportunity, freedom, and safety for themselves and their families.

Once in the U.S., poverty often becomes a way of life for many Latinos and their lack of access to resources keeps them locked in this cycle. Jobs are scarce, housing is substandard but costly, and difficulties speaking English keep them in this cycle.

Understanding Cultural Patterns

Just as the number of countries Latinos come from is vast, so are the cultural and racial differences between them. Skin color, for example, varies from light to dark. Other differences are often used to stereotype Latinos into one set mold. A stereotype is a “fixed or conventional notion or conception of a person, group or idea” (DeNeve, 1997, p. 19). Stereotypes are imposed on one group by another group and presume that everyone within the group exhibits those characteristics without room for difference.

Cultural patterns describe the systems of values, beliefs, practices, and customs of a particular group of people. These make up the fabric of a people’s lives. Both the people who are a part of a group and the people who are not part of a group can learn to recognize the cultural patterns of that group. Also, knowing the difference between cultural patterns and stereotypes is important. This knowledge assists in understanding the attitudes and behaviors of members from that ethnic or cultural group and working with them. The following are general cultural patterns found in many Latino groups. (DeNeve, 1997)

- *Importance of the family and authority:* Latino people often place a great emphasis on the family and family obligations and believe the family is honored through strong work ethics and by providing good financial support. Gender roles are clearly defined in Latino families with males being in superior roles within a well-defined family hierarchy. The male as head of the household sets the rules and actions. This is also true in other parts of a Latino’s life where age is respected and a hierarchy of status and economic class is expected. The

use of titles and rank add to these roles and expected differences. (DeNeve, 1997)

- *Formality*: From this value on hierarchy and authority comes a tradition of formality in speech, dress, and relationships. Status differentiations are part of the Spanish language reflecting how close friends are addressed versus all other people. Latinos are meticulous about having a proper appearance outside the home since this is related to status, respectability, and family pride. Many appear overdressed within the workplace because of the importance of “proper” attire. Poorer people may be reluctant to attend school or social functions because they lack this attire.
- *Work ethic*: The attitudes of authority and family affect attitudes toward work. On the one hand, Latinos feel that family should take precedence over work because work is an obligation to meet family responsibilities. This contrasts with respect for authority and the value of work causing Latinos to invest a great deal in their work. “Their preference is to work in an organization to which they can give their loyalty and establish long-term relationships” (DeNeve, 1997, p. 20). Moving from job to job is seen as a sign of instability rather than a sign of success.

Assimilation

Assimilation means becoming the same or blending in. Many ethnic groups have done this by taking on the language, values, and behaviors of the dominant group and abandoning the home culture and language. In the early part of this century, European immigrants came to the U.S. and assimilated by doing these things. The Latino experience has been different. They have not readily been molded into the U.S. melting pot and have wrestled with adapting to the Anglo culture versus maintaining traditional beliefs and practices. Listed below are areas where Latinos vary from the mainstream Anglo culture:

- *Ethnic identity*: Latinos retain a strong sense of ethnic identity regardless of the length of time or number of generations in the U.S. or the level of education attained. The factor with some influence on cultural identity is that of age at immigration. Younger children (preschool versus adolescence) are more likely to have a bi-cultural identity. This does not mean a total rejection of their ethnic origin and assimilation into the Anglo mainstream but rather being bi-cultural, (a synthesis of U.S. and Latino cultures). Ethnic identity is manifested in a strong sense of community and in allegiance to Latino concerns. (Hurtado, 1995)
- *Familism*: Latinos report a strong commitment to family. Latino families tend to be larger in size and vary with the inclusion of a number of extended family members. Latino families tend to settle and remain in geographic areas close to other related families for material and social support. (Hurtado, 1995)

- *Spanish-language maintenance*: Although Latinos learn English with each successive generation in the U.S., children are bi-lingual and continue to learn and use Spanish and English. This reflects positive attitudes Latinos have towards their language and the desire to preserve it as part of their culture. (Hurtado, 1995)

Socioeconomic Characteristics

Historically, Latinos have been disadvantaged in U.S. society. This is shown in the areas of education, the labor force, social status, and earnings. In general, Latino women (Latinas) are in worse economic positions than men. As a group, most Latinos have had a lower educational level although this is changing over time. As with other ethnic groups, the number of Latina women in the work force is dramatically increasing. But, this varies in areas of the country where employment opportunities are not as available for lower-skilled workers. Overall, Latinos along with African Americans and American Indians are more economically disadvantaged than non-Hispanic Whites and Asians. This disadvantage is attributed to a long history of discrimination and oppression of these groups in the U.S. (Ortiz, 1995, p. 29). Evidence of this discrimination and oppression can be seen in the fact that the “educational levels of Latinos [are] lower, and they [are] less likely to be professionals, to have their own businesses, or to earn as much as other groups” (Ortiz, 1995).

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