Mexican American Fatherhood: Culture, Machismo, and Spirituality

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Fatherhood has become an increasingly important dialogue in lifespan development (Bozett & Hanson, 1991; Park 2000; Shapiro, Diamond, & Greenberg, 1996). As reported by Marsiglo, Amato, Day, and Lamb (2000), the scholarship on fatherhood over the last fifteen years has highlighted a major field of study which has included critical discourse about methodological inquiry, national surveys and fathering measures, father involvement in childhood outcomes, father-child relationship, and the inclusion of non-resident fathers. However, little attention has been paid to the study of culturally diverse fathers and the differential impact on the life cycle of ethnic minority families (Hunter & Davis, 1992; Rogers & White, 1993). Consequently, the study of fathers through the 90s decade has focused its understanding of culturally diverse men on extrapolation from married and middle class populations, limiting the empirical knowledge base of those individuals and families who do not fit into this framework (Coley, 2001).

Perceptions of ethnic minority parenting, particularly fatherhood, have been defined primarily by a view that low income and minority fathers do not fit the traditional married, residential, and financially supportive images which have historically characterized normative, lifespan frameworks. Consequently, these perceptions have been cast in negative, non-affirming images regarding the relationship to a family’s well being (Coley, 2001). Garcia Coll et al. (1996) have commented on the need to situate parenting within a larger contextual perspective that incorporates the effects of racism, cultural factors, and the wider social environment of schools and neighborhoods. As such, ethnic minority fatherhood has not been addressed nor centered within its appropriate developmental pathway adding to inappropriate assumptions that have influenced counseling practice. (Muir, Schwartz, & Szapocznik, 2004).

This chapter will focus exclusively on Mexican American fatherhood and the various dimensions of this cultural group whose roles and responsibilities have major significance to communities across the U.S. (Hayes-Bautista, 2004). Practitioners can not afford to have the stereotyped images of Latinos continue to influence clinical beliefs that are often made about this
cultural group. As reported by Chavez (2001), some of these primary images that have flooded the media have included Latinos described primarily as undocumented immigrants, gang bangers, and welfare mothers. These visual stimuli have served to inappropriately define the population demographics of this group as well as to bias attitudes and respective sentiments to define Mexican American fathers. By association, these attitudes have direct impact on clinical practice and related proposed interventions.

Mexican American fathers have not been given the level of scholarship and subsequent understanding of clinical practice that is deserved in part due to the lack of interest with this cultural reference group and the related stereotypes (Baca Zinn, 1982; Mirande, 1997a; Torres, Solberg, & Carlstrom, 2002). Coley (2001) indicated ethnic minority fathers have been viewed as invisible men due to their unique life circumstances and the understanding of a developmental framework that has been based on a radically different normative standard. As such, stereotypes specific to Mexican American males have been influenced primarily by assumptions and attitudes describing this group as sexist, manipulative, and subject to a negative interpretation of masculine attributes, such as machismo (Cervantes, 2006; Torres, Solberg, & Carlstrom, 2002).

This chapter will outline several different areas relative to Mexican-American fatherhood to assist the counseling professional in developing a deeper awareness of this population and will propose culturally competent clinical intervention. I will discuss this conceptual dialogue within the following major headings: population and immigration dynamics, Mexican American fatherhood and culture, case studies related to the diversity of Mexican American fathers, role of spirituality, and counseling issues and intervention. Brief case studies will be used to illustrate particular areas of discussion. In addition, a more extended case will be presented in the end to provide an example of how this author works with this population.
Population and Immigration Demographics

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2007), Latinos constitute about 14.2% or 40.5 million of the U.S. population, and Mexicans constitute the largest Latino subgroup at nearly 26 million. Of this group, approximately 31% of Mexicans living in the U.S. are immigrants while another 9% are immigrants who have become naturalized citizens of the U.S. Martin (2003) reported that approximately one million legal immigrants become legal permanent residents (LPR) each year in the initial step towards U.S. citizenship.

The relevance of these data is the observation that when examining Mexican American fatherhood, the issue of immigration status plays a significant role in several important psychological factors: parenting, therapeutic expectations reflecting differences in cultural values and traditions, employment and residential stability, physical availability to family, and legal status (Chavez, 2001; Falicov, 1998; Mayo, 1997; McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, & Wilson, 2000; Portes & Rumbolt, 2001). Although Latinos are a diverse group, this population inclusive of Mexican and Mexican Americans, are typically unified by the Spanish language and the Catholic religion (Falicov, 1998, 1999; Matovina & Riebe-Estrada, 2002; Zambrana, 1995).

Relevant Immigration Dynamics

Any discussion of Mexican Americans, specifically fatherhood, needs to consider the issue of immigration. Contextual factors can play a significant role in assessment and intervention. However, this literature base is vast and will not be discussed in this writing. Refer to the following authors for more specific understanding of immigration (Hays-Bautista, 2004; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). This chapter will address only the post-war Latino, often referred to as the Latino baby boom generation (1950s and forward), who grew up heavily influenced by mainstream American culture. This identified generation of Latina/os is primarily of Mexican American background.
The rise in immigration from Mexico significantly increased through the 90s which resulted in several implications for Mexican American families. Newly arrived immigrants did not have the benefit of the knowledge and experience resulting from the civil rights movements two decades earlier as was true for prior generations. As a result, limited exposure to social justice dialogue made these newer arrivals less aware of their rights, and by association, their connection with the brotherhood of well established Mexican American communities. Second, influence in many Spanish speaking communities became more obvious with an increase of Latino-owned businesses in strip malls and companies headed by Latino CEOs. Lastly, the influx of Latinos over the past decade has allowed this cultural group to define its own identity.

The history of the immigrant second generation has supported a continued theme of Latino influence throughout the U.S. (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). While there is a current backlash of Mexicans who are undocumented and has resulted in factory raids, building fences and walls across border towns, and the levying of financial sanctions on employers who hire undocumented individuals, Latinos continue to bring significant influence in the nation (National Council of the Raza, 2007). This history has also added to a diverse understanding of how the ethnic label, Mexican American, has come to be categorized (Cervantes, 2004; Griswold del Castillo, 1984). It is within this backdrop that Mexican American fathers have become a relevant population demographic, one that is salient to counseling practice, and which mandates the requirement for subsequent clinical competency (American Psychological Association, 2003).

**Mexican-American Fatherhood and Culture**

A critical dialogue about men was not initiated until Bill Moyers’ PBS special on Robert Bly “A Gathering of Men” aired in 1990. This national opportunity to discuss the challenges of being male in society brought attention to the truth about masculinity, the need for initiation rituals in passing from boyhood to manhood, and a new vision for an understanding of manhood (Bly, 1990; Bly, Hillman, & Meade, 1992). These early writings began to ask fundamental questions:
how are men and woman different from each other?; how do these differences affect emotional and physical wellbeing?; and how does a social construction of masculinity impact the lives of men and their pathways as partners and fathers? (Brooks, 2001). What was not asked was: how does cultural diversity contribute to the shaping of men, and by association, the development of fatherhood? More directly, what does this cultural shaping look like for Mexican American fathers?

The absence of writing on Latino fathers, specifically Mexican Americans, has been due primarily to an earlier emphasis on white middle and upper class families, stereotypes of ethnic minority males, and the bias toward viewing women as primary gate keepers and protectors of family life. (Coley, 2001; Torres, Solberg, & Carlstrom, 2002; Zambrana, 1995). The limited descriptions of Mexican American fathers have not been complementary and invite images that are negative and stereotypical. Writing by Diaz-Guerrero over fifty years ago (1955) described Mexican males as authoritarian, aloof, reserved, or restrictive in emotion, and prone to aggressiveness, characteristics described as core characteristics of both Mexican and Mexican American men. By association, these characteristics have been attributed to fatherhood without any validity to this conceptual linkage. Other examples have included Oscar Lewis’ (1960, 1961) ethnographic studies in rural and urban Mexico that portrayed the father as dominant, authoritarian, and maker of all major decisions in the household. In addition, relations with children were described as distant with severe physical punishment used to maintain respect of children and spouse. These reference labels have carried over toward perceptions of Mexican American fathers and the assumed relationships with their children (Mirande, 1988).

Contrasting and distinct views of fatherhood in more recent years have described Mexican and Mexican American fatherhood in a more positive light reflecting characteristics such as being supportive, protective, engaged in parenting functions, and fully involved in the lifespan of families (Cervantes & Sweatt, 2004; Griswold del Castillo, 1984; Meir & Ribera, 1993; Powell, 1995; Sanchez, 1993; Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, & Gallardo-Cooper, 2002). Despite the stereotypic
and biased overtone that was set by early writers (Diaz-Guerrero 1955; Lewis 1960, 1961; Paz 1961), a relevant question to consider is *how should Mexican American fatherhood be understood in the twenty-first century?*

A helpful discussion about fatherhood was presented by Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, and Lamb (2000) who commented on four primary social trends that have impacted children’s lives: women’s increased labor force participation, involvement of fathers in intact families, cultural diversity in the U.S., and absence of nonresidential fathers in the lives of children. As such, the changing American family has been impacted by the development of more single parent families and biological father absence. In addition, immigration and acculturation have had related impact on indices of behavior and psychological stability with Latina/o families. Some of the conclusions reached by Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, and Lamb (2000) are that mothers will continue to be an essential focus in the parenting, will more likely experience fulltime employment outside the home, and adolescents may be reared with unpredictable expectations of their future lives.

It is significant to note that these conclusions are based on a broad overview of societal forces that affect families as a whole. Specific to Mexican American families, fathers in this cultural group are still in the process of shaking off old stereotypes, managing the label of being macho as young adult males (Mirande, 1997a), and navigating the co-related arenas of ethnic labeling and the acculturative process (Velasquez & Burton, 2004). The question of how Mexican American fatherhood is impacted by these four social trends in the new millennia is unclear; however, it is important to recognize the qualitatively distinct social and cultural forces, especially to the issue of fathering for Mexican American males (McLoyd et. al., 2000).

Dillworth-Anderson and Burton (1996) and Stack and Burton (1993) observed that traditional family developmental theories are limited in their view on life span issues specific to many ethnic and cultural communities. As such, these authors underscore the fact that for many
families, their lives are impacted by social-structural forces such as racism, unemployment, and poverty. A further critique is provided by Falicov (1998) who comments on the role of the migration experience as being a major experiential pathway for Mexican and Mexican American families. Interestingly, this major life episode has not played a role in the development of lifespan theories. Our understanding of Mexican American fatherhood has been defined by misunderstanding, stereotypes, and developmental theories that are disapproving, judgmental, and unrelated to the everyday life experience of this cultural group (Casas, Turner, & Ruiz de Esparza, 2001; Mayo, 1997; Mirande, 1988; Ramirez & Arce, 1981).

Newer observations of Mexican American fatherhood in the twenty-first century have been offered by several authors who comment on the importance of not making broad generalizations of Latinos about their roles, responsibilities, and involvement in the family. For example, Torres, Solberg, and Carlstrom, (2002) debunk the myth of machismo and encourage this attribute to be placed within a perspective that integrates historical backdrop, acculturation status, socioeconomic status, and family functioning. A similar observation made by Cervantes (2006) addressed this issue through a case study highlighting a more holistic view of machismo as related to Mexican American men.

Parra-Cardona, Wampler, and Sharp (2006) report on the significant diversity that is noted with Mexican American fathers and their subsequent involvement in teaching the value of harmony in relationships outside the home. In addition, Parke and Buriel (1998) comment on the distinct cultural traditions evident with Cuban, Puerto Rican, and Mexican American men relative to their specific roles as fathers and the shaping that they do to provide unique strength in their protective nature with families. A consistent theme with these writers is that there is limited information on this cultural reference group and that the relevant parameters to understanding Mexican American fatherhood have not been well understood. Implied in their comments is the acknowledgement of the wide diversity of fatherhood development with Mexican American men and the inaccuracies in
making broad generalizations. These assumptions then reflect on how psychological care becomes defined. Refer to writing by Cervantes and Sweatt (2004) for a review of best practices guidelines with Mexican American families which have direct implication for understanding fatherhood.

Some critical dimensions toward framing Mexican American fatherhood that can assist practitioners toward more accurate assessments in the counseling process include the following: ethnic identification, culturally relevant perceptions of fatherhood, perceptions of masculinity, machismo and role identity.

*Ethnic identification*

Latino male identity and fatherhood have not historically been linked in the literature; however, clinical experience finds a meaningful connection between the quality of the relationship, attachment, parenting, and values of being a father. For example, early writing by Valdez, Barron, and Ponce (1987) reported on the diversity that exists in the self identification process with Mexican Americans who have used a variety of ethnic labels to identify themselves including, Spanish American, Hispanic, Latino, Chicano, and Tex-Mex. While their study is not specific to fatherhood, these authors indicate that the reference point of masculinity is defined by the cultural, self identification process that impacts level of acculturation. As such, the demeanor and style that Mexican American fathers hold may be influenced by their ethnic identification.

The importance of ethnic labeling is relevant as assumptions are often made by practitioners based on subjective beliefs about what it means to identify as Mexican American. Casas and Pytluk (1995) provided a comprehensive review of ethnic identity formation specifically with Mexican Americans that examined several models relative to understanding ethnic identity with this group. A related commentary is made from a feminist perspective by Ramirez and Arce (1981) who discussed the significant diversity of acculturation trajectories that were evident with Mexican American families. This observation was updated by Pasch et al. (2006) who commented on the relevance of questioning stereotypes and not cataloguing Latina/o groups into single identities due
to the diversity of contexts related to nationality, migration history, within group variability, and acculturation. Interested readers can consult Knight et al. (1993), Bernal et al. (1990), and Phinney (1990) for a more extended discussion of ethnic identity. As such, understanding Mexican American fathers should permit sensitivity to the diverse ways in which this cultural label is understood and subsequently, how roles and parenting as fathers are self-appointed and incorporated.

*Culturally Relevant Perceptions of Fatherhood*

The task of fatherhood is generally grounded in learning to provide nurturance, integrating effective problem solving skills, stress management, and balancing displays of affection and disagreement in the parenting role (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000). In addition, the characteristics of families that shape parental involvement with children tend to involve a combination of factors such as gender and age, father, mother, and co-parent factors, life events such as employment, birth of children, health crisis, and so forth (Coley & Hernandez, 2006; Wood & Repetti, 2004). For Mexican American fathers, this shaping is influenced by primary cultural values such as family (*familismo*), respect for others and the elderly (*respeto*), and the need to dictate the appropriate child rearing practices that are important for youth to learn (*ser buen educado*). Halgunseth, Ispa, and Rudy (2006) comment on these cultural values and motivational roots that impact parenting practices, role of parental control, and responsiveness to others as some of the primary cultural characteristics. Falicov (1998) provides similar observations about how Mexican and Mexican American families shape particular cultural values and beliefs through family socialization and parental control.

The understanding of how Mexican American fathers are influenced by culture and family socialization are important clinical questions to ask in the assessment process for psychological treatment of this population. This point has been underscored by Eggebeen and Knoester (2001) who note fathers differ significantly from non-fathers as they become involved in having children.
It is important not to make assumptions about the presence of certain cultural values with Mexican American fathers, but rather ask and assess what is relevant so that a meaningful framework with the client can be adjusted. An additional observation made by Hernandez (2002) comments on the issues of poverty, social class, and immigration as shaping the role of fatherhood for Mexican American teen fathers. Failure to address this contextual background will miss important dimensions that would highlight areas such as emotional coping, life challenges and resilience, and impact of low socioeconomic status with the Mexican American client (Liu et al., 2004).

Perceptions of masculinity

There is a salient connection between the incorporation of a masculine attitude and fatherhood (Frago & Kashubeck, 2000; Parra-Cardona, Wampler, & Sharp, 2006). This observation is directly applicable to Mexican American males where masculine styles and Latino male identity are recognized to be diverse (Torres, Solberg, & Carlstrom, 2002). Thompson and Pleck (1995) comment on the “masculinity ideology” that acknowledges the traditional, socially constructive nature of masculinity. These authors assert the impact that distinct racial, ethnic, or religious groups as well as social class have on manhood development. A similar analogy is found with Latino masculinity that also varies across interethnic cultural groups and is impacted by cultural reference, gender role expectations, and socio-political reality. As such, Mexican American men integrate some form of masculinity into their roles as fathers based on acculturation level, degree of perceptions regarding an alliance with the Mexican male ideology, education, and social class (Coltrane, Parke, & Adams, 2004; Zamarripa, Wampold, & Gregory, 2003). The negative side of Mexican American men who incorporate a style of masculine identity associated with Mexican culture is that they are likely to experience levels of stress and depression (Fragoso & Kashubeck, 2000) and develop rigid gender roles that underscore patriarchy and dominance (Casas, Wagenheim, Banchero, & Mendoza-Romero, 1994).
Practitioners working with Mexican American fathers should inquire about how perceptions, cultural beliefs, and parenting style impact male gender self reference and prior cultural learning relative to ethnic identification.

*Machismo and role identity*

The term *macho* or *machismo* typically related to Mexican and Mexican American males, has been based on cultural myths, stereotypes, and media, and refers to a stylized set of actions in respect to hypersexual and aggressive behaviors and a propensity to define relational roles in a permanent partnership (Casas, Turner, & Ruiz de Esparza, 2001; Falicov, 1998; Quintero & Estrada, 1998; Rodriguez, 1996). The characteristic of machismo continues to have significant understanding relative to how it is defined for Mexican American males, and subsequently for this population of fathers. The study by Abreu, Goodyear, Campos, and Newcomb (2000) provides a useful reminder of the difficulty in over-identifying with a more traditional Mexican male role identity. The identification of the more traditional Mexican male role underscores a machismo set of behavior traits that are rigid, authoritarian, and restricted in emotion, much as described by Diaz-Guerrero (1955). In brief, the development of a macho attitude at this level can be disrespectful to one’s personhood, destructive in family relationships, and dangerous to one’s health. Awareness of this for practitioners may be useful relative to how to work with those fathers who may display more of these characteristics yet be unaware of the impact it may have on their families and relationships.

*Case Studies Related to the Diversity of Mexican American Fatherhood*

A consistent theme of fatherhood with this ethnic and cultural population has been the issue of diversity. This diversity is based not only on the construction of maleness within social class, culture, race, ethnicity, and age (Kimmel & Mener, 1992), but also in the incorporation of distinct cultural values that shape fatherhood for this ethnic group. How Latino males describe themselves as men is a useful backdrop to understand fatherhood (Fragoso & Kashubeck, 2000). In addition,
the construct of *machismo* is an important reference point to help orient the practitioner to ethnic identification, cultural expectations, and the subsequent role incorporated by the client (Arciniega, Anderson, Tovar-Blank, & Tracey, 2008). Gilmore (1990) reaffirmed in his cross cultural study of masculinity that *concepts of manhood are universal, and as a result of the characterization of machismo for Mexican American males, this personality attribute is not specific to that cultural reference group*. Consequently, there is a critical interaction between self descriptions of manhood, machismo, and fatherhood that are important dimensions to consider when working with Mexican American fathers. Despite the negative stereotypes the machismo attribute has had with Mexican American men (Casas, Turner, & Ruiz de Esparza, 2001; Diaz-Guerrero, 1955; Mirande, 1997a; Torres, Solberg, & Carlstrom, 2002), Latino males continue to view being *macho* as a relevant dimension toward a self definition of manhood (Quintero & Estrada, 1998). Obviously, the link to fatherhood is immediately present.

Three case studies are presented with brief commentary after each to provide an experiential reference point to these issues raised in this section as related to fatherhood.

Elio Juanes is a twenty-eight year old young adult male of Mexican American background who grew up in a low income community. He is experiencing significant difficulty with the peer group he has selected as his primary social support network. This peer group has been labeled as a tagger club whose actions have resulted in destruction of property. As a result, Elio spent a year in Juvenile Hall when he was seventeen years old. Since then, he has not graduated from high school and has been involved in low income jobs making minimum wage. He is having difficulty managing a more stable existence for him and his live-in girlfriend Janey. His view of being a man was formed early on by a father who abandoned him, his younger brothers, and mother when he was eleven years of age. Consequently, the consistent message he received from his mother was that as the oldest, he was now designated as the protector of the family and needed to look out for everyone, including her. As such, Elio feels that his role in his emerging family is one where being a man means that you protect your family yet are watchful of those elements that can cause threat to the family. As a result, he has taken a position that his manhood means the need to be aggressive and physical to protect those you love.

The case of Elio suggests that this individual’s life has been influenced by low socio-economic status and expectations from his family about how to perform as a young adult male.
Family modeling has instructed him to be watchful and aggressive in his role as a family member and subsequent parent. The probability that he would develop a relationship with a partner that may include aggressiveness and potential violence is heightened given a protector mythology that is framed by this individual’s social and family history.

Mark Gonzalez is a twenty-one year old Mexican American young adult who has just graduated from a local university with a degree in engineering. He has been given the opportunity to tour Europe for a month as a graduation present from his parents. He indicated that as a result of his graduation success, he has been able to consider an elite university to enter graduate study in chemical engineering, following in the footsteps of his father. His immediate plans are to “sow wild oats with female friends” and experience life to the fullest. His view of manhood was influenced by a father who strongly encouraged him to pursue his education, as well as by an uncle and a male mentor teacher who taught him to go after what he can but also take responsibility for his actions. This individual’s view of manhood is one which he still wants to explore as he believes there is “too much of a kid inside me” before maturing into a role that may characterize the rest of his life.

In contrast to the first case, Mark has a male mentor who has taught him about responsibility, yet has also made room for some permissiveness that has influenced his socialization. This individual’s incorporation of the macho/protective role will likely take a different avenue regarding his image of parenting and fatherhood as he readies himself for that developmental stage. These two cases suggest that an affirmation of masculinity will dictate a certain pattern into fatherhood depending on the contextual background of the individual.

Antonio Gamboa, a fifty year old Mexican American male, describes how as a child he was molested by an older brother and made fun of for his sensitivity and artistic ability. Although in the U.S. since he was seventeen years of age, Antonio has never achieved permanent legal residence. He learned that women were play objects and that although there was significant respect for their mother, a single parent who worked twelve hour days in a lemon packing plant, she essentially was never home to manage the discipline of her children. As a teenager, Antonio impregnated two of his girlfriends, one of whom he married. By his mid twenties, Antonio had served six months in jail for a domestic violence charge, had continued to verbally abuse his wife and young daughters, and was never home to play any significant role as a father and caretaker. By his late forties, Antonio found himself to be more self reflective, yet unsophisticated emotionally as to how to handle this awareness. He commented on how his absent father would likely have raised him although this dialogue brought tears and resentment over a perception of imagined lost family opportunities. Antonio was able to observe how unsteady and non-loving his life had become and how he had contributed to a now detached relationship between himself and his daughters. Even his son, a twenty-nine
year old Latino male, had been disengaged from his father as he viewed him as “too Mexican and a man that I would never want to be like”.

Antonio’s case reflects the modeling of a destructive machismo attribute and an incorporated image of being a Latino male that has haunted him throughout his young adulthood, marriage, and now as an astute observer of his own adult behavior (Welland & Ribner, 2008). This individual’s background is reflected in a history of abuse, the absence of a parent at home to model appropriate caretaking behavior, and a model of a negative, masculine role that was aggressive, manipulative, sexually promiscuous. The available case material does not address the question of his immigration status nor what impact this might have on his own personal and family development as a father. However, this would be an area of inquiry for the practitioner relative to uncovering why citizenship never became important for him and how this status may have impacted his own self identification, ethnic affiliation, and political loyalty.

Each of these three cases provides an illustration of the relationship between masculinity, acculturation and social status, and ethnic identity. Challenges in fatherhood observed for these individuals suggests that Elio Juanes would define his role in a more autocratic style, Mark Gonzalez would likely be more informed in his parenting while Antonio Gamboa has had a history of internalized conflict and self destructive patterns of behavior that have already had a significant negative effect on his family. The interplay of machismo with other relevant contextual dimensions in each case has distinct outcomes that are important for the practitioner to understand. Evaluating the incorporation of the male gender role can provide meaningful clinical information toward an understanding of how fatherhood can be evaluated, and a subsequent, culturally appropriate treatment plan developed.

An area that has not been well explored and has proven of limited education to clinical practitioners has been the topic of spirituality (Richards & Bergin, 2000). The backdrop of spirituality for Mexican American fathers is a meaningful one as it relates to a history of religious
and spiritual influence dating back centuries. This dimension for Mexican American father may be important in helping clients make salient connections to their socialization history with family and how this linkage is relevant to the role of being a father.

**Role of Spirituality**

Religion and spirituality have been significant themes of human functioning with the indigenous communities of Mexico for several centuries (Carrasco, 1990), and a major aspect with Mexican American families as this dimension is viewed to regulate behavior, attitudes, and relationships (Cervantes & Ramirez, 1992; Falicov, 1999; Carrillo & Tello, 1998). As Carrasco (1990) notes, the map of Mesoamerican traditions was organized by and around ceremonial centers modeled on a vision of the structure of the universe. This structure told how the world was made and how supernatural forces organized the cosmos (Leon-Portilla, 1962).

Matovina and Riebe-Estrada (2002) provided a meaningful subtext to the role of a Mesoamerican belief system in the lives of Mexican American families who typically have been socialized by a Catholic, theological perspective. Their writing is consistent with other authors including Carrillo and Tello (1998), Ramirez (1998), and Rodriguez (1994), who describe Mesoamerican belief systems as ancient rituals and beliefs which honor the sacredness of life and the various energies and ancestors in prayer. These beliefs are expressed in rituals like Day of the Dead ceremonies, honoring the Blessed Virgin, pilgrimages to sacred and ancient shrines, and a communal understanding of the presence of spiritual beings. These communal teachings, underscore the religious and spiritual experiences of Mexican Americans (Matovina & Riebe-Estrada, 2002; & McNeill & Cervantes, 2008) which emphasize a mixture of Mestizo and indigenous beliefs that predate the conquest (Josephy, 1991; Ortiz de Montellano, 1990). These rituals, traditions, and belief systems survived to the present among Mexican American populations.

How does this ancestral and spiritual heritage impact the role of fatherhood with Mexican American men in the present? Falicov (1999) discussed themes of folk health and illness, disorders
of the supernatural, spiritual and magical healing, and indigenous healers referred to as *curanderos* and *yierberos*, commonly known as herbalists. She acknowledged a widespread influence of religion and spirituality with Latina/o families as do Anzaldua (1987) and Quinonez (1998) although their reference point is often communicated through story telling, cultural mythology, and poetry. The critical discourse and poetry of these authors reflects a historical belief in Mesoamerican cosmology. It is the current writer’s belief that the images and historical ancestry of Mesoamerica is linked directly to fatherhood for Mexican American men.

The phrase, *la cultura cura*, refers to the spiritual element that is coupled with the socialization process with Mexican American families. The healing dimensions of culture and an intuitive awareness of the sacredness of life is often the backdrop to this socialization process. This element emphasizes indigenous ways that introduce ideas of balance, harmony, reflective feedback for the individual, and the relevance of family integration (Carillo & Tello, 1998). Ramirez (1983, 1998) underscores the Mestizo worldview of life as a psychospiritual imperative where there are lessons to learn that are directed by a higher source. Examples of this heritage left by Mesoamerican traditions for those of Mexican and Mexican American background are noted in beliefs in spirits and ancestors and their influence on behavior, patronage, and images of the Blessed Virgin. These images are often coupled with elaborate altars in many Mexican American homes (Rodriguez, 1994), and can include the public display of various religious images on t-shirts, cars, and calendars which also serve as a reminder to belief systems that predate a nation’s conversion to Catholicism.

Cervantes (2003) coined the term *Mestizo Spirituality* to reflect this systematic attention to a belief system, tradition, and cosmovision emphasizing wholeness, harmony, balance in one’s relationships and the learning of life lessons. Lastly, this perspective emphasized a belief in a theistic cosmology that is always present, protects, influences, and engages all life. Tello (1998) highlighted this spiritual reference point for Mexican American men and the trauma resulting from
the fractured psyche and disassembled indigenous beliefs that resulted from the Conquest. The results of this Conquest have been described as intergeneration post-traumatic stress disorder by Duran and Duran (1995) among indigenous and First Nation people in the United States. In reference to fatherhood, Tello (1998) discussed the healing tree philosophy which he described as symbolically emphasizing a positive centering base of principles that promoted emotional, family, and community well being. These principles are described in the following:

1. An acknowledgement of ancestral wisdom that is necessary for growth and healing,
2. Development of vision that reflects one’s true self as it impacts the wellness of one’s family and community,
3. Families and communities develop an interdependence with one another,
4. Belief in a circular learning process in which pride in one’s ethnic cultural background and respect for the belief systems of others is fundamental,
5. Live life with a sense of spirit that promotes newness and well being in one’s relationship with self and others.

Examples of writing which have demonstrated cultural awareness of these psychospiritual principles are noted in recent studies. Parke and Buriel (1998) comment on the distinctive cultural traditions that shape father relationships and the impact that those teaching have on family and community. Niska (2001) reports on the use of family stories with Mexican American parents who used this format as a way to learn new strategies to assist with socialization, resolution of family issues, and stabilize well being. Parke et al. (2004) commented on how Mexican American men teach the value of maintaining harmony and balance in their subsequent roles as fathers. This commentary on spirituality with Mexican American men is a useful way to conceptualize a more integrated meaning to machismo as the care-taking, protective, and ancestral wisdom aspects are emphasized (Cervantes, 2006; Falicov, 1999; Tello, 1998; Welland & Ribner, 2008). The recovery
of a spiritual base can be a relevant therapeutic task for practitioners with this client population (Cervantes & Parham, 2005; McCabe, 2007).

Both Montoya (1992) and Carrillo and Tello (1998) make direct reference to the Mexican American male as having a wounded male spirit that needs healing. Their commentary is fueled by observations of this Latino cultural group being impacted by cultural transition, non-resolution about ethnic identity, and the meaning of spirituality in their lives. From these authors’ points of view, the Mexican American male cannot be a complete father until he has integrated a more culturally unified reference point of his spiritual well being. As such, a Mexican American man cannot be fully complete both in his manhood or as a parent unless he is able to recognize the truth of his word, the sense of responsibility, and rejection of any abuse. In addition, to take time to reflect and pray, be sensitive and understanding, speak with support and clarity to one another, and model honesty and love are understood to be fundamental aspects of being a Mexican American male and a father (Cervantes, 2006; Carrillo, & Tello, 1998).

A salient observation in this writing is that Mexican American fatherhood is a more holistic integration of self that includes spirituality as the subtext to functioning and involvement with children and family. This reclaiming of life lessons from the Mexican American’s historical past may be a relevant principle in professional consultation with this group of fathers. It is being suggested that learning about and hearing the life histories of Mexican American fathers is an important intervention that will assist in the professional relationship, therapeutic attachment, and the setting aside of stereotypes that will facilitate meaningful psychological outcome. Consequently, a salient theme in the therapeutic relationship is the topic of *familia* which continues to be a primary organizing base and underscores the role of fatherhood with Mexican American males (Cervantes & Sweat, 2004; Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo & Gallardo-Cooper, 2002). As such, the phrase, *la cultura cura*, underscores the integration and healing process that is a socialized aspect of Mexican American families and characterizes a relevant aspect of fatherhood.
CASE ILLUSTRATION

The following case provides an extended discussion of a characteristic counseling process that I conduct with Latino fathers. I saw this individual for nine months, resulting in a mutual termination following self exploration, increased learning about his role in the family, and satisfaction with how his life had changed.

David Jimenez is a thirty-five year old Mexican American father who was raised through young adulthood by his parents. He is the oldest son of four siblings the rest of whom are sisters. He reported that his father was an alcoholic and about the time that David was five, his father entered an Alcoholics Anonymous program and was reformed. He indicated that he has been married for ten years and has three children all under age eight.

A brief history of David reveals that his entry into counseling was the result of a DUI over a year ago. He was found swerving on the road, stopped by the highway patrol, and subsequently ticketed. Although he was required to attend only ten visits of counseling, David has been seen for over thirty outpatient visits through the nine month period of professional involvement. Following graduation from high school this individual joined the Marines and served four years of active duty where he was trained as a medical corps man. Following discharge, he received further training as a medical technician and has been working at a local hospital ever since.

Additional history found that he had struggled in his marriage, feeling that he was not good enough as a life partner and sometimes reporting that his parenting was “bordering on abuse”. He felt guilty that he was not the caretaker that he learned to be from his mother. Alternatively, early memories of his father were of a “push and shove incident” between his parents that culminated in his father attending AA. Consequently, David indicated that although he was no longer drinking, his father struggled with family intimacy and was never able to tell David how proud he was of his accomplishments, particularly the honorable discharge from the military.

David indicated that only in the last several years has he identified as being Latino, specifically American of Mexican decent. He vividly recalled “unkind teasing” through elementary school regarding his last name, the accents of his parents, and the fact that he was dark skinned. As a result, David felt that his ethnic identification was never to associate as being Mexican American but rather identify with many of his “white classmates” and take on values that were consistent with this peer group. During high school, the values of independence and lack of regard for family clashed with his parents’ expectations and resulted in significant conflict until David left for the Marine Corps.

David reported that following discharge from the military, he wandered for a year without work trying to assess what he would do with his life. This wandering resulted in his completing additional training as a medical technician and dating a young woman in his community which resulted in marriage. He reported the marriage to be stable although felt that his ability to be empathic and sensitive to her needs was a struggle for him. Not until he began counseling did he begin to realize that perhaps the role modeling he received from his father may have been a significant aspect of this difficulty in the marriage. This issue along with the fact that he had received a DUI and had to attend counseling for a period of time were the primary reasons that initiated counseling.
Commentary.

David’s initial entry into counseling found him to be reluctant, suspicious of what to expect, and unclear about my role as the psychotherapist. I quickly became aware of his cautiousness to self-disclose. He knew he was there for a required set number of visits and it seemed that he was only willing to comply to meet the requirements set by the court. After some rapport building with inquiry about his family, his young children, and his personal history, the remainder of the first and the follow-up counseling visits found him to demonstrate considerably less defensiveness.

A significant theme that became a foundation for our therapeutic interaction was his responsibility to his family, both immediate and extended. When David would speak about related early developmental history, he would lapse into some Spanish language phrases, sometimes mimicking one or both of his parents about what they might say to him about his growing up and the need to be a “responsible man”. When language switching would occur, I would respond in kind thus affirming my tracking of his language and also indicating by modeling, a personal awareness of Latino values and beliefs. It was within this dialogue that I elected to ask about his Latino affiliation which he described as being “Hispanic or sometimes Mexican American depending on how I feel about myself”. Closer inquiry about this ethnic affiliation found him to have some confusion about those values he believed in that originated from his Mexican background and those that seemed to clash with the rearing of his children and the issue of connection with his wife. The therapeutic agenda was being set as he discussed the stories of alcohol abuse related by his mother about his father and how that impacted their relationship. A similar theme was now being replayed in David’s relationship with his wife. This parallel process also contributed to his confusion over how to be an effective parent.

The first several sessions with David were primarily oriented toward fostering trust in this professional experience and establishing a level of intimacy that could be helpful toward his personal recovery. While he initially indicated that he would only remain for the required ten visits,
after the third session he became invested in continuing the session for his self learning. This was
David’s first experience in counseling and so the expectations of this professional interaction,
advantages of confidentiality, and simply having the opportunity to be self-reflective in a trusting
environment were a significant impetus to his therapeutic commitment.

There was immediate identification with myself as a Latino male professional which has
proven to be a helpful and salient connection with many Latino clients regarding an assumed ability
to be culturally sensitive. Following the trust building stage, David began to utilize the next several
visits to replay memories from his early past. The snapshot pictures that he had of his father when
he was still drinking were the imaginal seeds that fueled the therapeutic dialogue.

A characteristic theme that occurs in my experience with Latino male clients, particularly if
they are fathers, is the issue of protection of family and the safety of children. This preoccupation
was also evident with David and interwoven with the lack of intimacy that he felt with his wife.
Interestingly, the vocabulary of *machismo* never was raised throughout the entire counseling period.
However, the common descriptors of this cultural attribute were found in how he incorporated and
reported on his sense of manhood and ethnic identity. These observations were seen in the
protection dialogue that was evident with his family as well as in the need to be resilient and strong
in adversity, a characteristic he learned growing up from his parents as well as during his time in the
military. Blended into this counseling relationship were the issues of *familia* and intimacy, the two
primary concerns that underlined his personal insecurities.

The topic of *familia* was often discussed relevant to not only his immediate but also
extended family. I have found it important to help examine with the client what family means for
him as this theme is a frequently diverse, cultural rubric that can have several different explanations
depending on the life experience, socialization process, and any related experiences of post
immigration history. This case found David to be a third generation Latino which means that his
great grandparents were the initial immigrants so there has been several decades of living in the
U.S. for this family.

The theme of intimacy dominated a central focus of counseling with David. This theme was reflected in how he learned to relate to his father, the kinds of relationships that he shared with intimate friends, and the level of emotional connection that he felt with his wife. While there was some uncovering work related to understanding the dynamics of past history, the primary orientation as a transpersonal practitioner was to initiate an opening to his psychological experience of early fatherhood with his own father to replace anger and resentment with peace (Epstein, 2007).

David’s memories of his father slowly spilled out as if the handle on a water faucet was turned to a slow trickle. This water faucet quickly gained steam and an emotional deluge was released allowing this individual to confront the lack of touch, loving attention, and minimal opportunities for intimate play with his father. David would become emotional at times and feel angry at himself for feeling deprived of what could have been. This therapeutic dialogue was framed within deep ambivalent feelings about being angry at his father, yet recognizing what his father was able to provide for him as a stable financially-responsible parent.

The theme of ethnic identity and feelings of manhood were significant in David’s decision to enter the military. He felt that he needed to prove to his father that he could be brave enough to withstand military life, be true to his self definition of Mexican background, and externalize an appearance of the man he was becoming. This discussion eclipsed into several counseling visits regarding his views of manhood and what he wanted to convey to his children as a father. Within this context, David was able to rewrite his family script, redefine his role as family protector, and integrate a more loving and nurturing involvement as a father.

The dialogue about manhood merged into issues related to emotional intimacy with his wife. He made the needed connection about the lack of touch and affectionate embrace that he did not learn from his father and only minimally from his mother. David admitted to some objectification of his wife relevant to being a sexual image for him while at the same time having guilt over
mentally placing her in that position. As a result, this guilt allowed him to open to new learning beyond what he saw modeled by his parents towards more authenticity with his wife. This movement in counseling shifted toward a dialogue of intimacy relative to what he had learned from his mother, however more importantly, what his wife could teach him.

As this case evolved toward termination, feelings of authentic regard for his wife became more prominent as well as a comfortableness in expressing his masculine identity. David came to describe himself as being a man who had intimate feelings for his wife which did not compromise his ability to be loving and caring yet also feel more secure in his manhood and emotionally connected in his fatherhood role.

**Counseling Issues and Intervention**

Scholarship that eventually fuels counseling theory and practice in the area of fatherhood for Mexican American men has been seriously absent. Despite the lack of interest in this cultural group and the stereotypes that have potentially molded the practice arena relative to intervention with Mexican American fathers, the understanding of Latina/o families has come a long way since the literature review by Ramirez and Arce (1981).

This chapter has attempted to introduce the unique cultural perspective that is inclusive of diverse family patterns, a deeper appreciation of contextual background, and the academic stereotypes that have co-existed in the literature about Mexican Americans through the 1960s and 70s (Diaz-Guerrero, 1955; Paz, 1961; Lewis, 1960, 1961). These stereotypical perceptions have included: parental absence, non-participation in treatment, punitive role modeling toward family, and stereotypical personality characteristics. Each of these descriptions could lead the practicing clinician to develop a disregard and biased assessment of Mexican American fathers.

The following recommendations may assist the counseling professional toward increasing cultural competency and developing a relevant practice with Mexican American fathers that can minimize bias and provide more accurate assessments.
1. Immigration for Mexican American families continues to be a predominant theme in the lives of this cultural group. In assessing Spanish speaking families, the issue of immigration may be a significant aspect in the counseling process particularly if there are immediate family members still residing in Mexico, if the designated caretakers (i.e. parents) work two or more jobs to financially stabilize a family, and the safety and permanency for children is unstable if legal residing status is not resolved (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2007). Each of these areas could impact the role of fatherhood for Mexican American males relative to security concerns, stability of family, and consistency of parenting messages.

2. Consideration of family variability due to acculturation which impacts bilingual ability and adherence to specific cultural values is an important aspect in the understanding of this population. Velasquez, Arrellano, and McNeill (2004) underscore the importance of recognizing diversity with Mexican American families. As such, practitioners should not make assumptions about the presence of certain cultural values, but inquire about those particular themes that have been integrated in a Mexican American father’s socialization history. This will allow the assessment and therapeutic process to be tailored to that particular individual.

3. Socioeconomic status is an important factor in working with families (Liu, 2002; Liu et al., 2004). It would be important for the practitioner to pay attention to the effects of poverty in fatherhood and family functioning. Eamon and Mulder (2005) comment on how poverty and a lower level of neighborhood quality can contribute to the development of antisocial behavior and subsequent non-participation in the broader community. Mexican American fathers residing in compromised neighborhoods may view their life situation as hopeless, leading to minimizing their potential contributions. This in turn may cause feelings of hopelessness for counselors (Kuther & Wallace, 2003). View Mexican American fathers as
having cultural assets which will invite a more meaningful relationship between therapist and client.

4. Help seeking behaviors for Mexican American fathers has been influenced by experiences of poverty, racism and discrimination, and cultural oppression (Gonzalez, 2000). Non participatory involvement in counseling and/or the perception of not being entitled to belong or participate as a member in the community have been relevant dimensions towards mental health utilization. Valdes, Barron, and Ponce (1987) comment on the issue of entitlement and how this understanding of counseling may be important to consider with this population. Actively encouraging participation for Mexican American fathers by allowing them to share experiences of fatherhood and commenting on the unique socio-cultural background they bring to counseling may enhance feelings of entitlement and the embracing of an effective treatment process.

5. Cultural attributes, particularly machismo, should be understood within a cultural context (Gilmore, 1990). A relevant way to address the incorporation of this assumed personality attribute is to inquire about how Mexican American fathers have learned to protect family members and what elements are important in this protective stance. This approach may allow fathers in this cultural group to feel more open to express themselves and inclined to disclose more specific ways they cope with issues related to cultural oppression, prejudice, and related unfair treatment as part of their incorporated ethnic identity.

6. It is recommended that during the assessment process and in counseling with Mexican American men, cultural referencing be addressed. Understanding what his Mexican American ethnic identity means for a particular father could provide meaningful information about his unique beliefs as well as expectations about the counseling process.

7. It would be important to ask Mexican American fathers what it has been like to be a father and to have children. This inquiry may assist in disclosing meaningful clinical information
that will likely shape treatment goals. In addition, this inquiry will also assist the practitioner to evaluate critically the cultural framework that is consistent with the client’s belief system and socialization experience towards fostering personal development in the roles of fatherhood and protector of one’s family (Coltrane, Parke, & Adams, 2004; Wisman, 2005).

8. The issue of spirituality has been described as a relevant backdrop for Mexican American families when treating fathers. The key to addressing this issue will depend on the nature of the referral, the specific concerns presented by the Mexican American client, and the therapist’s level of comfort with this dimension of human functioning. Mexican American fathers as a function of their indigenous history, are often oriented to the role of organizing truth in one’s heart and building a foundation of authentic reality for oneself and family as an important aspect to spiritual being (Duran & Duran, 1995). Further, Carrillo and Tello (1998) this theme as an important, self reflective, and meaningful affirmation of how one functions in the world (Anzaldua, 1987; Cervantes & Parham, 2005; Matovina & Riebe-Estrada, 2002; Montoya, 1992; Velasquez, Arellano, & McNeil, 2004). As such, the stage is set for this culturally salient dialogue with Mexican American fathers.

9. It will be important for the practitioner to evaluate stereotypes in treating Mexican Americans fathers to perceptions of this cultural group and prejudice that may exist with the theme of Latino to masculinity. Acknowledging one’s own cultural beliefs and stereotypes about manhood and how they impact effective and therapeutic psychological care is a relevant developmental principal for clinical and counseling practice (Englar-Carlson & Stevens, 2006).

*Postscript*

Mexican American fathers have had generations of history to disclose relative to their personal life stories, relationships to family, and involvement as protectors of their respective families and communities. Each of the case vignettes and the more extended case illustration have intended to
provide a meaningful voice to this fatherhood population in order to enhance awareness, education, and clinical competency. It is hoped that the writing and cases cited offer effective avenues for dialogue with Mexican American fathers and those practitioners who are treating them toward more effective psychological care and mutual understanding.
References


