Social work practice with Latinas/Latinos/Latinx

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Engaging in culturally sensitive social work practice with Latinx has never been more critical than it is in the current socio-political climate. This chapter provides an overview of Latinx social and demographic characteristics and a model for culturally sensitive social work practice that draws on decades of seminal work in the field of social work.

Diverse heritage and identities: Hispanic vs. Latinas/Latinos/Latinx

The term "Hispanic" includes individuals with family origins in Spain or in a country that was a former colony of Spain, including Mexico, Central or South America, and the Spanish Caribbean (Vidal-Ortiz & Martínez, 2018). The term "Latino" includes the same group of people, except those with ancestry in Spain (Morin, 2009). The term "Latino" emerged in the 1980s as an expression of resistance to obscuring historical and social differences between Spain and Latin American countries, its former colonies, and emphasizes the rich and diverse legacy of indigenous and other cultures. The term "Latina/o" emerged as a term of resistance to the androcentrism of Spanish language, reclaiming the female space. The term "Latinx" is more recent and inclusive of gender nonconforming and sexual minorities and nonwhiteness. However, the term "Latinx" still faces some opposition from those who consider it an academic imposition and may reflect Latinx gender sexual minorities' struggle to be included (Vidal-Ortiz & Martínez, 2018).

Many Latinas/Latinos prefer to identify themselves by their heritage (e.g., country of origin), and then as Latino/Hispanic, rather than trying to fit in a U.S.-government single racial category (Morin, 2009). Latinx use a variety of terms such as *trigueno, moreno,* and *mestizo,* to refer to mixed races (Delgado, 2006). Considering these different labels, in practice, it is important that Latinx have the opportunity to clarify how they identify and define themselves.

This is the author's manuscript of the article published in final edited form as:

Mariscal, E. S., Johnson-Motoyama, M., & Dettlaff, A. J. (2022). Social work practice with Latinas/Latinos/Latinx. In L. Rapp-McCall, A. Roberts, & K. Corcoran (Eds.), Social Workers' Desk Reference (Vol. 4, pp. 923–932). Oxford University Press.

Demographic characteristics

In 2017, the approximately 60 million Latinx people in the U.S. represented about 18% of the U.S. population and the largest minority group (Noe-Bustamante & Flores, 2019). Latinxs are projected to represent 30% of the total population by 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010) and their relevance for social work practice cannot be overstated. At a median age of 29 years, the Latinx population is younger than the overall U.S. population at 38 years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017a). Most Latinx are U.S. citizens (77%) with many residing in mixed-status families (Taylor, Lopez, Passel & Motel, 2011). Nearly 80% of Latinx immigrants have resided in the U.S. for at least 10 years (Noe-Bustamante, 2019).

Latinxs have diverse heritages, each with different economic and demographic profiles (Noe-Bustamante, 2019). In 2017, Mexicans (62%) and Puerto Ricans (10%) were the largest groups, followed by Salvadorans (4%), among many others (24%). The Latinx population grew 16% from 2010 to 2017, with Venezuelan, Dominican, and Guatemalan groups growing the fastest (Noe-Bustamante, 2019). The Spanish language facilitates Latinx connections with cultures of origin and within communities. About 70% of Latinxs are proficient in English (Noe-Bustamante, 2019), whereas 60% of those ages five and older speak Spanish at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017a). However, there are local differences in Spanish vocabulary, diction, and speech patterns, and many indigenous Latinx immigrants speak different languages and dialects. More than half of Latinx adults in the U.S. are Catholic (55%) but this percentage is declining (Pew Research Center, 2014) and some Latinx hold folk beliefs.

About 32 million Latinx are estimated to be eligible to vote in 2020, the largest minority group in the electorate, and although the 116th Congress is the most racially/ethnically diverse, Latinx are still underrepresented at 9.2% (Krogstad & Noe-Bustamante, 2019). Despite some

improvements, U.S. Latinxs are still poorly understood by the general population, the government, and its institutions. Latinx history in the U.S. is largely absent from school texts and curricula, which prevents Latinx youth from learning about themselves, their culture, history, and identity. Further, a great share of news stories about Latinxs focus on crime and illegal immigration, which increases the public misperceptions and leads to prejudice, discrimination, and thus, injustice (Morin, 2009). While Latinx representation in the media has increased in recent years, particularly in children's programming, there is much more work to do.

Disparities/ disproportionality among Latinx populations

Consistent with other historically marginalized populations, Latinx children and families are at disproportionate risk of experiencing a number of problems. The rapid growth of the Latinx population is evident as Latinx represent 22.7% of all people enrolled in school (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017b). While Latinx high school dropout rates have declined to 12% and college enrollment has increased to 35%, a gap persists in college completion (Krogstad, 2016; U.S. Census Bureau, 2017b). Only 15% of Latinx had a bachelor's degree in 2014, compared to 41% of Whites (Krogstad, 2016). As of 2017, 18.3% of the Latinx population lived in poverty, compared to 8.7% of the non-Hispanic White population. Although high, this represents a decrease in poverty since 2010 (26.6%) (Fotenot, Semega, & Kollar, 2018).

Consistent with this high rate of poverty, Latinxs are disproportionately overrepresented in a number of systems. For example, Latinx youth are 65% more likely to be detained in a juvenile justice facility than their White peers (Sentencing Project, 2017). In the child welfare system, Latinx children are slightly underrepresented at the national level, as they represent 21% of children in foster care although they make up 25% of the general child population. However, Latinx children are overrepresented in 20 states with the highest overrepresentation occurring in

Maine where they are represented in foster care at a rate of 9 times their proportion of the general population (NCJFCJ, 2017).

Latinx also experience differential access to health services. Latinx health care utilization is low: only 75% of Latinx adults reported seeing a doctor in the past year compared to 90% of White adults (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2019). Similarly, 25% of Latinxs report not having a regular health care provider, compared to only 14% of their White counterparts (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2019). This may be partly related to disparities in health insurance coverage. Among racial groups, Latinxs are three times as likely as White adults and nearly twice as likely as Black adults to be uninsured (Hostetter & Klein, 2018).

Latinx and COVID-19

Latinx have tested positive for COVID-19 at disproportionally higher rates than the white population across the U.S., corroborating persistent social and economic inequities (The Guardian, 2020; New York City Health, 2020). Latinx COVID-19 rates may be higher than reported because many Latinx are uninsured and less likely to seek medical care due to financial strains and/or fear of deportation. Latinx simultaneously represent a large share of the essential workforce as well as those most impacted by pay cuts and job losses due to COVID-19 (Pew Research Center, 2020). Further, while undocumented Latinx make tax contributions, they will not receive unemployment assistance or stimulus checks, nor will their U.S. citizen spouses if married and filing taxes jointly. Therefore, the economic impact of COVID-19 is hitting Latinx communities disproportionally hard with negative long-term consequences in today's charged socio-political climate.

It is getting harder to be Latinx in the U.S.

The socio-political climate in the U.S. continues to negatively impact the well-being of the Latinx community, and 54% of Latinxs report that it is more difficult to be a Latino in the U.S. today when compared to past reports (Pew Research Center, 2018). Some Latinx experience fear and anxiety related to immigration and border control policies including deportation, family separation, and the delayed reunification of children and families (Cowger, Bolter & Pierce, 2017). For example, recent policy changes have led to the highest numbers of migrant children detained at the border in U.S. history (Dickerson, 2018). The majority of these children are unaccompanied teenagers from Central America who crossed the border alone seeking asylum, and have not been released to live with families or other sponsors. Recent policy changes have

also affected the number of sponsors coming forward to claim children for fear of deportation, creating a humanitarian crisis (Meissner, Hipsman, & Aleinikoff, 2018). Though nearly half of Latinxs have serious concerns about their place in post-Trump U.S., the majority continue to be proud to be American and Latinx (Pew Research Center, 2018).

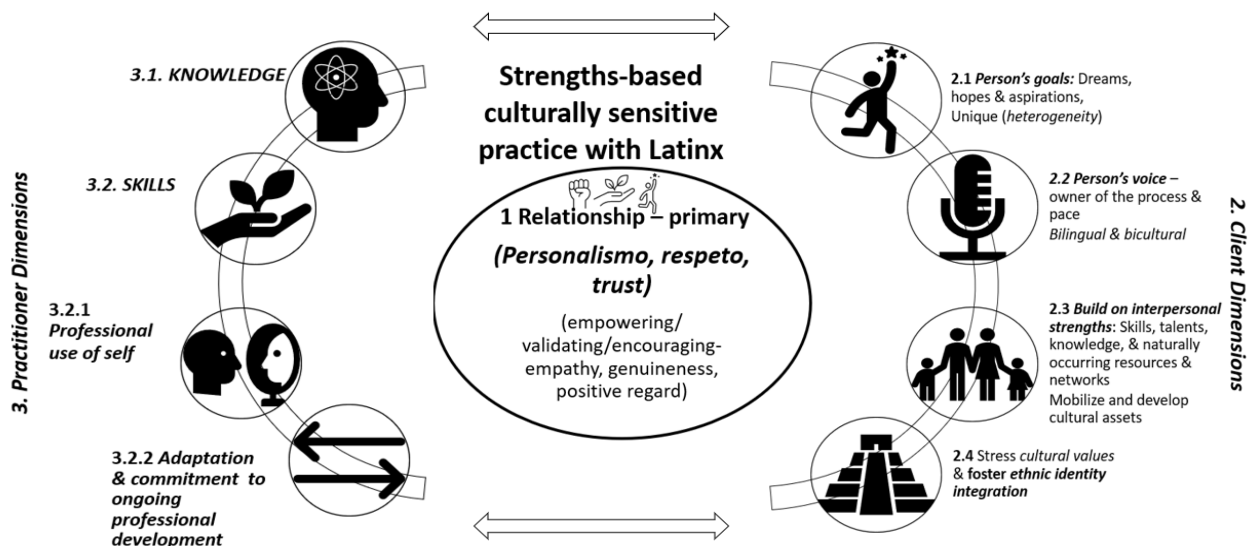
Culturally-Sensitive Social Work Practice

What does it mean to be culturally sensitive in social work practice? It means that a practitioner considers cultural influences alongside human behavior theories and knowledge about Latinx social, cultural, and historical experiences. Culturally-sensitive social work practice also recognizes within-group differences and the potential influence of the social worker's own culture and values (Furman et al., 2009).

Strengths-based culturally sensitive social work practice with Latinx populations

The strengths-based culturally sensitive social work practice model integrates literature on culturally sensitive practice and practice models with Latinx people (Calvo et al., 2016; Delgado, 2007; Furman et al., 2009; Gelman, 2004; Organista, 2009), the principles and practice model of the Strengths Perspective (Rapp & Goscha, 2011; Saleebey, 2013), and the Socio-Ecological Resilience Framework (Ungar, 2013). As Figure 1 shows, the helping **relationship** is primary and at the heart of the model, where the **client's** dreams and aspirations provide direction; the client's voice and uniqueness guide the process and pace, and; the client's assets, community resources, and cultural strengths promote transformation, resilience, and ethnic identity integration (**client dimensions**). At the same time, the **practitioner dimensions** include the practitioner's knowledge and skills, such as professional use of self, and flexibility to make adaptations to meet client needs. The practitioner's commitment to ongoing professional development enhances the overall quality of the services provided.

Fig. 1. Strengths-based culturally sensitive practice with Latinx populations



1. The Quality of the Relationship is Critical: Developing trust, respeto, and personalismo

The vital importance of the quality of the helping relationship depends on the presence of three key elements: empathy, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1961). This relationship is purposeful, friendly, trusting, empowering, and client-centered (Mariscal, 2014). The ability to build a working therapeutic alliance is one of the most critical skills in the provision of culturally sensitive services to Latinx. Given the current socio-political climate, it is important to spend the first session building trust and conveying warmth and personal connection, *personalismo*. The first session should also discuss the process to decrease stigma around mental health services, which are common among Latinx (Furman et al., 2009).

Core elements of a strengths-based culturally sensitive relationship with Latinx

1. The relationship is a collaboration in pursuit of the client's aspirations, hopes, and dreams (Rapp & Goscha, 2011). The client's uniqueness as a human being is honored (Rapp & Goscha, 2011).
2. The client guides the process and pace and their voice is respected (Rapp & Goscha, 2011). The client has a choice regarding their language of preference. Thus, the ideal practitioner would be bilingual and bicultural.
3. Active listening to the client's narratives, stories, and lore allows a practitioner to discover the client's strengths, talents, resources, and cultural assets beyond concerns (Mariscal, 2014).
   When examining community resources, the practitioner creates opportunities for the client to reclaim their personal power and make decisions that impact their life (Rapp & Goscha, 2011). Build on Latinx cultural assets and naturally occurring resources and social support networks, such as extended family systems, *compadres* (a child's godparent, co-parent), and other close relationships (Delgado, 2007).

4. A practitioner can foster Latinx identity integration by identifying and highlighting cultural values and assets, considering what is meaningful to a client (Ungar, 2013), and determining what values they want to adopt, transform, or discard.

2. *Client Dimensions*

2.1. Person's hopes and aspirations: The practitioner explores the client's dreams, hopes, and aspirations, and seeks to capture a holistic portrait of the client and their environment from the client's perspective (Rapp & Goscha, 2011). The practitioner recognizes the uniqueness of the client and avoids stereotypes and generalized Latinx perceptions, gains knowledge of the role of class and culture for this particular client, and integrates important concerns for the client, such as family and immigration (Gelman, 2004).

2.2. ***Person's voice and ownership of the process:*** The client is the owner of the process and their voice, in their preferred language, guides the practitioner's work. Bilingual and bicultural practitioners are ideal in their ability to navigate both languages and cultures. The practitioner's recognition that the client guides the process and focuses the relationship on achieving the client's aspirations communicates the practitioner's belief that the client is capable of changing their own reality and supports the possibility of a different future (Saleebey, 2013), empowering the client.

2.3. ***Build on interpersonal strengths***. Each individual, family, and community has strengths and assets that can support pursuit of the client's goals. The practitioner discovers and mobilizes the client's strengths, assets, skills, and talents as the client describes their experiences, stories, and cultural lore, wisdom, and assets (Mariscal, 2014). The practitioner identifies and attains resources and supports to promote resilience, and transformation (Rapp & Goscha, 2011). To identify interpersonal strengths and resources it is important to ask how the client managed to overcome barriers in the past, who/what helped, and what resources are available now. This process typically takes place in the community, which allows the practitioner to tap into the

client's natural social support networks, resources, and cultural assets, which from the strengths perspective represents an oasis of resources (Saleebey, 2013). The Latinx support network typically consists of caring individuals including close and extended family, and friends; merchants and social clubs; members of the religious community; and folk healers. Connecting with Latinx cultural assets in the community involves trust, patience, skills, mutual respect and interdependence, and the willingness to share power with the community, which has the capacity to help itself (Delgado, 2007).

2.4. ***Fostering client's ethnic identity integration***. Racial/ethnic identity can also be a source of pride and strength (Delgado, 2007). Considering the socioecological framework of resilience, fostering the client's ethnic identity integration requires a co-construction process, in which cultural values and assets are passed down on to youth and where youth adopt, discard, or change what is meaningful to them (Ungar, 2013). Some strategies to foster Latinx identity include contacting and visiting family and friends left in the country of origin as well as activities, such as folk music and tales, art, drama, literature, historic events, and creative writing about ancestral heritage (Delgado, 2007). In this model, the practitioner focuses on the cultural values that are meaningful to the client, identifying values from the client's multiple cultural backgrounds, that the client may choose to adopt, keep, transform or reinvent in their lives. Considering Latinx diversity, the ethnic identity of a client will be unique, resulting from the integration of selected generic Latinx values, indigenous traditions and beliefs, African heritage, and/or mainstream culture.

3. Practitioner Dimensions

3.1. Knowledge. Practitioner knowledge includes both informal and formal information regarding Latinx social, cultural, and historical experiences, such as the information presented in

the first section of this chapter. It also includes the content below, which can be applied to improve assessment, develop interventions, and advance social justice-oriented practice. Importantly, this knowledge enhances awareness of the Latinx heterogeneity and diversity.

3.1.1. Acculturation and acculturative stress. Acculturation refers to immigrants' internal process of change upon their exposure to a new culture (Padilla & Perez, 2003) and involves several challenges for Latinx (Calvo et al., 2016; Delgado, 2007; Dettlaff et al., 2014; Furman, 2009; Gelman, 2004; Organista, 2009). Acculturative stress results from the acculturative process. Examples of sources of acculturative stress include language barriers, unemployment, financial strains, discrimination in the new culture (e.g., immigration policies), and social isolation (Dettlaff et al., 2014), which may take a toll on wellbeing. Considering that behavior, language, knowledge, values, and cultural identity are indicators of the acculturation process, they are key considerations in practice (Furman, 2009; Organista, 2009). Strategies to enhance the quality of services for clients with limited English proficiency include providing trained interpreters, hiring bilingual and ideally bicultural staff, developing culture- and language-specific assessment tools (e.g., normed with Latinx samples), and providing materials and resources in Spanish (Delgado, 2007).

3.1.2. Assimilation, integration, & ethnic identity. Integration refers to a process that depends on immigrants' initiative to incorporate themselves into the host society, and, at the same time, on the host society's opportunities for newcomers and the community of origin's level of acceptance (Calvo et al., 2016). This approach is different from assimilation, in which the newcomer conforms to the American cultural norms. Ethnic identity, identifying with one's ethnic group, plays a role in identity formation and can affect psychosocial adjustment (Delgado, 2007; Organista, 2009).

3.1.3. Oppression and social justice. Knowledge of structural theories form the basis for culturally sensitive practice and advocacy on behalf of Latinx clients and communities including theories of oppression and social justice (e.g., exploring conscious and unconscious attitudes and behaviors across societal levels) and social stratification (e.g., structured inequality of societal resources and power) (Organista, 2009). Practitioners who fight oppression and advocate for social justice on behalf of Latinx clients and communities can help facilitate integration. Calvo and colleagues' (2016) propose to use immigrants' cultural capital (e.g., bilingualism) and advocate for structural opportunities for immigrants.

3.1.4. Accessibility to quality services. Practitioners must be attuned to multiple dimensions of client access to services. Delgado (2009) proposed an interdependent model, including *geographical/physical* (e.g., can the client get to the space where services are offered?); *psychological* (e.g., does the client feel safe?); *cultural* (e.g., are services in Spanish?); and *operational* accesibility (e.g., do we offer services to clients when they need them?).

3.1.5 Cultural assets. Delgado (2009) defines cultural assets as:

> "beliefs, traditions, principles, knowledge, and skills that effectively help people, particularly those who have been marginalized economically and socially by a society, to perceive and succeed in spite of immense odds against them." (p. 20)

Cultural values are assets that help Latinx navigate adversity (Delgado, 2007). For example, the value of cooperation or collectivism, entails mutual empathy and a sense of belonging and respect (Furman et al., 2009). *Familismo* refers to the attachment to one's nuclear and extended family and to strong lifelong interdependence between family members. The value of *personalismo* highlights the importance of personal contact and individualized attention when receiving services, and attempts to minimize professional distance, like *simpatía* (sympathy) which values pleasantry and warmth (Calvo et al., 2016; Delgado, 2007; Welland & Ribner,

2008). *Respeto* (respect) reflects the quality of the relationship, which could refer to close family relationships or professional deference due to authority and/or social status.

3.2 Skills. Practitioner skills correspond to the ongoing development of culturally sensitive engagement, assessment, and intervention aptitudes and competencies, including social work's core values and competencies (Delgado, 2007; Furman et al., 2009; Organista, 2009). Some of the most important skills include the ability to build a helping relationship; use one's self; and modify and adapt practices to meet the client's unique needs.

3.2.1. Professional use of self. Practitioner self-awareness is fundamental in social work practice with Latinx (Furman et al., 2009). Social workers need to understand how their own cultural heritage, worldviews, biases, race, social class and overall privilege impact their perceptions and practice with Latinx (Furman et al., 2009). Thus, examination of the self is of utmost importance. Cultural sensitivity can be enhanced by developing self-awareness of personal biases and accepting their existence. Indeed, practitioners who acknowledge their privilege and power differential are likely to be able to build stronger relationships (Furman et al., 2009). In addition, because Latinx value *respeto*, they may initially adopt a distant "doctor-client" relationship, which could be improved through *personalismo*. For instance, some Latinx clients may ask about the social worker's family life. The practitioner's appropriate personal disclosure allows the client to see the social worker as a person, as part of a family, and thus, enhances trust (Furman et al, 2009; Gelman, 2004). Practitioners may also need to increase appropriate physical contact and their comfort level in accepting gifts when working with Latinx clients (Gelman, 2004).

3.2.2. Ongoing commitment to professional development. Cultural sensitivity requires

the practitioner's commitment to ongoing professional development of cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills (Organista, 2009) including expressing openness and demonstrating commitment to language and cultural expertise (Calvo et al., 2016). Commitment to providing culturally sensitive services involves refusing "one-size fits-all" models and adapting and modifying practices according to the client's cultural values, beliefs, and expectations (Delgado, 2007; Gelman, 2004). It also involves keeping up with innovations in practice with diverse groups.

Conclusion

This chapter reviewed key social and demographic information about Latinx populations and introduced the strengths-based culturally sensitive social work practice model. However, a single chapter cannot capture all of the information needed to practice effectively with Latinx clients. To provide culturally sensitive social work practice in the context of today's dynamic socio-political climate, it is critical for social workers to engage in 'perpetual' learning (Delgado, 2007), including learning from the communities they serve.

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