

Life as a Mexican Man: Conceptions of Masculinity
Lizette Ojeda, MA
University of Missouri - Columbia

My interest in understanding Mexican masculinity was due in part by not understanding the men in my *familia*. I didn't understand their attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors about life and more specifically, about women. Why did I never see them cry? Why did they engage in *machista* behavior? Why did they turn to alcohol to cope with their problems? And despite all this, why were they willing to risk their lives for the sake of their family?

And so, to help answer some of my questions about what it means to be a Mexican man, I decided to initiate a qualitative study to better understand the masculinity of working class Mexican immigrant men. Most of these men were in the U.S. while their families were in México. Ages ranged from 22 to 40 years. Their education level ranged from 3rd grade to some college. What follows are some of the topics that I focused on during the interviews and some preliminary themes that have emerged.

Childhood

When they were growing up, the men stated that they learned to be macho. They learned that women stayed at home with kids while men worked. One man who was raised by his mom said, "She taught me how to be a man based on a woman's view of how a man should be." Men also reported that during childhood, they learned that a man is always willing to help their family and to work hard.

Family

The men's role in their family was to send them money to México and make sure they have everything they need. To do this, the youngest participant had to drop out of high school because he is the oldest son and comes from a single mother household. The men whose partners were in México felt guilt because their wives had to take their place at home. Their role as fathers were to pay for their children's education. The fathers wished that they would be with their family so that their children would listen to them since they are the man. One father shared that his youngest daughter was born in his arms, but since then has not seen her. It's been 7 years.

Responsibility

The men believed that their #1 responsibility was to financially support their family. Many stated that they are in the U.S. to build a home back in México for their family. Two men stated that they worked in a chemically hazardous factory but that it is worth it for the sake of their family. The men stated that if they could not fulfill their family responsibilities they would feel like a failure. Many said that not fulfilling their family obligations was no option because there are people who depend on them.

Masculinity

The men believed that to be "a man" is to work hard, be responsible, keep one's word, have many women, respect women, not to cry, and to be the man of one's castle. One man stated that he did not feel "complete" as a man because he has made mistakes; he has been with other women. He shared, "I know that it's not good

because I don't value myself and I disrespect my wife. My wife asks me, but I deny it. I did this because I couldn't resist women who approach me. I did it because my wife is not here with me, besides she can't see what I'm doing." The men stated that they would feel "less than a man" if they were physically or psychologically abusive to others, lost self-control, not able to help their family, not faithful to their partners, not responsible, and becoming the man that they did not want to be.

The men stated that the best thing about being a man was the power, control, and opportunities they were privileged that many women don't have. They also enjoyed being able to do what they want and go where they wanted without being questioned. Others believed that the best part was enjoying the responsibilities of being a man and making sure to carry them through.

At the same time, men stated that having too many responsibilities was a downfall of being a man. "You have to put your own needs aside to fulfill that of your family," shared one man. Others did not like how men identified themselves by the control they have over women rather than the control they have within themselves. Not feeling able to tell people one's problems was another con to being a man. Another participant expressed, "The worst part of being a man is "being a man." Furthermore, being stereotyped as a typical Mexican man was considered a negative aspect of being a man.

Machismo

The men stated that machismo represents insecurity in a man. "Machismo is a way that a man handles their fear of being out of control and alone." It is also, "Wanting to have control over someone because you don't have control of yourself." Other men stated that it represented abuse toward women and lack of principles. Some men said it represented an inability to resist the desire to conquer women. It was also seen as acting on impulse without thinking. One man stated, "I've been accused of being gay because I am faithful to my partner. I think the best way to minimize machismo is to learn and understand why you are a macho." Most men agreed that machismo represented a need to control women and not want to help out with household chores. The men recognized that machismo contaminates a marriage and family.

Psychological Wellbeing

When asked what causes them stress, the men reported excess work, money problems, adapting to the U.S. culture, not being able to help one's family, and not being able to do something that they want to do. More specifically, they stated that the most stressful part of being a man is not knowing how to handle stress, which often leads to substance abuse. One man said, "My dad is an alcoholic, the men in my family are alcoholics, that's what I learned about how to escape from my problems. Alcohol is a tool that is used to share your emotions that you otherwise couldn't do if you weren't under the influence. I deal with stress through alcohol. Even though it's not the healthiest, but it's the easiest. Mexican men drink alcohol because it allows them to do courageous things that they couldn't have done without alcohol." Other men stated that they handle their stress by talking with their partners and family, going to church, painting, reading, and exercising.

When asked what it means to show one's emotions, some men stated that it shows yourself and your vulnerabilities. Some men said that they do not like to show their emotions for fear that

someone will hurt them. One man stated, “A Mexican man closes his heart because of previous negative experiences which makes it hard for people to get in. It’s important to understand our history to know why we are macho and avoid emotions more so than White men. Similar to Native Americans who also have issues with substance abuse, we had our land taken away from us by Europeans and also the southern part of what is currently the U.S.”

Perceptions of Mexican Men

I asked the men what they thought people’s opinions were about Mexican men. Almost all the men stated the same perceived opinions of being macho, alcoholic, promiscuous, ignorant, gardener or construction worker, trouble maker, hard worker, and untrustworthy. I asked them if they agreed with these perceptions. Most men said that there was some truth to it. “There are some Mexican men who are really bad. They ruin it for the rest of us.”

I interviewed these men by myself in the privacy of their homes. I wondered what role my gender would play in our interactions. Would they feel a need to hide some parts of themselves for fear of being judged by a woman? Would they try to portray themselves in a more positive light? Probably so. Nevertheless, these men did trust me enough to share their thoughts, beliefs, and emotions with me. They took a risk and allowed me to enter their world. They taught me about the joys and struggles of being a Mexican man. And for this, I am grateful.

Counseling Latino Men: Not All Are Created Equal

Lizette Ojeda, MA

University of Missouri - Columbia

When you think of Latino men, what do you think of? Do machismo, substance abuse, and violence come to mind? While these are some of the common stereotypes of Latino men, they are also, unfortunately, real issues that effect this population of men in great numbers. Fortunately though, there are also many Latino men who present with issues in counseling other than the aforementioned.

Before I first began counseling Latino men, I have to admit that I was biased and expected to encounter issues of machismo, substance abuse, and/or violence. My agenda was to help these men for the sake of their families who suffered as a result of their male power and problems. Quite frankly, I perceived the Latino man to be the source of familial problems. I thought it would be challenging to see these men past their machismo and all the baggage that comes with it. Very soon however, I began to see my Latino male clients past their woman-suppressing problems. I began to see them as victims of society’s expectations of men, and even more so of Latino men. I did not expect to counsel Latino men who shared their emotions and souls with me, but this is exactly what they did.

I will share a brief story of one of my Latino male clients (using a pseudonym and removing identifiable information) to (a) present a client with less typical problems characteristic of the Latino male, (b) bring to light macho behavior that the client was oblivious to, (c) discuss my experience as a Latina counseling Latino men.

Like many Mexican immigrants, Julian had emigrated to the U.S. for a piece of the “American pie.” His two years of college education liberated him from working labor jobs and instead worked in homecare as a nurse’s aid. Julian was a frantic man, desperate to save his marriage and family. Julian, reported that his wife had been seeing a younger man for about a year and finally wanted to leave with him. Through his tears, he expressed feelings of humiliation, anger, and previous homicidal thoughts toward his wife and her lover. He so desperately wanted her to stay with him, that he “wished her to have an accident that would leave her paralyzed so that she could never leave” him. Julian had convinced his wife to stay with him by begging on his knees, crying, and reminding her of their 5-year-old daughter, who would suffer without a complete family. Eventually however, his wife left him and their daughter behind. Literally overnight, Julian went from the sole breadwinner who was rarely at home because of working two jobs, to being a single father. Julian experienced distress not only because his wife had left him, but because he now had to view fatherhood very differently. His anxiety of single fatherhood came from a fear of being a bad father, as was his perception of his own. Julian never wanted any children because he perceived the world as too corrupt. In fact, he admitted to “convincing” his wife to four previous abortions. He felt guilt about the abortions and was overwhelmed with fear that God would punish him by taking his only child away. As time went by however, Julian was able to let go of his hope for his wife’s return and was able to decrease his anxiety about being a single father.

Throughout our work, it became apparent that Julian was struggling with abandonment and childhood issues. Julian had stated that he was not a macho like his father, although his only request was that his wife iron his clothes. While Julian was not an alcoholic, physically abusive, or a “macho like his father,” he did demonstrate less subtle forms of machismo that he was not aware of perhaps because of the severity of which he was exposed to during childhood by his father. For instance, he had used his power as a man to control his wife (e.g., abortions, keeping her from leaving him). Furthermore, he felt humiliated as a man for having been abandoned by his wife. After all, he had learned from his father that a woman’s purpose was to serve a man. He also believed that it was a woman’s job to raise a child, especially a daughter. Despite Julian’s not so obvious acts of machismo to the Latino macho, his seeking out counseling services should be recognized as a non-macho act given that Latinos underutilize counseling services in general.

My experience as a Latina counseling Latino men has been a challenging yet a fulfilling experience. As a young Latina woman counseling older Latino men, I had to deal with anxiety about my credibility. After all, how can I help an older man work on “man’s stuff” if I am just a young woman who couldn’t possibly understand, right? Luckily, my own fear of how Latino male clients would perceive me was actually greater than that of reality. As a Latina, I have had to listen to Latino men’s stories about the negative treatment of the women in their lives. At times, this is difficult to do because I too am a woman. But I have learned to see my Latino male clients past their negative behaviors and into their hearts full of pain. As a Latina counselor, I am a tool for Latino men to learn how to positively relate to women. I am a woman who can assure my Latino male clients that they are no less of a man should they share their pain and sorrow. I am a safe place where they can come and shed society’s expectations of them as Latino men...at least for a while.

Anxiety, Sexuality, and Fitting in Nowhere: Case Report
Mitchell Hicks, PhD
Independent Practice

Assistant Professor of Counseling and Human Services
Roosevelt University

In the present article, I present an example of my work with a Latino male whom I will call “Miguel.” Since this is a treatment that took place a considerable time ago and his current location is unknown, it was not possible to secure his permission to present this case. Therefore, significant details regarding his background and issues presented that may serve to identify him or locate where this treatment took place have been removed, altered, or fictionalized.

Theoretical Considerations

Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, and Gallardo-Cooper (2002) provide important concepts to understand when working with and attempting to establish trust with Latino clients:

- Personalismo – orientation toward the person always being more important than the task at hand, including time.
 - Plática – a form of “personable small talk” linked to personalismo orientation. Engaging in conversation of more personal nature that may include more surface disclosures about therapist and his/her background
 - Respeto – sensitivity to the individual’s position and creates a boundary within which conversations should be contained to avoid conflict. (Language reinforces hierarchy)
 - Dignidad – value actions that enhance sense of pride
 - Simpatía – Easy-going, friendly, and fun persona
 - Confianza – Development of trust, intimacy, and familiarly (relational)
 - Cariño – Demonstrations of endearments in verbal and nonverbal communication
- Gender Roles
 - Marianismo – girls are to grow up to honor the model of the Virgin Mary: pure, long-suffering, nurturing, and pious.
 - Machismo – Often stereotyped concept of sexist and chauvinistic behavior. Actually refers to being an honorable and respectable man.

Psychodynamic Theory in General

- Moncayo (1998) proposed a reformulation of psychodynamic psychotherapy based on Lacan’s conception of Freud from a postmodern perspective. He argued that for minorities in general, and Latinos in particular, focusing on ego-adaptation to [majority] society is akin to the learning to obey the master. This is rooted primarily in the “American ideology of individualism and the self-made entrepreneur.” In contrast, concentrating on de-repression of unconscious material is akin to emancipation. This does not make the same assumptions about “primitive” defenses. Although I do not completely agree with this stance, it does highlight the need for care in terms of to what

the patient is being asked to adapt and may serve to broaden what is considered functional.

- Relatedly, some have proposed the concept of “connection/disconnection” to replace the separateness/relatedness dialectic that underlies psychodynamic and systemic thinking (e.g., Jackson & Greene, 2000). Specifically, the ideal of connection refers to being bonded with others, particularly family members, in a manner that personal growth is allowed to occur. Implied in this concept is that being detached and totally autonomous is just as pathological as being so tightly linked that the patient gives up (or is denied) his or her own agency. This concept seems to better articulate a metric by which to judge the health and quality of object relationships by placing the concept of “growth-producing relatedness” at the fore. This may also serve to more accurately represent what the original psychoanalytic and family systems theorists were describing as it has never been considered healthy to achieve a separation that is marked by emotional and relational disengagement.

Case Material

Miguel is a single Latino male in his 20's who initially presented for treatment after being referred for psychotherapy by his psychiatrist. At that time, he reported experiencing considerable anxiety most days but denied having panic attacks. He frequently worried about his performance on the job and about making friends. Client indicated that he has always had a small amount of anxiety, but that it increased exponentially during his first semester in college. His symptoms were so strong at that time that he performed poorly in most of his classes, which increased his anxiety. He now fears that he may not be successful in his new employment situation. At that time, it seemed as if one of his core concerns was tension between his religious values with regard to sexual behavior (e.g., no masturbation, remain a virgin) and his very active sexual fantasy life, strong libido, frequent masturbation and viewing pornography. In addition to the guilt he felt with this struggle, he seemed fairly isolated. When I began seeing him, he had done little work on the sexual issues as he was uncomfortable discussing them with a previous therapist, who was female. In addition to the above stated problems, later in treatment he evidenced symptoms consistent with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (e.g., fear that angry gay men will rape and kill him, which provoked considerable anxiety that he quelled by “not making them mad,” avoiding them, and sleeping with a handgun next to his bed for protection).

Sociocultural Considerations

Miguel is Latino-American and grew up on the West Coast. Client's mother is a Mexican American born in the southwestern United States and his father emigrated from South America. His family is probably upper-middle class and lived in a predominantly White area of the city in which he was raised. Client experienced considerable discrimination in school as he was mistreated by Whites because he was Latino and by other Latinos because his family had some money and they thought he was “too White” and a “sell out.” Client expressed considerable pain over this dual rejection. To compound matters, client reported that his father seemed to want to bury his cultural heritage. Miguel indicated that he has longed for connection with Latino friends, but has been only modestly successful in securing them. Although he spoke Spanish, it

was unclear whether English or Spanish is the preferred language in the home (or some combination).

Client also reported that his Christian faith was very important to him and that he tried to live in accordance with its precepts. It was important in therapy to frame interventions in such a way as to make it clear that the goal is not to undermine them.

Further Psychosocial History

Client was the only child in his family. He reported that he and his father have not always gotten along as they would “fight for power,” and experienced him as cold and distant. Client believed that this situation has improved after his father took a new job that was less stressful. He described his mother as “strict” and “overprotective,” and felt that he had a good relationship with her. He indicated little connection with his extended family. Client reported that he talked to his parents about twice a week via telephone, but thought that perhaps this was too frequent. He described their relationship as “close,” and that he is happy that he has been able to have a better relationship with his father in recent years.

Outside the family, the client reports having “close” relationships with a woman friend and her boyfriend, but “they have lives too.” While he did interact with this couple and a few other acquaintances, he reported feeling considerably isolated. In dating relationships, he reported that he was usually pushed away by women in whom he had expressed a romantic interest.

Client indicated that he had never had a serious romantic relationship. Although he had been on several dates during our treatment, he always ended up terminating the relationship because “she might want to have sex,” or “people will think that I can do better or that I’m just using her for sex,” or “she’s just not the perfect girl.” It was observed by both myself and support staff that he made passes at about every woman in the waiting area, and had seemed socially awkward at those times. Moreover, he reported high levels of arousal when he saw beautiful women anywhere. Previous therapist indicated that he was appropriate with her until treatment ended, but things changed when he ran into her at the grocery store. She reported that he hit on her at that time, and did not seem to comprehend her explanation of ethical boundaries. With regard to sex, client indicated that the messages he got from home were “don’t do it” and “sex is bad.”

Miguel did not really have any close friends, but did identify a few people with whom he had been able to form some relationship. Notable was another Latino man with whom he worked and who started at about the same time. In this situation, client felt that they were developing a close relationship, but his parents told him to stop because the man reportedly sounded “gay” to them. Miguel could not identify anything to support this conclusion, although he did honor his parent’s wishes.

Educationally, Miguel struggled. At the time of treatment, he was working at his job much of the time, and had a pretty strict regimen that he kept faithfully. He felt that his anxiety kept him from performing better both educationally and in his current employment. However, he seemed to not grasp that it may also negatively impact interpersonal relationships.

Conceptual Hypotheses

At his core, Miguel seemed to have a sense of himself as unlovable, weak, and defective. This gave rise to intense feelings of shame, especially as the threat of exposure looms and he developed increasing awareness of his need for connection. The possibility of being exposed led him to ward off intimacy and its accompanying anxiety with a sexualization of it. However, another twist occurred as he projected onto women (and arguably men as well: see below) his desire for them as “maybe she wants me to be her boyfriend” or “she’ll want to have sex,” thus he felt unable to continue these relationships. He also put out an air that he was special or better than others around him for one reason or another (e.g., superior work habits), yet was jealous when others received recognition or promotion after what he felt was far less effort.

Complicating the picture is some of the content of his obsessions. His tendencies toward perfectionism, order, and routine not only served to bolster his self-esteem, but also to ward off anxiety about his “true self.” Some of the content of his obsessions, particularly his fear of homosexuals, raised questions about a component of the true self. I would like to pose three hypotheses. First, he may have somewhat typical thoughts about the attractiveness of men that he latched onto with such ferocity that he started to believe himself to be gay. He then warded this off by projecting his feelings and possibly self-loathe onto men he perceived to be gay (irrespective of whether or not they were). Second, he likely longed for deep emotional intimacy in general, and with men in particular. If so, his obsessions may be linked to a fear of intimacy itself and used their perceived sexual orientation as an excuse to put distance between them. Finally, he may have been bisexual or homosexual himself, and may have been unable to accept this. Not only did he fend off this anxiety through projective identification with perceived gay men, he might have been sexualizing relationships with women to prove how heterosexual he is. Unfortunately, treatment did not last long enough to fully explore these hypotheses due to a change in the therapist’s work situation.

Reflections on the Process of Treatment

One major challenge in working with Miguel was that our work required a stylistic shift. As is typical with more psychoanalytically informed treatment, I initially was resistant to conversations of a more personal nature. It was typical for Miguel to begin sessions seeking some type of personal information from me, but interpreting this was not only futile but a technical error. As stated above, many Latino clients expect to engage in some level of *platicar* and place relationship above tasks. Early in the treatment, I fortunately learned about this aspect of the culture and was able to modify my approach and expectations accordingly. This became a fruitful engagement that allowed for the development of trust and deepened explorations.

Another challenge was attempting to discern to what extent his relationships with his parents reflected culturally-appropriate connection or some state of dysfunction. This was complicated in part by what seemed to be discomfort with exploring his childhood history and family dynamics with any level of depth. However, with some gentle questioning he did begin to question the quality of connection. Although this issue was never fully explored or resolved, it was my intention to respect his decision to not in any way dishonor his parents while still asking

him to reflect. It was my hope that any conclusions he drew were his own and not coming from my cultural framework.

Finally, Miguel seemed to experience a lot of self-hatred as well as difficulty in figuring out where exactly he belonged. His identity as a Latino male had been undermined due to the discrimination and rejection that he experienced from both Whites and other Latinos. Although it is unclear to what extent family dynamics contributed to this, Miguel seemed to have a relational pattern of desperately wanting to be cared for and accepted by others that ultimately resulted in rejection as he engaged in behaviors and employed defensive maneuvers that served to keep him distant. In addition to a few examples cited above, in our sessions he would miss appointments whenever he experienced a hint of authentic connection with me.

Conclusion

Although Miguel struggled with relationships, work, and even in our relationship, it was always clear that he took the mandate to be an honorable and respectable man very seriously. It was a privilege to work with him, and I grew in several important ways. First, my horizons of what manhood means and how that interacts with other cultural considerations was broadened. Second, I came to understand some of the methods of psychoanalytic psychotherapy that I had been taught needed some adjustment to account for different ways of relating. Allowing myself to “break the rules” in this case led to a much more satisfying therapy relationship in which some important truths about the symptoms he was experiencing and how they were affecting him could be discussed. I believe this also allowed him to hear my request that he not hit on women in the waiting room *and* not damage his sense that I thought well of him.