Current Issues Impacting the Mental Health and Wellness of Chicano/Latino Families in California

By Joseph M. Cervantes, PhD, ABPP

This article is intended to provide an overview of some of the salient issues affecting the mental health/wellness of Chicano/Latino families. My perspective has been primarily formed by my personal and professional identity as a Chicano psychologist with awareness of strong indigenous roots, and as a resident of Orange County, a region that houses many ethnic/cultural groups inclusive of Mexican, Central, and Latin American families. Secondly, I have been influenced by my experience as a child and family psychologist with two and a half decades of practice, mostly in Southern California. Lastly, I have had the opportunity to become involved in the evaluation of over fifty deportation evaluations of undocumented parents from Mexico and Central America with children who are U.S. born American citizens. The forced move of undocumented parents who have U.S. born children has also affected my perspective.

There are four principle arenas that I have found to impact the psychological wellness of Chicano/Latino families in California. These include: (1) lower quality education for inner city children; (2) poor mental health intervention for children in school settings; (3) increasing inter-ethnic distrust among Chicano/Latino youth; and (4) immigration policy that is confusing and non-supportive of U.S. born children with undocumented parents.

Lower Quality Education
Clinical practice with Chicano/Latino children over the last several years has found lower expectations, less tolerance for monolingual Spanish speaking children, and decreased involvement of parents in the schools. These dynamics are likely factors that have bred non-compliance in youth with schoolwork, behavioral problems, and the increased presence of disrespecting attitudes. A salient factor involved in this process is the fact that teachers are overwhelmed public servants who are challenged daily to perform multiple tasks, only one of which is the education of students. Furthermore, non-support of dual language immersion programs in the primary grades provides an unspoken and critical message to children regarding the non-value of their ethnic/cultural heritage. There is a level of expertise that is required in working with multiethnic populations of students, particularly children who have multiple ranges of acculturation and language facility in English. This is a critical area that needs significant attention.

Poor Mental Health Intervention
Counseling in schools has been a resource that has been viewed as expendable when city, county, and state budgets have been tight. Re-evaluation of a counseling presence has been learned with the recent onset of school violence across the country. Nevertheless, the presence of school counselors and allied mental health workers continues to be significantly inadequate in schools. We know from studies and experiences with Chicano/Latino families that they struggle economically, especially those families that are less acculturated. Thus, the combination of lower self-expectations as a result of minority status, minimal family incomes, inconsistent child care due to parents’ work status, and many other complicating factors (e.g., child abuse, domestic violence, developmental/ emotional/behavioral problems) are all issues that are brought to the school environment. Not addressed is the role of acculturation stress and inconsistent levels of language ability in Spanish and English in the process of learning to cope effectively. The school environment is the hub of community, peer socialization, and future life success. Yet our communities tend not to be prepared for the intermingling of bi/trilingualism, acculturation, and learning.

Increasing Inter-ethnic Distrust
The Chicano/Latino communities are flooded with families from many Spanish speaking countries (e.g., Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Peru, Colombia) and not just Mexico. This mix has created heightened tension and competition which has been interchanged with illegal drug proliferation, low-income challenges and little formal education. The presence of guns has also fueled increased violence
and distrust towards "foreigners" whose habits, customs, and beliefs do not match those of one’s neighbors. In brief, a spirit of brotherhood and peaceful co-existence has been undermined as a result of a vicious cycle of no money, few opportunities for stable and economically feasible employment, and a closed societal door to becoming fully productive and self-sufficient citizens. Thus, oppression and ethnic/racial discrimination continue as an invisible and volatile caldron that appears seething and soon to overflow.

Immigration Policy
While immigration to the United States has always been a sensitive subject, the current legal atmosphere and posture is increasingly rigid and uncompromising. The current plight in this arena is the determination of psychological hardship for U.S. born children so one’s respective parents are not deported to their Spanish speaking country of origin. The criteria of ten years of recent, continuous residency in the United States on the part of the parents is the minimum requirement. Many parents have often come themselves as small children or adolescents to this country, and have logged as many as 20-25 years of continuous residency. The confusion and anxiety whether families will have to sell all their assets (e.g., homes, deplete bank accounts), leave long established communities and uproot children to move to a now "foreign" country has caused significant turmoil. With children, separation anxiety, decreased school performance, nightmares and fears of parental abandonment are some of the characteristic symptoms that have been created. Present immigration policy appears to be infusing irreconcilable fear in many Chicano/Latino families who have long established histories of stability and success as productive "citizens."

These four arenas are some of the principle observations that I believe to cause significant imbalance in our communities across the state and affect the psychological wellness of Chicano/Latino families. Each county in California will likely have a unique perspective in this discussion from their own set of community dynamics. The goal is to raise families that can participate meaningfully in society, and also to increase the physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual resiliency of its members. To advance as one community we much become more inclusive, available and competent in supporting an inherent moral and spiritual agenda. To climb the mountaintop together is a cultural and ancestral imperative that is being prompted. May the Hand that prompts be patient with the human instrument that must heed and take meaningful action.

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