

# Developing **CULTURALLY CENTERED** Interventions

MODULE 4  
DESK REFERENCE



Clinical Applications of **CULTURAL ELEMENTS**  
When Working with Hispanic and Latino Populations



National Hispanic and Latino

**MHTTC**

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network

Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

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The National Hispanic and Latino MHTTC recognize the complexities associated with gender and ethnic identification. With the intention of both facilitating a fluent reading of the text and supporting an inclusive and respectful language, this document uses terms that are linguistically neutral and inclusive of diverse gender groups and identities. In this document, we also use the term Latinx to encompass ethnic identity as well as non-binary gender identification.

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## **Institute of Research, Education, and Services in Addiction (IRESA)**

The Institute of Research, Education, and Services in Addiction (IRESA) of the Universidad Central del Caribe leads the National Hispanic and Latino MHTTC. The Center serves as a national subject matter expert and a key resource for the workforce and communities seeking to address mental illness prevention, treatment, and recovery support to reduce health care disparities among Hispanic and Latino populations across the United States and its territories. In partnership with state and local governments, mental health providers, consumers and family organizations, Hispanic stakeholders, Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) regional administrators, and the MHTTC Network, the Center seeks to accelerate the adoption and implementation of mental health-related evidence-based practices.

## **National Hispanic and Latino Mental Health Technology Transfer Center**

The mission of the National Hispanic and Latino Mental Health Technology Transfer Center is to provide high-quality training and technical assistance to improve the capacity of the workforce serving Hispanic and Latino communities in behavioral health prevention, treatment, and recovery. We disseminate and support the implementation of evidence-based and promising practices to enhance service delivery, promote the growth of a diverse, culturally competent workforce, and bridge access to quality behavioral health services. We are committed to increasing health equity and access to adequate culturally and linguistically grounded approaches.

## **The School-Based Mental Health Project (SMH)**

The School-Based Mental Health Project (SMH) of the National Hispanic and Latino MHTTC works specifically with schools, organizations, and professionals to strengthen their capacity to provide culturally and linguistically responsive school mental health services. This initiative facilitates training, technical assistance, and capacity-building efforts led by experts in the field. Our goal is to increase awareness to attend to Latino students' mental health needs, promote the implementation of school mental health services that are culturally appropriate, encourage the use of promising and evidence-based practices, and disseminate information on practical strategies and implementation efforts of mental health services within a cultural context.

## Introduction

Latinos experience similar rates of mental health distress as other groups. However, disparities exist in access to mental health services and the provision of culturally responsive mental health services. This desk reference was developed for mental health care professionals interested in learning how to integrate cultural traditions and beliefs to implement culturally centered interventions when working with Hispanic and Latinx populations thus increasing equity and quality of services. The content derives from Module 4 of the Trainer's Guide for Clinical Applications of Cultural Elements When Working with Hispanic and Latino Populations.

This desk reference can serve as a guide for:

- Identifying specific cultural elements relevant to Hispanic and Latinx populations and their mental health needs.
- Integrating Hispanic and Latinx client's understanding of health, distress and cultural experiences into treatment plans and interventions.
- Facilitating ethnically sensitive treatment which can foster rapport and be responsive to the cultural differences between client and provider.
- Applying and modifying interventions through eight culturally centered treatment dimensions.

## **Beliefs about the Origin of Mental Illness**

When determining interventions that will best meet Hispanic and Latinx clients' needs, beliefs about causes of illness must be considered. There are three primary belief systems about the origins of illness that can impact the client's response to mental health treatment to consider.

### **Personalistic**

- Illness was caused by the intervention of a divine being with special powers.
- Illness was caused by retaliation for sins or disrespect to an ancestor (alive or passed).

\*When beliefs systems are personalistic, recovery entails the use of ritual and symbolism, often by natural or spiritual healer.

### **Naturalistic**

- Human health is closely tied to the natural environment.
- Harmony and balance are sought by maintaining health and well-being. Illness results when a person's energy is disrupted.

\*Naturalistic treatments increase metabolic health through diet, exercise, and energy balancing treatments.

### **Biomedicine**

- Biomedicine is a system of beliefs that is summarized by a "body-as-machine" metaphor.
- Biomedicine focuses on theory, knowledge, and the empirical research of illness in order to advance treatment options and it is frequently used in western medicine.

## Culturally Adapted Mental Health Interventions

To integrate the client's understanding of the cause of the illness into goals and treatment plan, interventions must include:

- client's concept of health,
- client's concept of distress and suffering,
- client's cultural values
- diagnosis and assessment of the provider.

Research shows that culturally adapted interventions have lowered rates of premature drop out (Flaskerund & Liu, 1991; Takeuchi, Sue & Yeh, 1995).

## Culture Centered Mental Health Treatment

The term, **culture centered**, is used to encourage the use of a “**cultural lens**” as a central focus of professional behavior.

In culture centered practices, all individuals, including the treatment provider, are influenced by different contexts, including the historical, ecological, sociopolitical, and disciplinary.

The best approach to working within a culture-centered context includes:

*Knowledge about specific cultures*

+

A “*not knowing*” *stance* that incorporates the cultural and personal

=

This creates *the ability to see the specific individual or family norms which impact the individual* which may or may not be congruent with the person's color, class, ethnicity and gender, while simultaneously recognizing and respecting culture-specific differences that exist due to color, class, ethnicity and gender.

# Ethnically Sensitive Mental Health Treatment

1. Recognizing and expressing the existence of cultural differences between the client and provider
2. Having a knowledge of the client's culture
3. Distinguishing between culture and pathology in the assessment phase
4. Modifying the treatment as necessary to accommodate the client's individual culture

## Ecological Validity Model

The ecological validity model conceptualizes eight dimensions of intervention and can be adapted treatment to be more effective with ethnically diverse clients (Bernal & Saez-Santiago, 2010).

## Language

Includes the actual language (Spanish, English), but it also includes local colloquialisms and idioms that impact the expression and understanding of what is occurring.

### Importance to Hispanic and Latinx Clients:

- Clients usually express themselves better in their native language.
- Local dichos, or idioms, can connect cultural metaphors with the clients experience to increase understanding of treatment concepts.
- Language may also indicate acculturation or assimilation levels.

### Specific Modifications for Hispanic and Latinx Cultures:

- Appropriate translation/interpretation of communicated information.
- The provider should clarify any language embedded meanings that are conveyed through sayings or metaphors.
- Many theories encourage the naming of experiences of distress and suffering in order to reframe and restore experiences.



## Persons

Refers to the individuals that the client or family expects to be involved in their treatment, and the significance of each of the persons, including the client-provider relationship during the intervention.

### **Importance to Hispanic and Latinx Clients:**

- Latinxs may place a high value on personalismo, or friendliness.
- Clients may be more likely to place a high level of trust in one professional, instead of relying on multiple specialists.
- Latinxs may not always express disagreement to individuals that are in positions of authority, but then may not follow treatment recommendations.

### **Specific Modifications for Hispanic and Latinx Cultures:**

- In treatment, the provider needs to focus on developing rapport with the patient.
- Treatment may include multiple members of the patient-defined family.
- Treatment should include patient empowerment with the provider as a guide. It is important to be aware of the client's wishes and needs in treatment.

## Metaphors

Refers to the symbols and concepts shared by a particular group and help individuals make meanings of new situations based on previous experiences that they have had. “Este hombre está de pelos.” (“This man is all hair.”) i.e. “This man is very angry.” “Me volteó la tortilla.” (“He flipped the tortilla on me.”) e.g. “He changed the topic.”

### Importance to Hispanic and Latinx Clients:d

- Individuals of power may symbolize oppression or prejudice to the client which may impact the therapeutic rapport.
- A provider that is attentive to these variables will be able to identify the positive symbols that are helpful for the individual and minimize symbols that negatively impact treatment.

### Specific Modifications for Hispanic and Latinx Cultures:

- Treatment needs to explore the patient’s story as understood by the patient.
- It is the provider’s role to assist the individual or family in exploring their unique cultural meanings, narratives and metaphors through dialogue (Falicov, 1995).
- The provider may best support this by maintaining a supportive, curious, and imaginative stance that acknowledges the individual’s cultural constraints and resources (Falicov, 1995).
- The linguistic use of dichos (sayings) may help the client understand and express nuanced meanings.

## Content

Refers to cultural knowledge about values, customs, and traditions. Each client may be influenced by cultural values, customs and traditions specific to their family, community, and race.

### **Importance to Hispanic and Latinx Clients:**

- Hispanic and Latinx individuals have unique values, customs and traditions that connect them to their native countries and to their families.
- Being conscious of this content can allow the provider to hear the specific problems and concerns that their clients have and address them efficiently.

### **Specific Modifications for Hispanic and Latinx Cultures:**

- Treatment needs to be holistic and may need to incorporate spiritual or other elements from the patient's culture.
- Incorporating values, customs, and traditions will increase the amount of comfort and familiarity that the client has with the behavior that he or she is asked to perform.

## Concepts

Refers to the constructs of the theoretical model that is to be used in treatment. It incorporates the provider's understating the client's problem, and it involves the client's understanding of that same problem. If the provider's and clients' understanding of the problem is not conveyed, there may not be an adequate partnership to complete treatment goals.

### **Importance to Hispanic and Latinx Clients:**

- Theories should be used that allow for the integration of the individual's cultural values and beliefs so that they can understand and accept the framework of their problem.
- If the understanding of his illness is incongruent with the theory being used, he may not be able to fully participate in treatment.

### **Specific Modifications for Hispanic and Latinx Cultures:**

- When choosing a theoretical framework to use, ensure that it is consistent with the cultural concepts of the individual that is being served.
- Be open-minded to changing the concepts used in treatment in order to better meet the individual's needs.

## Goals

Refers to the identified desired outcome of treatment. Goals should reflect the client's and provider's mutual understanding of the problem and of the solution. Additionally, the goals must be congruent with the client's cultural values.

### **Importance to Hispanic and Latinx Clients:**

- If a client does not have the understanding that the goal is worthwhile, he may not fully engage in services.
- Due to the concept of respeto (respect), Hispanic and Latinx clients may not directly tell a professional that they do not feel that an intervention will be helpful.
- If a provider understands the power imbalance in the relationship and works to involve the client in goal setting, there is a higher likelihood that the client will participate in the interventions willingly.

### **Specific Modifications for Hispanic and Latinx Cultures:**

- Providers need to take into consideration specific values, customs, and traditions that are integrated into the client's understanding of the problem and continue to carry these concepts into the goal setting process.
- An example of a culturally modified goal would be to focus on familismo (familism) and respeto in a family therapy session in order to strengthen family dynamics, improve emotional support and validation, and increase communication and problem-solving strategies among family members.

## Methods

Methods are the procedures to follow in order to achieve therapeutic goals. These procedures incorporate the theory used as well as the provision of the assessment, the use of transference and countertransference in the relationship, and the use of specific interventions, such as group or individual treatment.

### **Importance to Hispanic and Latinx Clients:**

- If the client is uncomfortable with the methods of the provider because they are different than what was expected, progress may be slowed or stopped until communication and understanding can be improved.
- If the client has not had a previous experience with services, providing them with methods that are familiar will help increase their comfort. For instance, offering services in a central location in the community, or located in the schools that their children attend will help increase the feeling of “personalismo”.

### **Specific Modifications for Hispanic and Latinx Cultures:**

- Offering services in the preferred language will increase the client's understanding of the treatment process.
- If the client is encouraged to express their culture-related behaviors and feelings by way of methods that they are most comfortable with, the provider can offer a better opportunity for the client to resolve their own internal and external conflicts.
- Including trusted individuals in the referral and assessment process may increase comfort with new methods or new providers.

## Context

Context considers the client's broader social, economic, and political contexts. It also includes the client's understanding of themselves within their environmental context. Context impacts their priorities in completing tasks and in if and how they follow treatment recommendations.

### **Importance to Hispanic and Latinx Clients:**

- Hispanic and Latino cultures are high-context cultures. This means that, for Hispanic and Latinx individuals, the context is highly relevant in the understanding of messages and expectations.
- Clients may present with a high level of non-verbal cues that providers are not conscious of.
- If the provider does not understand the social, environmental, and economic context of the client, the intervention may include recommendations that put the client at risk, or that are impossible based on the client's social, environmental, and economic resources.

### **Specific Modifications for Hispanic and Latinx Cultures:**

- Treatment should prioritize developing rapport with the client to create an accepting and supportive environment.
- Treatment and interventions need to consider the client's understanding and experiences of their acculturation and immigration process, stage of development, social supports and relationship with their country of origin.

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