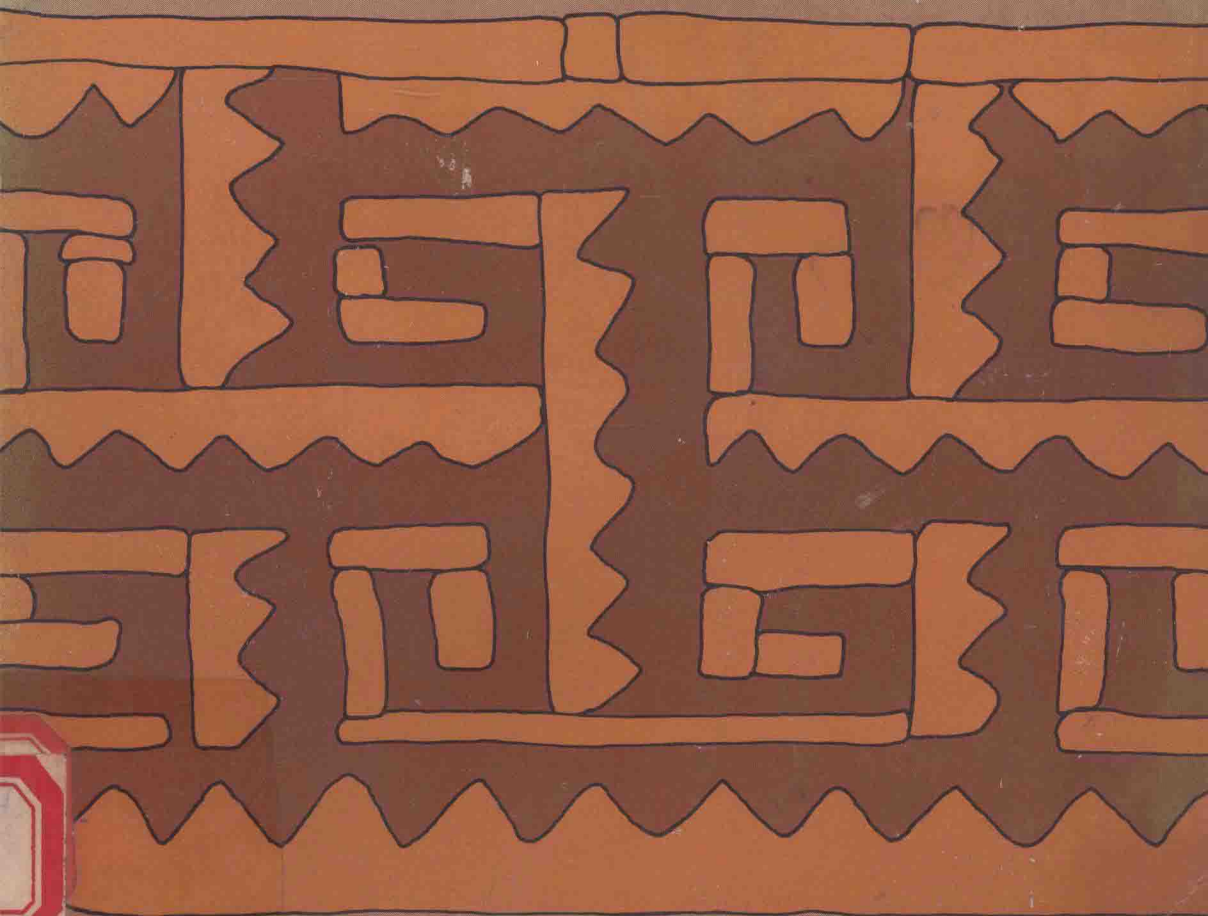


# HISPANIC CULTURE AND HEALTH CARE

FACT, FICTION, FOLKLORE



Edited by RICARDO ARGUIJO MARTÍNEZ



# **HISPANIC CULTURE AND HEALTH CARE**

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**FACT, FICTION, FOLKLORE**

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**HISPANIC CULTURE AND HEALTH CARE**  
**FACT, FICTION, FOLKLORE**

To the development of the health care practitioner's  
cultural body of knowledge in the area of Hispanic folk medicine  
so that bias and misinterpretations may be eliminated to result  
in a more holistic-deliberative type of care.



## **PREFACE**

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This text has been compiled with the intent of providing the nurse practitioner and other allied health personnel with a collection of selected readings about Hispanic health care beliefs and practices. Because Hispanics (or Mexican Americans) comprise the second largest and fastest growing minority in the United States, it has become increasingly important for all health personnel to be aware of the cultural mores and practices that may influence the acceptance and delivery of health care services. By providing information about Hispanic cultural foundations, we hope that bias will be decreased and a more effective, holistic approach to the planning and delivery of health care will be adopted.

The text is divided into four units. The first unit, Cultural Considerations: Introduction to the Hispanic's Life Styles, discusses significant adaptive mechanisms and particular life styles that may contribute to Hispanic health care beliefs. An overview of cultural attitudes is provided, with the primary focus being on the role of the Mexican-American family. Varying viewpoints and rationales are presented to stimulate thought about and discussion of Hispanic life styles.

Unit two, Cultural Factors and Their Influence on the Health Beliefs of the Hispanic, explores the significance of societal influence on the health attitudes and beliefs of Hispanics. Cultural components such as religion, language, family structure, and traditional community life style, often viewed as inhibiting the acceptance of modern treatment regimens, are examined. In addition, discussions are included on the origins and formulation of folk medicine and its possible incompatibility with scientific health measures.

The analysis of folk medicine and disease as social phenomena is a unifying theme in Unit three, Folk Diseases, Health Rituals and Practices, and Their Influence on the Biopsychosocial Realms of the Hispanic. The Mexican-American folk medical system is examined and compared to scientific medicine and implications for the mutually satisfactory coexistence of the two systems are presented.

Unit four, The Hispanic's Reaction to Health Care Delivery Systems, dis-

cusses common barriers that Mexican-Americans must overcome in seeking, acquiring, and utilizing available institutional and community-based health services. Specific case studies reflect some Hispanic reactions to hospitalization, intervention by public health nurses, and treatment of mental illness.

The appendix consists of a table of commonly used "folk" herbs and their indicated use in the treatment of particular illnesses.

The purpose of this book is to expose the reader to some of the facts, fiction, and folklore surrounding Mexican-Americans. Many of the contributors themselves would debate not only some of the "facts" their colleagues have determined but also the methods by which data has been collected and studies conducted concerning Hispanics. As is true in studying any ethnic group, generalizations are easy to make; however, the reader is cautioned that generalizations are often misleading if not errorous. All cultures are diverse and complex and Hispanic culture is no exception.

In assembling this collection of articles, I have attempted to present various viewpoints and conclusions in the hopes that after completion of the text, readers will be able to make knowledgeable interpretations of the data included and draw upon this information when dealing with and planning the care for Hispanic clients.

Special acknowledgement goes to Richard Wayne Yee for designing the cover of this book.

**RICARDO ARGUIJO MARTÍNEZ**



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# UNIT ONE

## CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS: INTRODUCTION TO THE HISPANIC'S LIFE STYLES

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The Hispanic family has long been presented as a close-knit group consisting of two subconcepts: the nuclear family and the extended family. Traditionally, the family maintains its position of prominence within the psychological life span of the Hispanic individual. "A Hispanic in need of emotional support, guidance, food, or money expects and is expected to turn to his family first in order to have such needs met. Only in unusual circumstances or when there is no alternative available will a Hispanic or his family attempt to seek help from others. This (seeking outside help) often occurs at great expense to the pride and dignity of both the individual and the family. This is perhaps one reason why it is so difficult to get individuals or families to seek professional help for medical and emotional problems."\* The interpersonal patterns within the traditional family are usually organized around two dimensions: "The elder order the younger and the men the women."† Because major decisions affecting the family are usually made by the elders (fathers or grandfathers), practices that have been passed from generation to generation still tend to influence the Hispanic's health beliefs.

Most social scientists when studying the cultural mores of the Hispanic limit their studies to the poor. Although between 30% and 40% of the Hispanics do fall into the poverty-level category, there are many Mexican-American families that are considered middle-class and a few that are wealthy. The diversities in socioeconomic status together with the variances in assimilation to Anglo-American cultural mores make it difficult to draw accurate generalizations. Because there are literally thousands of Mexican-American families in North America, all differing significantly from one another along a variety of dimensions, it is important that the health care practitioner be familiar with and understand the various cultural factors that may influence the health beliefs of the

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\*Hernandez, Carrol A., Haug, Marsha J., and Wagner, Nathaniel N.: *Chicanos: social and psychological perspectives*, St. Louis, 1976, The C. V. Mosby Co.

†Rubel, Arthur J.: *Across the tracks*, Austin, Texas, 1966, The University of Texas Press.

## **2 Cultural considerations: introduction to the Hispanic's life styles**

Hispanic. It is the intent, therefore, of this unit to present the reader with both traditional and nontraditional cultural factors contributing to the health attitudes and behaviors of the Hispanic.

As stated previously, the family is probably the single most important contributing factor influencing the health attitudes of the Mexican-American. In "The Mexican-American Family" Nathan Murillo discusses the cultural differences between the Mexican-American and the Anglo and outlines some of the strengths and weaknesses of the family structure.

In "The Mexican-American: how his culture affects his mental health" Dr. Stenger-Castro discusses a study he conducted exploring specific areas of the Mexican-American culture and correlations existing between mental abnormalities and various aspects of the culture.

Reyes Ramos in "A case in point: an ethnomethodological study of a poor Mexican-American family" provides an in-depth critical analysis of one family and the interpretations and coping mechanisms used to manage the practical circumstances of their daily lives.

Identifying cultural patterns and specific life styles is an important step in collecting data for the purpose of planning deliberative nursing or medical care.

**RICARDO ARGUIJO MARTÍNEZ**

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# 1

NATHAN MURILLO

## The Mexican American family

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I was asked to talk on the subject of the Mexican American family. I find it neither possible nor desirable to separate the Mexican American either as an individual or as a family unit from his history, cultural heritage, sociological, or psychological context. However it seems desirable to focus more on certain aspects of the Mexican American family which have received, to my knowledge, relatively little attention. Therefore, I will attempt to describe and discuss today some intercultural conflicts and dynamics, as they apply to the diversity of people found under the rubric of Mexican American and particularly as they relate to the family.

Those of you who are interested in a more purely sociological view of the Mexican American family can readily find numerous sources of factual data showing conclusively that the Mexican American ranks at the bottom or near the bottom on nearly every measure of socioeconomic success that has been utilized by the experts. A recent book by Galarza, Gallegos, and Samora entitled *Mexican Americans in the Southwest* (1969) contains data based primarily on the 1960 United States census. The book is a report of a two-year study during which the authors traveled throughout the United States and Mexico studying economic, social, political, educational, and other factors influencing the Mexican American. Briefly, these are some of their findings: the Mexican American population in the United States is estimated to be between five and six million people. From one third to one half of the Mexican Americans in the Southwest live below the official level of poverty or immediately above it. Most are manual workers earning only the lowest wages. Educational opportunities have been so restricted that this ethnic group is some three to four years or more behind the educational attainment of the general society. At present more

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Paper presented at the Mexican American Seminars, Stanford University, Stanford, California, April 3-4, 1970. [This paper is republished from Hernandez, C. A., Haug, M. J., and Wagner, N. N.: *Chicanos: social and psychological perspectives*, ed. 2, St. Louis, 1976, The C. V. Mosby Co., pp. 15-25.]

Grateful acknowledgement is given to Margarita C. Corral for her assistance in preparing this paper.

than 80 percent of the Mexican American population is urbanized. This last is contrary to the popular belief that most Mexican Americans are farm workers.

Important as this information may be, it fails completely to provide much basis for a humanistic understanding of the Mexican American people in their daily lives. For a more vital perspective and a more compassionate understanding of this large, diverse group of people one must delve further into their cultural heritage and history. The more one does this, the more obvious it becomes that there is no real way to arrive at significant universals or generalizations regarding the Mexican American family as it exists in this ethnic group. The reality is that there is no Mexican American family "type." Instead there are literally thousands of Mexican American families, all differing significantly from one another along a variety of dimensions. There are significant regional, historical, political, socioeconomic, acculturation, and assimilation factors, for example, which result in a multitude of family patterns of living and of coping with each other and with their Anglo environment. More precisely, there are families that are poor and a few that are wealthy; there are families where Spanish is the exclusive language spoken in the home and others in which it is never spoken. There are families who trace their ancestry back to their Spanish forefathers and others who trace their ancestry back to their Mayan, Zapotec, Toltec, or Aztec forefathers. Some families were living on the land which is now the southwestern part of the United States before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock while others have immigrated to the United States only in recent years.

Some of this diversity among the Mexican American people is reflected in the variety of names by which they have been known. At various times and in various places the Mexican American has been labeled Latino, Hispano, Spanish American, American of Spanish descent, and more recently (with increasing frequency and growing pride) Chicano. This last term has changed its meaning considerably in the past few years. It used to be primarily descriptive, but now it stands for a whole new orientation and a psychological identification with the *movimiento* which is working to improve conditions for all Latinos in this country. In sum, there is no stereotype Mexican American family pattern based on one unique traditional culture.

In Oscar Lewis's well known book *Five Families* (1959) he presents a sample cross section of families in Mexico—from a small peasant village in the country, a slum tenement in Mexico City, a new working-class housing development, and an upper-class residential district. At this time I would like to quote briefly from the introduction to that book:

Although each family presented here is unique in a little world of its own, each in its own way reflects something of the changing Mexican culture and must therefore be read against the background of recent Mexican history.

I believe this statement could apply equally well to the Mexican American family. It is essential to maintain this type of perspective when consideration is given to a large diverse people as they continue to adjust to changing conditions.

In an essay on the distortion of Mexican American history, Romano (1968) bitterly assails the concept of traditional culture with respect to the Mexican American. He makes the particular point that traditional culture is a passive concept incorrectly and destructively applied to human beings in process who have survived primarily through their ability to grow, change and adapt to different times, places and circumstances. With specific reference to the Mexican American, Romano objects to their treatment by sociologists, anthropologists, and historians as an ahistoric people. As a result he says the Mexican American has never been seen through Anglo eyes as a participant in history or as a generator of the historical process. To partially correct this distortion Romano gives several examples of activism on the part of Mexican Americans in the Southwest over a period of years. Romano insists that to correct the distortion of Mexican American history it is necessary to adopt a historical culture and an intellectual historical view of Mexican Americans in place of the stereotype static concepts of a traditional culture and the nonintellectual Mexican American.

As a psychologist I believe that only a process-change orientation is applicable to human beings *if* there is a desire to understand them realistically as they live and express themselves through the dynamics of their behavior. I can only concur with Romano that a historical perspective *is* important in understanding others. Static concepts have little relevancy to the dynamic processes of living.

Although I agree with this basic thesis, I find it only creates more difficulty for me to present some understanding of the values and conflicts within and concerning Mexican American families. I find myself on the horns of a dilemma. On one hand there is the desire to present an accurate view of Mexican American families, about which one cannot in reality generalize because of the many significant differences among them. On the other hand is the necessity, based partly on practicality, to present a somewhat traditional cultural view of the Mexican American family, which may have little or no relationship to reality.

To compound the problem I feel it important to make clear that there are other relevant variables such as hierarchy of individual needs, developmental and maturational factors, and personality styles which enter into and frequently overshadow the more general social-cultural values. In other words, not only do historical and cultural factors affect interpersonal patterns of adjustment but also personal needs and personality styles play significant roles. It is not surprising to find that conflicts of values between an individual and his family may be just as great as between one family member's cultural identification and a

different cultural tradition with which he may have contact. To again quote from Oscar Lewis:

Whole family studies bridged the gap between the conceptual extremes of culture at one pole and the individual at the other; we see both culture and personality as they are inter-related in real life.

This is the perspective I would like to maintain in addition to the historical heritage of the Mexican American family.

How can one describe a traditional Mexican American family when there is no uniform pattern? In an effort to solve this problem I have tried to temper my description of the "traditional" Mexican American family by describing it also in the context of some comparative cultural value systems and frequent areas of conflict among these. I will go further, however, and make explicit that the values discussed must be viewed from a probabilistic approach. That is, every value I attribute to a Mexican American person or family should be understood basically in terms of there being a greater chance or probability that the Mexican American, as compared with the Anglo, will think and behave in accordance with that value. Obviously, if my earlier words have any meaning, in the final analysis one must come to know and accept the uniqueness of the individual or of a specific family. Many Mexican Americans are not only bilingual but also bicultural, and it is very worthwhile to ascertain the special blending of cultures one may encounter in a person or family in order to acquire a realistic understanding.

I will introduce the Mexican American family by describing a few probable cultural value differences between Mexican Americans and the Anglos. Next I will talk about some concepts specifically related to the family. Following this I will note some of the conflicts and dynamics of these values in relationship to the Anglo society. Finally I will turn open the meeting for discussion with comments or questions from the floor.

The cultural differences between the Mexican American and the Anglo can be viewed in terms of differences in mental set or orientations, style, or "naturalness" in behavior. In many respects Latin values are more clearly defined and behavioral patterns are more closely adhered to than is common in the Anglo culture. This clarity of conceptualization implies no lack of variety, complexity, or richness of experience. On the contrary, I believe, a clear focus tends often to provide a basis for a more relevant and enriched experience for the individual. One is not so often left confused and searching for his place in life when recognizable guidelines are available. Thus the individual can experience life sooner and perhaps more fully. The Latin culture seems to provide more emotional security and sense of belonging to its members.

Let us now examine one cultural difference as an example: attitudes toward



material things. In the Anglo society values stemming from the Puritan view tend to emphasize work as a form of responsibility leading for the most part to rewards of a tangible nature. The Anglo world is described sometimes as divided into two categories: those of work and of play. The *responsible* individual is the one who works first so that he can later enjoy his recreation with or among his material gains. However, a vicious cycle may be formed because recreation often then becomes an obligation for the purpose of enabling the individual to go back and work more effectively and with greater energy than before. The Mexican American is likely to have a different orientation. To him material objects are usually necessity things and not ends in themselves. In contrast to the Puritan ethic, work is viewed as a necessity for survival but not as a value in itself. Much higher value is assigned to other life activities in the Mexican culture. It is through physical and mental well-being and through an ability to experience, in response to environment, emotional feelings and to express these to one another and share them that one experiences the greatest rewards and satisfactions in life. By comparison, any pursuit of material things by the Mexican American through work and the accumulation of wealth are likely to suffer. To the Mexican American it is much more valuable to experience things directly through intellectual awareness and through emotional experiences rather than indirectly through past accomplishments and accumulation of wealth. For the Mexican American, social status and prestige are more likely to derive from an ability to experience things in this kind of spiritually direct way and to share such knowledge and feelings with others. The philosopher, poet, musician, and artist are more often revered in this culture than the businessman or financier.

The Anglo's tendency to judge others largely in terms of the absence or presence of material comforts which he values so highly may cause him to perceive the Mexican American as "culturally deprived." This ethnocentric attitude on the part of the Anglo, which implies that his standards are the only "right" ones, usually evokes ridicule and resentment from the Mexican American. The Mexican American has only to remember that long before the first crude Anglo frontiersman came chopping his way through the forest many of his own forefathers lived on haciendas in the Southwest, where life was as civilized as the European of the time. Latin art and music flourish everywhere. One can glimpse this for himself today by going where Chicano students, for example, congregate. Music is always heard and colorful murals surround. By contrast other areas seem dull and lifeless.

There appears to be a common tendency for the Anglo to live in a future or extended time orientation, whereas the Mexican American is more likely to live and experience life more completely in the present. This difference in time orientation may be related to several factors; for example, value differences