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Working with Latinos in Rural Communities: “Nuts and Bolts”

Cover Page Footnote

Erratum

Ed. note: This version of the article is slightly revised from what was originally published since the correct Spanish spelling of several words did not appear in the previously published version.

Working with Latinos in Rural Communities: “Nuts and Bolts”

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Abstract

Latinos currently comprise 16% of the entire U.S. population and 9.3% live in rural areas ((U.S. Census, 2010). These current percentages indicate that most social workers will work with this population at least once during their careers. Therefore, it is important that social workers develop skills and knowledge to work effectively with Latinos. Working with Latinos in our current sociopolitical climate poses many challenges for social workers working in rural areas. However, if social workers adhere to the guidelines and standards initially established by the profession and implement best practices many of their efforts will be successful. This chapter aims to illustrate, using case studies at the various levels of practice, some basic “nuts and bolts” to assure best practices. It also aims to help provide knowledge about cultural aspects in the Latino culture. The implications are that social workers will encounter working with Latinos. It will be wise to assess and assure that biases are not affecting their abilities to work with a population that is also very diverse based on citizenship, migratory patterns and regional residency.

Keywords: rural social work, Latinos, micro, mezzo, macro best practices

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The U.S. is home to over 50 million Latinos comprising 16% of the entire population (U.S. Census, 2010). Many are born in this country and yet, seen as foreigners. However, many are considered indigenous in much the same way First Nations people are due to the current southern physical border areas having been part of Mexico prior to the historic Louisiana Purchase in 1803 (U.S. Department of State, n.d.) and the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo following the conclusion of Mexican-American War in 1846 (U.S. History, nd). Working with Latinos requires an integration of many skills and knowledge. Latinos are a diverse population and cannot be grouped into a generalized people (Furman, et al, 2009). Knowing this, will most likely affect the helping process and certainly deter a trusting relationship. Diversity among this population parallels with the diversity of rural communities. No one rural community is similar and knowledge and skills are required to practice in a rural area and work with a diverse case -load. This reading aims to identify some general best practice "nuts and bolts" when working with Latinos in rural communities with consideration regarding family, family structure, beliefs, customs and rural lifestyles. It provides three case studies at various levels and some important aspects to consider for each case. Common "nuts and bolts" or themes to consider include (a.) language barriers; (b) cultural beliefs; (c) cultural aspects where universal beliefs are negative, such as the characteristic of "being macho"; (d) fear of deportation; (e) racism and discrimination; (f.) time as a continuum.

Firstly, clarification of the terminology should be determined. The use of the term Latino is a complex one and social workers should solicit the terminology best preferred by the individual or group. This is amiable when the engagement stage is a positive process and a trusting relationship is established. The majority may prefer to be associated with their country of origin. If they are U.S. born, many prefer to be called American. Although the U.S. census

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uses the term Hispanics the term Latinos will be utilized for the sake of maintaining consistency within this chapter. However, it important to consider that the term, Latinos, is considered politically correct and accepted by the culture.

Rural social workers must certainly begin to understand this thriving and growing population by understanding some basic characteristics, although the argument has been made that there are differences among the Latino population which is based on various factors including countries of origin, U.S. regions and for those assimilated and non-assimilated. Furman et al (2009) identifies the need for students to be prepared to work with Latinos. Latinos make up a large percentage of people living in rural areas. The exact count cannot truly be estimated but it is believed to be and recorded at an estimated 9.3%. Latinos are considered to be the largest minority group in rural and small town areas (U.S. Census, 2010). It can be said that this number is probably much higher but obtaining an accurate count is due to lack of citizenship status, migratory trends and current sociopolitical beliefs. Another reason it is difficult to obtain an accurate count is the fact that some households are multifamily for the sake of economic reasons. Considering these factors, one can see it is nearly impossible to obtain a true count. Much of the Latino culture is located in the west and southwest in the states of Arizona, California, New Mexico and Texas. Other Latinos of Cuban and Puerto Rican descent reside in Florida and New York. However, it is important to keep in mind, that Latinos are a mobile people and migrant throughout the U.S., depending on employment opportunity.

The Nuts and Bolts of Working with Latinos/as in Rural Communities

This chapter will focus on three levels of case studies including the micro, mezzo and macro levels. The micro study will provide a study addressing a referral in a school setting in which a child is caught between two cultural worlds and attempting to ascertain acceptable and

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unacceptable behavior when dealing with children of the opposite sex. It will depict universal beliefs about certain cultural characteristics that are viewed as negative but in the culture have positive connotations. There are also some aspects of the judicial system and the complexities of discrimination and further complications of a belief system different from the host country.

The mezzo case study will address the complexities of family dynamics, including hierarchical layers, family roles, behavior exhibited in public and the clash between traditional parenting and teen rebellion in the life cycle. The case entails an adolescent female involved with the judicial system and the expectations for rehabilitation within a rural system.

The macro case study addresses outside collaborative relationships and the clash of beliefs in regard to cultural values. When working with rural communities or cultures it is important to determine the presence of indigenous leaders. If there is an existence of these leaders than it is important to acknowledgment them and speak to them before involvement with the community. It is also important to avoid any biases and especially involving your own perception of "expertness". While working with cultures different from your own it is important to see the client as an expert also (Yan & Wong, 2005). The case involves community and individual gardening for the purpose of addressing health disparities in a predominantly Latino community isolated from the community at large.

Understanding some of the important characteristics of the Latino culture will surely begin the engagement process. The Latino culture is collective rather than individualistic and usually one cannot work with an individual without including family members or close friends. Religion is an important aspect of the culture and it is quite common that individuals have sought assistance from clergy before any professional.

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It is important to remember that the Spanish language is considered a romance language, therefore, a positive and passionate one. Literal translations can not be used when there is a need to consider all nuances in the therapeutic process.

Depending on the individual's experience with whether or not their first language was Spanish is important to consider, as some mental health terminology may not be in the Spanish language should the social worker be attempting to discuss a diagnosis or other types of clinical terminology. Other factors to consider would be limitations of the English language, fear of deportation and the lack of confidence in speaking English. For those U.S. born, English may be their first and only language and may be offended should you immediately begin speaking what you assume is their native language. Among third and even second generations of Latinos they have lost their heritage language and to assume that all Latino descendants speak Spanish is a risk. It is best to ask what language they prefer to speak. This is an easy task when working with individuals but you will have those members who speak one or the other among families or groups.

Other characteristics to begin to understand and identify while working with Latinos and their families is that of *familismo*, *machismo*, and *simpatía* (Barranti, 2005; Brammer, 2004; & Falicov, 2010). *Familismo* is probably the best known of the terms in that it entails the meaning of the adages such as, “it takes a village”, “what happens in the family stays in the family” and “we help our own”. Thus, it is important to note as a family strength because they will initiate and seek services prior to requesting formal or outside services. In rural areas, sometimes, this is the only support you have. These supportive services can be both positive or negative. Positive for obvious reasons such as having concrete needs met, providing emotional support and other types of support. It is also the concept of collectiveness. Decisions are made as a group and not

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as an individual. Living in rural communities can be isolating, and living in a community not welcoming towards people from other cultures can be more problematic in many ways. Social workers should assess family and natural support services accessibility. These types of support systems can mediate family stress relating to isolation and provide positive perspective in family situations. Negative aspects might be family members who are judgmental, negative, impaired or simply wanting to take advantage of family members. The process of contextualizing alleviates much stress and allows the family much needed relieve knowing there is support and a different perspective of the situation. *Machismo* is a complex and social constructed concept and would need much more discussion than one can provide here. It possesses both positive and negative attributes and usually references the patriarchal family structure. In rural communities patriarchal structures are more prevalent (González-López, 2005). *Simpática* refers to the hospitality and respect Latinos demonstrate towards others.

Micro Case Study

Roberto is a 10-year-old male who was recently referred to the school social worker in a rural east Texas community, for fighting, talking to his female peers using sexually explicit language, talking back to the teacher and displaying gang-like signs. The family reported that Roberto had recently been involved in a car accident with his father and seemed to be "hanging around with the wrong crowd". The car accident took place while his father was under the influence of alcohol and he saw him taken away with handcuffs by police officers. The car was beyond repair but no one was hurt. While being arrested he saw his father being mistreated by the police or what he thought was mistreated. Roberto was born in the U.S. but both his parents are legal residents having gained citizenship during a time of amnesty. Roberto speaks both English and Spanish but his parents are more comfortable speaking Spanish. During an individual session

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with Roberto he reports having experienced a *susto*. *Susto* in this case refers to the symptoms Roberto is experiencing such as depression and anxiety from having been a victim of a car accident and having seen his father taken away in handcuffs. The literal translation in English for *susto* means “fright”. Experiencing a *susto* is taken very seriously and families will seek assistance to help the individual and family. Roberto reports that now he must see a *curandera* or a natural healer in the Latino culture. He states he is afraid for his father but thought that he was being *macho* by speaking to the girls in a disrespectful and *macho* manner. He states he was trying to be “all tough” because he thought he was supposed to behave that way to prove he was becoming a man. Since Roberto is the eldest child in the house he believes he must take on the role of “the man of the house” during the father’s incarceration. He was also reluctant to see the *curandera* because his friends would make fun of him. He was feeling embarrassed because, living in the Bible Belt, his non-Latino peers were saying that he was a devil because he believed in witches for seeing a *curandera*.

The family initially attempted to work with a local priest but discovered the Catholic priest only came occasionally due to the remote area and shortage of rural priests. This can be quite common where living in remote rural areas clergy may not be available on a regular basis for the community. In some remote areas with limited clergy, they travel to various communities on a monthly or bi-monthly basis to conduct masses and other services such as funerals, weddings, and baptisms are conducted by appointment. Often times, they must make an appointment far in advance, at which time the crisis will have been handled or left to resurface at another time.

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In rural communities where these practices are foreign, people tend to be more ethnocentric and less accepting of perceived odd beliefs or superstitious beliefs. In some instances, this can be seen as overt racism because the belief is different from their own (Daley, 2015). In this case the social worker is not only working with the cultural characteristics but also a community that might be unwilling to assist the family. The social worker must begin to become aware of their own beliefs and their ability to accept other's beliefs different from their own. In this case the social worker was from a conservative rural area and had been brought up with deep Protestant values. This was a belief unbeknownst to her upbringing and current set of beliefs as she continued to see life under these constructs. However, she began to research and consult with other social workers from similar background as Roberto's.

Working with this case requires much knowledge about the various beliefs in regard to a *susto*, societal views on immigration and immigrant, the status on various levels of immigration, beliefs in natural healers, the dynamics associated with the phenomena of *machismo* and the hierarchy of the family structure.

In this case it was best not to use Roberto as the interpreter for the family sessions, as this would be detrimental to the delicate family hierarchy and the homeostasis within the family. In this case, especially, Roberto might see this as an opportunity to act out more as a way to prove his manhood and go against the important characteristic of *simpática*. In order to maintain the family system it would be best to obtain as much normalcy as possible and allow the couple to work together to address and correct Roberto's behavior. Together the family should agree on ways to provide a reward and consequence process for addressing the behavior and working with the teacher when behaviors occur at school. The social worker worked closely with the schools and recommended having police officers educate the entire class about their jobs and to ease

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Roberto’s fears. This small request served as an educational community collaboration to ease fears and to normalize the situation.

Education is also a way to normalize what “becoming a man” means in a positive manner. Explaining that *machismo* not only means being brave, demanding, and virile but the positive attributes include being chivalrous, nurturing, responsible and being emotionally connected (Ojeda, Piña,-Watson, 2014).

Working as the social worker, with Roberto, it is important to empower by encouraging the family’s beliefs of alternative healing. Your own ability to instill hope and faith, at times, is all the family needs to resolve and remedy their own emotional injuries. In rural areas especially regionally, these natural healers and *curanderas* maintain a low profile and it is only among the people and word –of- mouth that one can be encountered. Often families will travel great distances to consult and seek services from *curanderos*. They are much more prevalent along the border areas and in very remote and out-of-the-way areas, such as the high mountains in northern New Mexico and California. Research is limited concerning the practice of *curanderos* and how and where they can be contacted but those who seek those services are quite successful in their search. The social worker will need to instill faith and hope as a power of healing and accept that healing is sometimes beyond our comprehension and that a belief system different from our own should be accepted and even normalized for a child’s sake. Working with this family required research and the need for self-evaluation by the social worker. The social worker realized the need to embody all social work values and initiate further education in order to best meet this family’s needs. This was a gift to the social worker in her trajectory to maturity and best practices.

Important factors to consider working with Roberto and his family in a rural setting includes:

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- Language barriers and linguistic connotations
- Cultural characteristics including health beliefs
- Support systems
- Rural aspects such as religions, clergy availability, transportation
- Fear of deportation
- Actual racism
- Length of time in the country

Mezzo Case Study

The First Offenders program is designed as an alternative program for adolescents to avoid serving time in a correctional facility. It requires the offender and their families to participate in multiple family group interventions (Quinn, 2004). This is usually a mandatory attendance of two sessions a week for three months. This includes individual family sessions once a week.

Marisol Hernandez is a 15 year-old Latina recently referred to the First Offenders program due to a shoplifting charge at a local family-owned drug store. This wasn't the first time, she steals and reports that she often takes make-up at a local store where her friends work. She stated she didn't think anyone would mind since it was a family run business and her friend's parents were the owners. In fact, she felt they allowed it knowing she had no money to make the purchases. The owner pursued prosecution and Marisol was court-ordered to participate in a three-month First Offenders program at the small courthouse, along with other first time youth offenders. Unfortunately, she knew most of the participants as did her parents when she attended the first multiple family group session. Marisol's family was the only Latino family in the group. Others attending came from surrounding rural areas and did not know each other.

During the first group session, she and her family remained silent and avoided participation even when questions were directly asked and when provided with activities. They

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remained silent for the next four consecutive sessions. The social worker in this case attempted to take a strengths based approach and acknowledge their attendance. However due to the social worker's mandated work duties she did have to inform the family that she had to file a report to the court and Marisol's juvenile probation officer; and that she would have to report their low level of involvement.

Marisol's father expressed that it was only due to the respect they had for the group facilitator and the fact that they wished to keep their family problems private in front of people who were not family. He reported that in the community it is difficult to trust and that he didn't know the other families on a personal level and so he felt he needed to be vigilant. Suspicion is healthy for those groups that have been oppressed and discriminated against (Corey, Corey & Corey, 2014). The subject of confidentiality should be addressed with any minorities in the group privately. Another issue to consider is that a family member may not be able to read as was the issue with Marisol's mother. Illiteracy can be a problem with the paper work, including signing confidentiality forms. Marisol's mother attended school up to the 8th grade in another country. In other countries, not all have free access to education. This lack of knowledge can be easily remedied if the social worker noted who signed the forms. More knowledge requires probing when assessing all family members. In this case the social worker attempted to assure he understands the hierarchy in the family. It is important to know that among rural Latinos there does tend to be more patriarchies than in urban areas (Falicov, 2010). Knowing this can eliminate potential biases leading to thoughts that a female's lack of participation may be due to domestic violence, submissiveness, child abuse and other serious assumptions. This issue can be serious when the social worker is not consciously aware of their own biases and could cause the

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Hernandez family to be assessed as noncompliant causing more judicial problems and discrimination.

Following this encounter, the family refused to attend the sessions and Marisol's father stated that he preferred his daughter spend time in a youth correctional facility. At this point, the social worker informed the family that this was not an option and for Marisol's sake spending time in a facility could be detrimental for her future and other reasons. After careful consideration and spending time with the family during a home visit the social worker was able to learn more about the family dynamics and the kind of things that might make the family more comfortable during the multifamily meetings. The social worker learned that it is often customary to start an uncomfortable situation in public with *la plática* (chitchat) and the importance in assuring complete confidentiality and building a trusting relationship among all involved. Thereafter, every session was started with informal gathering that included refreshments thus leading to an informal and relaxed setting. It was also noted earlier that the family was often tardy coming into the sessions, and when addressed by the social worker he learned that time is not based on mainstream culture but in the Latino culture it is based within the parameters of a time frame. If meetings started at 7:00 pm that usually meant between 7:00-8:00 pm. Of course if the family were completely assimilated this would not be the case. As a result, the meetings were changed to 6:30 and allowed for 30 minutes of informal gathering which assisted with cohesion and trust building. The social worker also began to start every session with reminding all those in attendance about confidentiality and had all participants sign an agreement during each and every session. The youth were especially held to this value and consequences of breaching the rule was discussed with the hope of peer pressure adherence.

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Delving into clinical personal issues might be a challenge within a setting like this if there is not diversity among the group members. Although, some barriers can be overcome during these multiple family sessions a cohesive and trusting relationship will take more time and can propose a challenge with time limitations. In these cases, it is best to identify a co-facilitator of the same ethnicity. If this is difficult to achieve than networking to identify a respected professional individual in the rural community might be necessary and perhaps even the use of teleconferencing with a facilitator of the same ethnicity. Although, not ideal, the social worker must work harder to assure all participants are comfortable and feel at ease with this type of arrangement.

Important factors to consider working with the Hernandez family in a rural group setting includes:

- Cultural characteristics
- Social justice issues
- Confidentiality
- Suspicion
- Perception of time
- Assimilation vs. non assimilation
- Co-facilitator of same ethnicity
- Awareness of own biases and their influence
- Family structure and hierarchies especially among rural Latinos
- Extra effort and time in creating trust
- Use of technology
- Level of literacy and educational level
- Relationship between language, culture and identity

Macro Case Study

Briar Forest or *La Selva* as it is known to those living in the community of a rural east Texas area have been friendly collaborates with social work students at a local university. The community consists of over 100 families living within a two-mile radius, horseshoe shaped area for over 25 years. The community has worked side-by-side with students erecting mailboxes

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with emergency addresses for emergency location purposes and building shelter bus stops for children to wait for school buses. Recently, the community allowed students to work with a local nonprofit community agency in planting vegetable gardens as a social learning project to address poverty and the health disparity Latinos experience with diabetes and hypertension (American Diabetes Association, 2015). The community is heterogeneous, in that, the residents are mainly of Mexican descent, of lower socioeconomic status and Spanish-speaking. As many Latinos living in rural communities the poverty rate is high in the area (Villalobos, 2014). Many of those living in the community experience extreme poverty and tend to be assigned swing and night shifts in the local poultry factories. Besides, poultry, the community possesses a large lumber industry and other small factories where the population is employed.

Working within this small Latino community, nestled outside the community at large, has taken years of trust building and establishing a reputation of credibility in fostering and nurturing relationships by a local social worker. Working at the macro level requires much nurturing and fostering with prominent community members within the Latino community and outside the small community. A social worker needs to be well versed with the skills in community development, organizing and planning. Firstly, a social worker needs to be in the community and visible in other activities surrounding the community residents. This includes attending church celebrations, cultural events and other activities important to the culture such as soccer games, religious events and important life situations involving death and births. The rural community is located in the Bible Belt area and very religious. The hub of the community centers on church for socialization and spiritual needs.

The community at-large is known as the oldest in the state and maintains its antiquated beliefs and customs. It does not believe in chain brand businesses and any other influences that

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may appear immoral such as films, music and events. It can appear unwelcoming and extremely conservative and segregated neighborhoods is contributes to this appearance. People of color tend to live among their own and therefore, establish their own businesses where they support and shop in their own neighborhoods. Those having immigrated may experience much isolation in various aspects (Stacciarini, Smith, Garvan, Wiens & Cottler, 2015). As a social worker, it was beneficial to show support for the local economy by shopping and patronizing the businesses.

Working with communities and particularly Latino communities requires much patience and investment. Identifying key informants and indigenous leaders is important and the social worker assured she possessed the skills to convey confidence, trustworthiness and knowledge. Important strategies to implement in Latino communities, besides spending time in the neighborhood, is to embrace good old grassroots efforts by meeting and greeting on a face-to-face and door-to-door basis.

Working in this community the indigenous leaders and key informants were informed about the garden project and they began to obtain a “buy-in” from the residents. One indigenous leader went as far as organizing a community meeting and inviting all residents to a meeting to discuss the project and recognized local neighbors for their efforts in the care of their yards. He set folding chairs in the middle of his property and awarded small yard signs for residents to be placed in their yards. Awards were given to the “best kept yard”, “prettiest flowers”, “best grass” and other awards. This was a technique in which the leader demonstrated investment into the community by encouraging residents to take pride in their neighborhood. In attendance were the students and faculty. It was also an opportunity to speak to each participant about the need to have fresh vegetables for the purpose of maintaining a healthy diet and keeping diabetes away. A

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brief questionnaire was distributed in Spanish and English to ask of their interest in planting a garden at no cost and students went door-to-door to make inquiries at a later date to assure all residents were provided the opportunity. Twelve families expressed genuine interest in having a garden planted in their yards, but there were only resources for seven. To resolve the issue a large community garden was planted in the same vicinity as the indigenous leader who agreed to maintain it and assure the vegetables were distributed to any residents who wanted food.

Those working with the project worked closely with a community partner known for their efforts in environmental issues and gardening. A small grant was obtained through the local university to purchase plants, seedling and garden equipment. Other materials were donated by a large corporation. With the assistance of a local certified permaculturalist and the expertise of other gardeners from the community partner, six vegetable gardens were planted in individual yards. Students and residents worked side-by-side to plant the gardens once a week for three hours during the late afternoons and mornings in raised beds. The beds were of 5 x 7 wooden boxes filled with soil from the ground and sifted to make it fine. Natural top soil was purchased and other top bark particles to prepare for planting. All had a job to do which may have involved, constructing wooden boxes, digging, using a shovel, sifting ground soil, turning over soil, hauling soil in wheel barrels and eventually planting and watering. The project was complete in three weeks and residents were informed that they would need to continue the maintenance. Those who had individual gardens planted, half were battling diabetes and others wanted to assure a healthy diet and expressed that they knew fresh foods were best and most, importantly, that they were expensive to purchase.

This project was not without its many challenges and barriers which mostly consisted of language barriers, a cultural difference in both gardening techniques and quality but also

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gardening for practicality versus beautification. Where one culture saw gardening as an art and the need to purchase quality, biodegradable, environmental-friendly materials the other culture saw gardening as a necessity and to utilize the most inexpensive materials available. Another challenge was that the community partner failed to recognize the knowledge the Latino community brought to the process and the need to appreciate and accept these talents and desires. One incident depicted in this process was when the collaborating expert in gardening began to pull out plants because they were not planted a specific measurement from one another and the resident became angry for taking the vegetable plants out of his garden. The resident saw this as removing food from his property and disrespectful. Small incidents occurred by students in which residents felt disrespected. For example parking where there are clearly no clear indications of physical parameters identifying parking areas due to the lack of curbs, driveways either paved or unpaved. At times there are no other physical signs of where yards end and start due to overgrowth of vegetation or natural pastures. Often it is a cultural learning experience for all involved and it is important to attempt to be inclusive of all residents by communication and clarifying parameters prior to the actual project.

Important factors to consider working with Latino in a rural community setting includes:

- Language barriers
- Social economic issues
- Extended period to establish trust
- Working with other entities
- Cultural differences
- Appreciation of knowledge
- Physical boundaries
- Indigenous leaders
- Necessity vs. non necessity
- Extra effort and time in creating trust
- Inclusiveness and communication
- Empowerment needs
- Isolation and immigration

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Conclusion

There is no one “shoe fits all” in any cases and when in doubt it is important to ask questions while exposing self to the Latino culture. Once a trusting relationship is established, you will find that many are honored to share their culture. Building a trusting relationship, especially during times of divisiveness, is important in assuring a successful process in whatever the goal is to be accomplished. Understanding language, family structure, community structure, confidentiality, time connotations, health beliefs, fears, strengths and socioeconomics is important in attempting to begin an empowering process. Working with rural Latinos and in rural Latino communities requires a constant process of self-assessment. It is important to assure all intricacies of cultural characteristics and aspects are taken into consideration like educational levels, paternal hierarchies in the rural setting, and religious beliefs to avoid making assumptions. Working with Latino and in their communities requires a deeper ability to self assess and reflect to avoid prior beliefs and assumptions to overcome preconceived biases. This can be accomplished by accepting that Latinos are diverse and acquiring knowledge about their specific rural characteristics and communities. Social workers should adhere by the guidelines set forth in the *Code of Ethics* and practice some basic “nuts and bolts” for the purpose of experiencing positive outcomes.

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