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# Shifting Identity: Process and Change in Identity of Aging Mexican-American Males

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*This article addresses the shift in machismo identity that occurs in Mexican-American male identity and the developmental process and the change in one's role as an elderly Mexican-American man.*

*Socialization of male-ism in Mexican-American boys begins with the cultural expectation that a young boy is and will be a man. There are also explicit expectations that girls should be respected but that, in contrast to boys, girls should be submissive and obedient. This is the beginning of machismo and the separation of being a "man" versus being a "woman."*

*Aging results in a loss of machismo and this is evident by the manner in which elderly males interact with their spouse and adult children. Towards the latter part of life, decision-making becomes a shared process between spouses. Quite often, Mexican-American elderly males are seen accompanying their spouse's at flea markets, garage sales, grocery shopping and even assisting with baby sitting grandchildren.*

Key words: *machismo, aging, Mexican/American, identity, gender roles*

## History of Machismo Characteristics

Machismo as a concept characterizing male behavior and personality has the potential of influencing boys who are socialized in corrective matters that are harsher than girls and their own sense of worthiness is brought to their attention to be a man before they reach manhood. For example it is not uncommon for boys to be told that they must act like a man not a woman and to hold themselves proudly without emotions. This historical

or anthropological perspective suggests that machismo involves bravado and suppressing emotions (Riding, 1985).

It is important to note that machismo can have both positive and negative meanings, positive in the sense of protecting the honor and welfare of the family, having a strong work ethic, being a good provider and living up to responsibilities (Galanti, 2003). Whereas the negative elements can include heavy drinking, subjugation of women and performance of high-risk activities that increase health risks among males and potential domestic violence for females (Redondo-Churchward, 1998).

As boys transition into adolescence and young adulthood, machismo is played out in relationship to how they conduct themselves against other males and in their relationship with females. The sharp dichotomization of gender roles in some segments of the Mexican community seems to only add to the misunderstanding or the term macho. Typically, boys settle matters by fighting with other boys and losers are considered less macho. Boys maintain a distant relationship with girls who are perceived as being unworthy of group membership; they are willing to simply follow. This interactional process solidifies hypermasculinity and, in some sense, a cultural image of male honor, respect, and specific gender roles (Neff, 2001).

By the time that they enter young adulthood males have experienced a strong dose of how to exert machismo and they practice dating behaviors while maintaining the upper hand with girls. The young male seeks out girls that come from traditional Mexican-American families, believing that traditional females will act submissively and will not challenge his macho role. Many Mexican-American marriages begin with a clear sense that the male is boss and that all decisions must be accepted by the female. "Nevertheless, family decision-making is described as either a joint process of both parents or primarily the job of the mother" (Vega, 1990, p. 1020). Ybarra (1982) found a range "from a patriarchal (role-segregated) structure to an egalitarian (or joint-role) structure, with many combinations of these two polar opposites evident" (p. 172).

Yet what was initially clear related to gender roles gradually gives way to uncertainty, much in response to bicultural assimilation that occurs in U.S./Mexico border regions. In the absence of

a distinct model of behavior it is no wonder that things begin to change for Mexican-American males at midlife when their spouse assert increasingly more influence in decision making. It may be at this point in the life cycle that the foundation is laid for the striking behavioral changes that elderly males exhibit in their relationships with spouse and children. Women's covert decision-making becomes more prominent both within and outside of the family. Mexican-American women begin to expect equality. Initially acts of defiance occur behind closed doors. This eventually becomes an open challenge and a shift in the Mexican-American male's identity begins to manifest. These characteristic shifts in identity may vary in inception and intensity depending on geographic location, with more pronounced shifts occurring in location that are further removed from the border. Additionally, other mediating influences, such as the male's educational level and health status, may account for differences in shifts in identity. Based on anecdotal evidence it is hypothesized that education and decreased health status are negatively associated with machismo. This shift may have positive and negative dimensions that need to be considered to capture a clearer picture of how machismo (Cuellar, Arnold & Gonzales, 1995) may play out in the family.

### Rio Grande Valley Characteristics

The Rio Grande Valley is located along the Texas-Mexico border stretching from Brownsville to Rio Grande City. The 2000 population census for the counties of Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, and Willacy was 978,369. Mexican/Americans, many of whose ancestors lived in this area before Texas joined the United States in 1848, constitute the majority of inhabitants. The proportion of Hispanics (Mexican/Americans) in Cameron County in 2000 was 84.3 percent. Hidalgo's Hispanic population was 88.3 percent, Starr's was 97.5 percent, and Willacy's was 85.7 percent.

All though the majority of Hispanics in the Valley are relatively young, with a median age for Hispanic males at between 23.9 and 26.2, the 2000 Census reveals that 19,125 Hispanic males were between 61 and 70 years of age. Roughly 10 to 12 percent of the male and female population in the Rio Grande Valley in 2000 was 62 years of age or older, totaling 110,320. Not surprisingly,

slight more than 1/3 of elderly grandparents were responsible for caring for children. The vast majority of Rio Grande Valley inhabitants speak Spanish at home, and this has been the pattern for decades. Between 77.8 and 90.4 percent of the Hispanics population spoke Spanish at home in 2000. Immigration from Mexico contributes significantly to the Valley's population growth. Excluding census figures from Willacy County, the census category "foreign born" accounts for about 1/3 of the Hispanic population. In 2000, the percentage of foreign born in Cameron County was 29.1 percent, Hidalgo was at 32.4 percent, and Starr was at a staggering 37.2 percent. Educational success and employment wages are exceedingly low for this region of the Country. Almost 50% of Hispanic males who are over the age of 25 have less than a high school education, and only a dismal 4.2% of males in Willacy County have a college or higher education level. Finally, the median family yearly income for this area is between \$17,385 and \$24,468, while about 1/4 of Hispanic family make less than \$10,000.

#### Factors Associated with Shifts in Machismo Identity

The uniqueness of the Rio Grande Valley is a direct result of the interdependent relationship between border residents on the US-Mexico border and the exchange of cultural values, norms and behavioral patterns, with machismo being a crucial cornerstone in the identity formation of the Hispanic male. The importance of machismo among young men begins to slowly diminish as they mature and become more secure about their manhood and respect the contributions of their spouse.

Hondagneu-Sotelo (1992) argues "that the partial dismantling of patriarchy [machismo] arises from new patterns of behavior induced by the arrangements of . . . migration" (pp. 397-398). The effect of migration on the Rio Grande Valley is most evident by a pervasive push/pull to assimilate and adapt to life on the US/Mexico border. On the US side there is an effort to maintain Mexican customs and traditions, while also being progressive in the way one acts and behaves. The woman's role which is initially traditional gradually merges with those of more assimilated Mexican females. "The experiences of these migrant women suggest

that when women are not accorded legitimate or institutional power, they may resort to subversion of legitimate authority" (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992, p. 406). In contrast to what was once covert subversion, Hispanic women are being much more assertive with their spouses. Now challenges to male supremacy are much more visible. As an example, a divorced Hispanic female in her early 50's recently asserted that her ex-husband could be buried with her, but her coffin would be on top of his.

There is evidence that in families the woman takes a different type of active role "Women often participated fully in major family decisions regarding the disciplining and rearing of teenage children . . . and how to spend hard-earned savings" (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992, p. 410). This is in sharp contrast to the male who accrues his power at birth by virtue of his gender. Machismo permits males to assert that there is his money, the family's money, and that spouses must make ends meet with the family money which includes the women's share.

There does appear to be a number of factors that either contribute or temper the degree of machismo that one exerts on the family. "Machismo cannot be a signifier for class conflict, since it is not unique to working-class men" (Pena, 1991, p. 42). Pena (1991) further suggests that the folklore of machismo is held as rationalization to allow the male to assert independence but with a shift as the economical provider is replaced by overt equality that had been operating covertly. Hondagneu-Sotelo (1992) challenges "the stereotypical image of machismo in Mexican immigrant families" (p. 411), where there is more of a family unity due to proximity of living and working. Machismo also is tempered by education, more so for the male than the female and generational familial background. It has been pointed out that machismo is not currently and may never be solely a Hispanic phenomena (Casas, Wagenheim, Banchemo & Mendoza-Romero, 1995; Gilmore, 1990) and may very well be more closely related to the development and adherence to a strong male gender identity and self-esteem.

As Mexican/American couples approach retirement age (60+) the partnership changes if the male chooses to adapt to marriage and retirement. The Mexican-American male will no longer have the power of being the bread winner to hang onto whatever degree of machismo that was evident. This final loss of machismo

becomes more apparent by the manner in which he interacts with his spouse and children. After retirement decision-making becomes a shared process and before they realize it the Mexican-American elderly males are following their spouses around to flea markets, garage sales, grocery shopping and even baby sitting grandchildren. A clear example of this is the often heard phrase that they are not grandbaby sitting but spending time with the grandchildren.

The elder Mexican-American male rationalize that it is no longer his responsibility to carry the burden of doing everything that must be done and that he has willingly given up power and control. Spouses may now openly challenge such rationalizations without apparent concern for consequences; spouses are freer to express their feelings, thoughts, and preferences. Despite efforts to obscure over shifts by means of humor and other distracting tactics, males have few choices. The male can resist, become physically ill, or learn new behaviors. He can now identify with the more benevolent aspects of machismo, i.e., taking care of women, honor, and respect.

### Anecdotal Findings

Machismo may appear to be a ubiquitous phenomenon among Mexican-American males but that is much too simplistic to be useful and in reality far from being accurate. Youth strive to be "macho" but the large majority of males begin to self identify with equality and shared respect. As with any cultural or ethnic stereotypical characteristic those who exemplify that characteristic take on the normative image that represents the majority rather than the minority. There certainly are those who blindly embrace machismo even though they oppress significant others, there are many who have or are in the process of disengaging from the concept of machismo.

It is important to note that outward manifestations of machismo may not match up perfectly with inner reality. For most Mexican/American males, machismo elements are certainly present, but not to the stereotypical degree that is initially attributed to Mexican/American males. The commonly affected reality that males, including older men, control and oppress their spouses

cannot be considered the norm in terms of current trends and evolving educational gains. The control relates specifically to being in the best interest of the family and safety and less to oppression. Mexican/American males have a sense of duty that they must be the protector and that if a spouse or other family member is hurt or threatened it is as if it happened to them personally. This sense of duty can be viewed as machismo without the oppressiveness that is attached conceptually.

As Mexican/American couples age, the assertive influence of the wife becomes more apparent, and with retirement the male becomes less important interpersonally. This power shift has been observed by the authors in client interviews and discussion during the past two decades. Older Mexican/American males struggle with feelings of worthlessness and being useless to the family. With this loss of a direct contribution, monetarily, to the family come the loss of identity and a search for a new family role.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

Ybarra (1982) cautions all researchers to "remain sensitive to the many variations which occur in Chicano family structure and ideology; otherwise incomplete and distorted perspectives will be perpetuated (p. 177). This is true for any culture or ethnic group and this especially holds true for Mexican-American elderly men. One area that is not documented relates to elderly Mexican-American male sexuality. This is somewhat of a taboo topic that raises concerns about truthfulness and frankness but necessary to explore to determine trends and behaviors. Discussion with this population group about sexuality, whether in individual or group therapy, are often brief and focuses on generalities. Few are willing to talk openly in group and the subject is easily changed or ignored. This is clearly an area that requires closer examination and research. Additionally, information is needed from spouses to corroborate information that is provided by the males.

It is incontrovertible that there are Mexican/Americans that embrace control and oppression, and one such case recently surfaced. While sobbing, a BSW Junior who had recently married stated that her new father-in-law dictated that she would no



longer attend school. She was expected to stay home and begin helping her mother-in-law. Her husband could not assert himself as his father was providing them with temporary housing in his home. Her husband reasoned that he would ask permission in the near future to be allowed to look for an apartment. Even though incidents like this occur in Mexican/American communities, many known, like this particular individual are shocked when this happens. The family had not given her the impression that this might happen as relates to this student, she maintained that she could not have predicted her father-in-law's ultimatum.

At the other polar extreme are families who are or were lead by the Mexican/American woman who was neither controlling nor oppressive. These families need to be studied so as to determine power dynamics and the roles of the husbands. Future research is needed to determine the distribution/prevalence of machismo in Mexican/American men and to explore its relationship to key demographic variables, including age, education, acculturation, health status and income.

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