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## **Culturally Informed Emotionally Focused Therapy With Latino/a Immigrant Couples**

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**L**atinos/as<sup>1</sup> are the largest and fastest growing ethnic minority group in the United States (U.S. Census, 2000). However, Latinos/as continue to be seriously underrepresented in research and service delivery, which

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345

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prevents them from obtaining the benefits associated with participation in evidence-based practices (Castro, Barrera, & Martinez, 2004). The purpose of this chapter is to present a culturally informed model for the application of Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) with Latino/a immigrants. EFT is an evidence-based intervention capable of alleviating couples' emotional distress by promoting individual worth and identity along with relational security and intimacy (Johnson, 2004). We focus on the application of EFT with Latino immigrants because this specific Latino population is significantly underrepresented in clinical research (Castro et al., 2004).

For purposes of clarity, we will first introduce a general theoretical framework that integrates sociological, cultural, and Latin-American feminist theories. These theories identify relevant contextual factors that impact the lives of Latinos/as. Next, we will present a culturally informed model of EFT, followed by a detailed step-by-step demonstration of its clinical application with an immigrant Latino/a couple. Finally, we will propose recommendations for applying EFT among diverse Latino/a populations (e.g., U.S.-born Latinos/as).

## Authors' Backgrounds

I (JRPC) am a Mexican native and relocated to the United States eight years ago to pursue my graduate education. I have since completed my graduate studies and become an assistant professor in a graduate family therapy program at a state university. As a first-generation immigrant, I have experienced the excitement and fulfillment associated with accomplishing professional goals that would be very difficult for me to achieve in Mexico, due to the intense contextual challenges that my country of origin continues to face. However, as an immigrant in the United States, I have also experienced the pervasive effects of ethnic discrimination and bigotry that continue to exist in this country.

Based on my life experiences, I am passionate about utilizing clinical interventions that are efficacious and culturally relevant. It is also critical for me to ensure that clinical practice is informed by social justice. Thus, I consider it necessary for clinicians to remain attentive to the ways in which disadvantaged populations continue to face contextual barriers and oppressive legacies that impede them from fully embracing their strengths and cultural richness.

I (DC) am a third-generation Mexican American whose grandparents took the challenging journey of immigration in order to provide more opportunities for future generations. As such, I have benefited from their

sacrifices. In particular, I am currently entering my third year as a doctoral student. I have encountered many contextual challenges as part of an ethnic minority living in the United States. For example, I have lived in lower socioeconomic neighborhoods with crime, poverty, and drugs that create many stressors on couples and families. Therefore, I am dedicated to narrowing the gap of educational and health disparities for Latinos through the advancement of evidence-based and culturally appropriate interventions.

I (KH) am a White female who was born and raised in the United States. I am now in my third year of graduate school, working toward my master's—and eventually my doctoral—degrees in marriage and family therapy. I have been seeing clients for almost two years now. Through my personal relationships and clinical work with marginalized populations, I have become aware of and begun to question my privileges in society. For example, as I write this chapter I am sensitive to the fact that most couple therapy intervention is developed and implemented with populations of the cultural and ethnic background to which I belong (e.g., White, middle class, heterosexual), and I struggle with this reality. The many inequities that people of color face motivate me to take responsibility for the promotion of social justice.

I (AREC) am a female international student from Guatemala, Central America. After becoming a licensed clinical psychologist in my country, I decided to specialize in marriage and family therapy in the United States. I am currently a second year master's student. Throughout this process, I have had the opportunity to work with clients of different social status, particularly with low-income families and clients living in multi-stress situations. My professional career has been a path of personal growth through which I have questioned my beliefs and strengthened my commitment toward social justice. My journey to the United States has helped me to experience the importance of using culturally sensitive approaches to help clients effectively.

I (SH) am an African American female graduate student in a marriage and family therapy program. I am in my second year of a nonterminal master's degree. As a racial minority in my graduate program, I constantly question my role and at times find myself silenced by my personal feelings of inferiority. Initially, I began writing this chapter with a bit of hesitation because I did not want another book to alienate and negatively isolate the Latino population as different from other clients. After many discussions with my colleagues, I became aware of the need to acknowledge and embrace the differences of Latino populations as a way to enhance their experiences in therapy. Therefore, I realize it is important that our clinical work is continuously grounded on the histories and experiences that our clients bring to therapy.

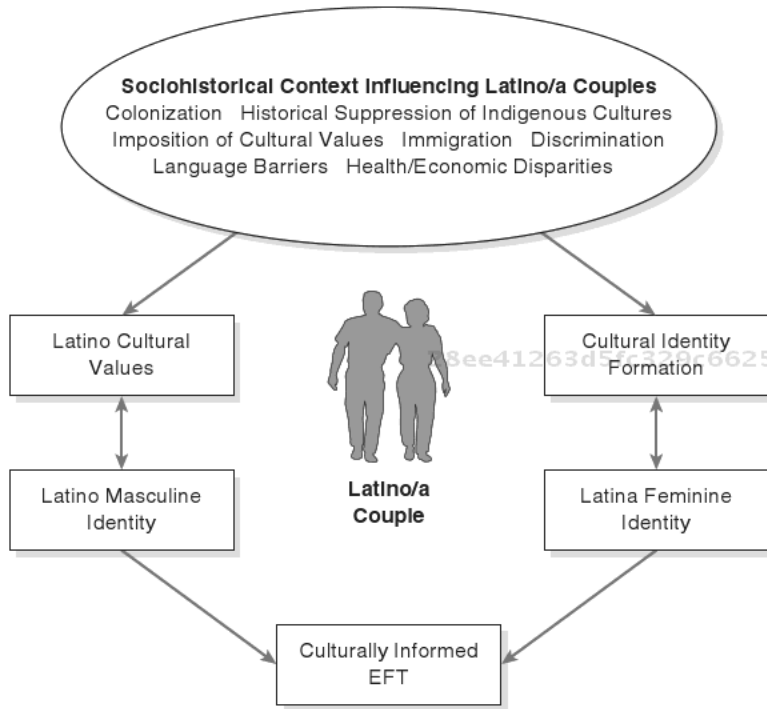


Figure 17.1 Context and Clinical Practice With Latino/a Couples

## Context and Clinical Practice With Latinos/as

Figure 17.1 illustrates key contextual factors that impact the lives of Latinos and that should inform clinical practice with Latino/a couples. As illustrated in the figure, a major limitation of our model is that it has been applied only with heterosexual Latino/a couples. We recognize the great need to disseminate and evaluate EFT among LGBT populations, including the LGBT Latino population. We also consider that the adaptation of EFT among sexual minorities should be informed by knowledge of the intense oppressive experiences that they continue to experience (Bepko & Johnson, 2000).

### Historical Colonization

The European invasion of the Americas brought genocides and destruction of the Indigenous cultures already established on the continent. The European conquest also promoted an ideology that depicted Native

Americans as inferior “savages without soul,” who needed to be taught the “true civilization” as lived by the Europeans (Bacacela, 2006). Scholars have indicated the need to continue to identify the long-term effects of the European colonization. For instance, in the mental health professions there is a risk of considering Eurocentric forms of relationship functioning as the ideal, while minimizing the cultural richness embedded in the relationship dynamics of ethnic minority populations (Castro et al., 2004).

#### *Latino/a Immigration Perceived as a Threat: Perennial Colonization*

Latino/a immigrants living in the United States have historically been at best tolerated and at worst persecuted. Some scholars have even suggested that Latino/a immigration represents “a major potential threat to the cultural and political integrity of the U.S.” (Huntington, 2004, p. 243). Unfortunately, the depiction of Latino/a immigrants as a burden overlooks the systematic efforts the United States has made over time to attract Latino/a immigrants in order to satisfy U.S. interests. Specifically, a revolving door policy has operated by which immigrants become welcome whenever there are labor shortages in critical areas of the U.S. economy (Nevis, 2002). Despite such realities, Latinos have frequently been utilized as “convenient scapegoats” whenever the United States faces political or economic crises (Nevis, 2002). In response, mental health practitioners should remain attentive to the potential negative impact these contextual stressors may have on Latino/a immigrants, particularly because the couple relationship may be one of the few avenues they have to express the distress associated with these forms of social exclusion (Parra-Cardona & Busby, 2006).

### 28ee41263d5fc329c66250c17d2dfa25 ebrary Latino/a Cultural Values and Cultural Identity Formation

#### *Latino Cultural Values*

Mental health practitioners should recognize and appreciate important Latino/a cultural values (Falicov, 1998). As summarized by Falicov, *familismo* is understood as dedication and commitment to one’s family. For many Latinos/as, a commitment to *la familia* may supersede financial or professional achievements. In addition, rather than considering the nuclear family as the basic family unit, Latinos/as may consider *la gran familia* as their family unit, consisting of both vertical (i.e., multi-generation) and horizontal (i.e., extended) family members. *Respeto* is a Latino value that highlights the deference that is owed to every individual. *Personalismo* refers to the importance of establishing meaningful interpersonal relationships in diverse social settings. Finally, *colectivismo*

highlights the importance of evaluating the ways in which one's actions affect the common good (Falicov, 1998).

### *Cultural Identity Formation*

Scholars have highlighted the dangers of utilizing simplistic models of cultural identity formation (Cabassa, 2003). Specifically, rather than considering "assimilation" or "acculturation" to mainstream U.S. culture as an ideal outcome, a more culturally relevant paradigm is to understand cultural identity as a complex process with multiple potential outcomes (Ivey, 1995). For instance, some Latino/a immigrants may develop a cultural identity that embodies a strong identification with either their country of origin or the United States. In contrast, other Latino/a immigrants may want to be identified as bicultural, and choose to integrate elements from both cultures. Unfortunately, the benefits associated with integrative expressions of cultural identity (e.g., biculturalism) continue to be overshadowed in clinical practice, particularly by service providers using theoretical models that identify assimilation as the ideal form of cultural identity (Coatsworth, Maldonado-Molina, Pantin, & Szapocznik, 2005).

## Latin American Feminism and Gender Analysis

### *Latin American Feminism*

Feminist perspectives argue that patriarchal societies are structured in ways that ensure the socioeconomic and political superiority of men, while relegating women to subordinate roles (White & Kowalski, 1998). Latin American feminist ideologies share this assumption. In addition, these theories highlight the need to examine the ways in which patriarchy is associated with the diverse forms of historical oppression experienced by Latin American countries (e.g., foreign invasion and colonialism, assassination and alienation of indigenous communities), as well as the need to identify culturally relevant definitions of masculinity and femininity (Ramírez Hernández, 2002).

### *Latino Masculine Identity*

The concept of *machismo* has often been defined in a way that depicts Latino men as domineering toward women (Baca-Zinn, 1982). In objection to this portrayal, Latino/a scholars have expressed the need to identify new culturally relevant definitions of Latino masculinity. For example,

Latino men have reported embracing alternative identities characterized by *positive machismo* and *nobleza* (Tello, 1998; Torres, Solberg, & Carlstrom, 2002). *Positive machismo* and *nobleza* highlight the importance of embracing compassion, tolerance, and perseverance when facing extreme contextual challenges (Tello, 1998). These constructs motivate men to establish interpersonal relationships characterized by open emotional expression, gender equality, and family commitment (Tello, 1998).

### *Latina Feminine Identity*

Latina feminist scholars have expressed concerns that feminist ideologies often overlook the cultural value that ethnic minority women may attribute to traditional gender roles (Torres & Pace, 2005). For instance, Latina women may find their role as primary caretaker empowering and culturally relevant. Thus, scholars have expressed the need to avoid stereotyping such women as submissive or unable to become independent. Instead, Latina feminist scholars advocate for examining the extent to which Latina women feel safe and empowered in deciding their preferred gender roles (Torres & Pacem, 2005).

## **Culturally Informed EFT**

Our proposed culturally informed model of EFT stems directly from the theoretical framework we have just presented. Table 17.1 summarizes this model by indicating how each step of the EFT process can be adapted for clinical work with Latino/a immigrant couples.

### **Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT)**

EFT is an evidence-based intervention for couples that privileges emotion and attachment (Johnson, 2004). As Johnson explains, the process of EFT seeks to restructure the way in which each partner responds to the attachment needs and emotional reactions of the other, seeking to develop a new interactional cycle that fosters emotional engagement and promotes secure bonding. The practice of EFT traditionally takes place according to nine steps that guide the couple through three stages of change: (1) de-escalation of the negative interaction cycle, (2) building new interactional patterns that promote secure attachment, and (3) consolidating the new cycles of attachment. The reader is referred to the original source for a more detailed description of EFT (Johnson, 2004).

**Table 17.1** Overview of Culturally Informed Emotionally Focused Therapy With Latino /a Immigrant Couples

<p><b>Step 1: Joining and Assessment Informed by a Cultural Perspective</b></p> <p><i>Part A: Joining While Attending to Immigration, Gender, and Cultural Identity Issues</i></p> <p>Join with the couple in a collaborative and genuine manner.</p> <p>Obtain a clear history of the couple's immigration experience(s) as well as their individual perceived cultural identities.</p> <p>Learn about the couple's cultural values and how these may relate to your work together (e.g., role of <i>familismo</i>).</p> <p>Begin to explore how each partner's gender script relates to expressions of emotional vulnerability.</p> <p>Listen to the couple's story and recognize possible obstacles to secure attachment and emotional connection.</p> <p><i>Part B: Assessment of Relational Difficulties</i></p> <p>Clarify the presenting problem and identify the couple's goals for therapy.</p> <p>Notice strengths of relationship.</p> <p>Assess for appropriateness of EFT (e.g., no ongoing domestic violence, couple wishes to improve relationship).</p>
<p><b>Step 2: Identifying the Problem Interaction Cycle That Maintains Attachment Insecurity</b></p> <p>Utilizing a systems perspective, identify how the actions of each partner interact to form a cycle of distress.</p> <p>Remain attentive to issues of attachment, cultural identity, immigration, and gender when conceptualizing the cycle.</p> <p>Confirm this cycle with the couple and begin to elicit their automatic cognitions and self-dialogues associated with it.</p>
<p><b>Step 3: Preparing the Experience of Emotional Vulnerability and Accessing Unacknowledged Feelings</b></p> <p><i>Part A: Preparing the Experience of Emotional Vulnerability</i></p> <p>Understand that gender and culture can play a critical role in influencing couple dynamics.</p> <p>Recognize that gender socialization may obstruct emotional vulnerability in both males and females.</p> <p>Respect the contextual necessity of emotional toughness while also expressing how this could prevent intimacy in the couple relationship.</p>

<p>Promote a “both/and” position of gender identity that can respond to cultural strengths and appreciate emotional vulnerability (e.g., by using the <i>hombre noble</i> philosophy).</p> <p><b>Part B: Accessing Unacknowledged Feelings</b></p> <p>Validate and explore the context in which the gender and cultural identity of each partner has developed.</p> <p>Help each partner identify the primary emotions that are driving the interaction cycle.</p> <p>Foster a validating and safe atmosphere as the partners in the couple begin to express these emotions.</p>
<p><b>Step 4: Reframing the Problem in Terms of Emotions, Attachment, and Cultural Needs</b></p> <p>Talk through the problem with the couple, explaining it as a cycle that evolves out of each partner’s emotional reactions and attachment behaviors.</p> <p>Encourage continued emotional vulnerability by inviting each member of the couple to share their cultural needs.</p> <p>Externalize the problem, empowering the couple to work together to combat the distressing interaction cycle.</p>
<p><b>Step 5: Promoting Identification With Disowned Needs and Integrating Into Relationship Interactions</b></p> <p>Enable both partners to continue to explore and express their attachment needs.</p> <p>Promote interactions that are validating and nonblaming.</p>
<p><b>Steps 6 and 7: Facilitating Acceptance of Each Partner’s Experience and Encouraging Expression of Specific Needs</b></p> <p>As each partner begins to disclose his or her underlying attachment and cultural needs, help the other to understand these needs and respond appropriately.</p> <p>Challenge the myth that each member of the couple must have similar cultural experiences by asking the couple to recognize and accept their cultural identity differences.</p>
<p><b>Steps 8 and 9: Fostering the Emergence of Unique Solutions and the Consolidation of New Positions</b></p> <p>Support each partner as they practice expressing clearer requests for connection and providing validation.</p>

(Continued)

**Table 17.1** (Continued)

Help reinforce new interaction cycles that promote emotional vulnerability and engagement.
Ensure both partners feel fully entitled to their attachment and cultural needs.
Celebrate overt expressions of needs that defy traditional gender and cultural stereotypes and reinforce the value of such expressions within the relational context.
Revisit troublesome issues in the couple's relationship and support each member in addressing these issues using their new patterns of interaction.
Move toward termination (e.g., normalize fears of relapse, reinforce couple's successes, discuss attachment rituals).

### **Finding Two Homes: Fulfilling Emotional and Cultural Needs**

The following clinical presentation describes the implementation of EFT with a first-generation Latino/a immigrant couple affected by immigration stressors, lack of attention to issues of cultural identity formation, and rigid gender socialization. This case study is meant to be an illustration of one way in which culturally informed EFT has been applied with an immigrant Latino/a couple to produce multiple positive outcomes. It is by no means a fixed format that should be followed in every case. Rather, the essence of culturally informed EFT requires that the uniqueness and diversity of every Latino/a couple be acknowledged during the therapeutic process. This model suggests a method by which to accomplish these goals.

## **CASE EXAMPLE**

Pedro (35) and Sofia (33) had been married for six years.<sup>2</sup> Both were first-generation immigrant Latinos/as. Pedro came to the United States five years before under a visa limiting his employment to specific sectors of the labor market (e.g., construction, agriculture). After spending four years as a farm worker, he was promoted to production supervisor in a food processing plant. Sofia immigrated along with Pedro by using a spousal visa and was not allowed to work. However, she had recently enrolled in the

community college and was pursuing an associate's degree in nursing. At the time of therapy, they had applied for a new type of visa that would allow Sofia to seek employment.

During the intake session, Sofia reported acute communication problems that had recently become much more frequent and intense. She was also distressed by a marked reduction in her sexual desire. Pedro confirmed the communication difficulties and expressed concern for their decreased sexual activity. He expressed confusion over Sofia's distress and loss of sexual desire. Despite these difficulties, both Pedro and Sofia expressed a desire to rekindle their relationship and pointed to how fulfilling their relationship had been when they had gotten married.

Next, we will apply the case to the EFT steps as suggested by Johnson (2004).

## Step 1: Joining and Assessment Informed by a Cultural Perspective

The initial sessions were devoted to clarifying the presenting problem, identifying the couple's goals for therapy, and establishing a collaborative treatment plan. During this stage of treatment, it was particularly important for me (JRPC)<sup>3</sup> to obtain a thorough history of their immigration experiences and perceived cultural identities before proceeding. This allowed me to obtain a clearer understanding of the ways in which contextual and cultural issues were impacting the couple relationship.

### *Part A: Joining While Attending to Immigration, Gender, and Cultural Identity Issues*

Pedro and Sofia were married prior to relocating to the United States, and recalled how their relationship had been stable and fulfilling during the first few years. About a year after their wedding, the couple had decided to come to the United States to escape the financial and safety problems they were experiencing in their home country. Once in the United States, Pedro was subjected to an exhausting work schedule—between 60 and 70 hours per week—but the couple decided to remain here because of the opportunities they had to improve their quality of life. However, Sofia explained that it was difficult for her to only see her family for two weeks each year. Pedro reported similar feelings, but expressed that “unfortunately, that’s the price we need to pay in order to have a better future . . . We need to focus on what’s ahead of us and not to look back.”

When asked about cultural identity issues, Sofia expressed a deep appreciation for the economic opportunities and sense of safety she had experienced in the United States. She especially valued the opportunities for independence and professional development offered to women, which differed from the barriers women continued to experience in her home country. Although she expressed a desire to spend the rest of her life in the United States, she also explained, "I really miss feeling the warmth of my people, the beauty of my country and my culture . . . that is difficult to find here in the U.S."

Pedro focused on describing the challenges associated with being an immigrant in the United States, but also demonstrated a deep appreciation for his job, despite the hardships it entailed. He affirmed that one of his major life goals was to become a U.S. citizen. Although he expressed a strong appreciation for his culture, he also described clear frustrations related to his country of origin, explaining, "We came here [to the United States] because we couldn't find in our country these opportunities . . . a good job and safety . . . and that angers me . . . that's why I want to become a U.S. citizen . . . this country is offering me a home."

I asked the couple what they valued most about being Latinos/as and how they wanted to inform our work based on these issues. Sofia expressed that she strongly valued the importance of having a strong sense of family cohesion and community. Pedro agreed, but explained that the family he had established with Sofia was of primary importance to him because his own family disintegrated after his parents divorced when he was young. Pedro also affirmed the importance of his recent promotion because it would allow him to ensure that all the workers were treated with *respeto*.

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#### Part B: Assessment of Relational Difficulties

As therapy progressed, Sofia expressed how one of her main concerns was that Pedro struggled to understand that sometimes she was not in the mood for sex. Pedro complained that Sofia "was too sensitive" and that she seemed to "keep resentments" from previous fights. When I asked Sofia about her reaction to Pedro's statement, she was clearly upset and expressed how difficult it was to share her feelings with Pedro. In addition, Sofia explained that she realized the advantages of relocating to the United States, but felt that Pedro refused to acknowledge the hardships associated with being an immigrant. She expressed that "Pedro only faces problems by saying 'never look back, always look forward' . . . that is frustrating . . . I wonder if coming to the U.S. was the right thing or not."

## Step 2: Identifying the Problem Interaction Cycle That Maintains Attachment Insecurity

Pedro and Sofia were engaged in a pursue–distance pattern. Specifically, Sofia was actively seeking increased emotional connection with Pedro by sharing with him her feelings of distress and loss. However, Pedro dismissed Sofia’s feelings by remaining in a withdrawn emotional position, trying to deal with her emotional distress by focusing on the future.

Contextually, issues of cultural identity, gender, and immigration influenced the relational difficulties of this couple. For example, Pedro could be considered a biculturally oriented individual with a strong orientation toward the United States, particularly because of how much he valued the opportunities he had found in his adopted country. Overall, his sense of satisfaction associated with living in the United States was higher than his sense of loss associated with not living in his country of origin. In contrast, although Sofia also had elements of biculturalism, she was clearly oriented toward her country of origin, as demonstrated by the profound sense of loss that she continued to experience by missing her family and culture.

Gender issues were present in two ways. First, Pedro was not validating Sofia’s experience and was pushing her to “move on,” while trying to impose the need to “focus on the future.” Thus, Pedro had not realized the ways in which his male privilege and identity as their sole source of income increased Sofia’s pressure to conform to his viewpoints. In addition, it appeared that Pedro had internalized strong gender socialization messages that undervalued the richness of emotional vulnerability.

Important attachment needs were also not being met for each partner, in part because of the difficulties associated with immigration. Specifically, both partners were experiencing attachment losses associated with not living close to their families and country of origin. When coping with these losses, Pedro was adopting a more stoic stance by highlighting the need to “move forward, without looking back,” while Sofia was clearly naming the profound negative impacts associated with their lives as immigrants. In addition, Pedro interpreted Sofia’s low sexual desire as an indication that she was losing interest in him. This was highly threatening to him because he vividly reported how much he loved Sofia and how she provided the motivation that kept him “fighting in life.” Sofia described Pedro as being emotionally unavailable. Thus, she did not experience Pedro as the secure base she needed in order to cope with the contextual stressors she was facing.

I described these patterns to Sofia and Pedro in order to confirm that my impressions reflected their experiences. Next, I asked them to focus on the automatic cognitions and self-dialogues associated with each cycle. Sofia identified that after refusing to engage in sexual intercourse with Pedro she would frequently think, "I wish he would only hug me and understand me more." When I asked her whether she had similar thoughts after attempting to share her struggles as an immigrant with Pedro, she agreed. Sofia explained how she had convinced herself that it was useless to share her distress with him, because "he would only try to focus on the benefits of living in the U.S." Pedro was able to identify a self-dialog informed by a sense of resentment. Specifically, he would say to himself that Sofia was not capable of valuing his daily efforts because she was too immersed in herself. He also expressed that Sofia's decreased sexual desire was a source of anxiety for him. He wondered whether she was losing interest in him or if she wanted to force him to return to their country of origin. As the couple began to disclose their attachment insecurities, I reflected to Pedro and Sofia that their experiences were also a testimony of their desire to be close to each other.

### Step 3: Promoting Emotional Vulnerability and Accessing Unacknowledged Feelings<sup>4</sup>

This step is informed by feminist and cultural perspectives. We draw from the contributions of scholars who have documented the importance of engaging Latino/a men by emphasizing the virtues associated with being a *hombre noble* (noble man) as a way to challenge rigid gender socialization. We purposefully focus on engaging males in treatment, especially if we perceive struggles with experiencing emotional vulnerability. We also recognize that being a man conveys privilege in patriarchal societies, and because Latino/a immigrant men are often the main providers in their families, issues of power have a critical role in Latino/a couple dynamics. Thus, we fully agree with scholars who have proposed informing the EFT intervention according to feminist principles, particularly because of the importance of overtly addressing issues of gendered privilege in couple therapy (Vatcher & Bogo, 2001).

#### *Part A: Preparing the Experience of Emotional Vulnerability*

To begin to open space for deeper emotional work, I provided Pedro and Sofia with a brief handout to consider prior to our next session. The

handout referred to reflections of what constitutes a *hombre noble*. I started the following session by asking the couple about their reactions to the handout. Sofia was enthusiastic after reading that a man who is able to be emotionally vulnerable can also be considered a virtuous man. Pedro expressed that he resonated with the image of a being a *hombre noble* and was intrigued by my emphasis on men, rather than the couple. I explained that after working with many families and couples, it was my belief that men can promote much more happiness in their families when they understand masculinity not only as the capacity to fight for their families in everyday life but, equally importantly, as the ability to help everyone to embrace intense emotions such as fear, sadness, or hurt.

I went on to focus my attention on Pedro and expressed to him that I deeply respected his capacity to face the extremely challenging working conditions he encountered on a daily basis. I asked him to help me understand how he had developed this sense of strength and resilience. Pedro vividly described the numerous ways in which he had to adapt his thinking in response to his work environment. For instance, he had often felt like giving up after a work week of 70 hours in the fields under challenging conditions. He also reported various occasions where he experienced discrimination by supervisors or non-Latino coworkers and decided to remain silent for fear of jeopardizing his immigration status. Pedro shared how he was committed to enduring any hardships in order to secure the future of his family. He said, "*Te tienes que aguantar* (you must tolerate it) . . . you cannot be weak in the fields . . . if they treat you bad because you are an immigrant, you just need to be very strong."

After validating Pedro's strong commitment to his family and virtues, I invited him to reflect on the ways in which his capacity to overcome adversity by hardening his emotions could also represent a challenge to his relationship with Sofia. I clarified how I was concerned that the armor he had developed in order to survive as an immigrant farm worker was also preventing him from experiencing emotional vulnerability in his relationship with Sofia. I encouraged him to maintain this armor as a way of protecting himself from the contextual challenges he had to face, and I also suggested he let his guard down at times with Sofia in order to experience increased intimacy through emotional vulnerability.

### *Part B: Accessing Unacknowledged Feelings*

Pedro shared that he wanted to be a *hombre noble*, but said he did not know how to solve Sofia's problems. When asked about his feelings

whenever Sofia expressed distress to him, he responded "I'm afraid . . . I don't know how to make her feel better . . . It's hard for me to hear what she says." I thanked Pedro for embracing emotional vulnerability and asked him whether he was willing to listen to Sofia's experience. He consented. Next, I asked Sofia to express to Pedro her losses associated with being an immigrant, but she insisted that he was aware of her feelings. I validated her hesitation by asking, "Are you afraid that he will not be able to listen and understand you?" She confirmed this fear. In response, I asked Pedro to tell Sofia that he was committed to listening without having to fix anything and that he would focus on fully understanding her struggles.

Sofia provided a description of her emotional distress associated with being an immigrant. Although Pedro spontaneously reached out to her and touched her shoulder, Sofia remained unresponsive to his gesture. I reflected on Sofia's nonverbal response and asked what was keeping her from responding to Pedro. She replied in an angry tone, "It's just that I'm tired of feeling so lonely! . . . Pedro is the only person I have here and I cannot talk to him! . . . I'm afraid of telling him what I feel because he shuts me down by saying 'let's focus on what is good.'" I thanked Sofia for showing her anger, and I asked Pedro to let her know that he was committed to providing a safe space in order for her to continue to share her feelings of loss. I also encouraged him not to find a solution, but to focus on understanding her emotional experience. Before ending the session, I asked the couple to keep talking about Sofia's experience and encouraged Pedro to exclusively focus on validating her feelings.

In the following session, Pedro expressed his strong desire to make Sofia feel better whenever she became sad. He also identified feeling "incompetent for not being able to make her happy." Sofia expressed relief after listening to Pedro's disclosure of concern for her.

After highlighting their accomplishments, we went on to explore the underlying feelings associated with their sex life. Sofia expressed that she wanted to be sexually intimate with Pedro. However, she could not enjoy sex because she "felt disconnected from him." At other times she would just feel angry and did not want to think about having sex. I asked Sofia whether she usually dealt with anger by disengaging from Pedro and asked her whether she would be willing to express her anger to Pedro if she knew he would be responsive.<sup>5</sup> She responded that it was difficult for her to express anger because she was never allowed to do so in her family of origin. I reflected to Sofia that the process of therapy provided a growth opportunity for both her and Pedro. This meant that

it was important for her to openly express her anger without taking a blaming stance. In addition, I highlighted to Pedro how critical it was for him to reassure Sofia that she could express any type of emotions whenever she experienced them.

As the process continued, I asked Sofia whether she experienced any other insecurities in her relationship with Pedro. She disclosed that she struggled with fears of not being the type of woman that Pedro wanted as a partner. These concerns left her constantly wondering whether Pedro would abandon her for someone else who could be “more courageous” than she was.

#### Step 4: Reframing the Problem in Terms of Emotions, Attachment, and Cultural Needs

During the following sessions, we continued to explore the underlying emotions experienced by Pedro and Sofia, as well as the nature of their unmet emotional needs. Sofia continued to express sadness for the losses that she experienced as an immigrant. She also became aware that the more she suppressed her feelings, the more she emotionally distanced herself from Pedro. On the other hand, Pedro felt inadequate for not being able to help Sofia with her experiences of loss. He continued to feel overwhelmed by Sofia’s distress and would still resort to his strategy of focusing on the future as a coping mechanism.

By reframing the problem in these terms, I promoted interactions between Sofia and Pedro to communicate their emotional experiences to each other. In addition, I invited them to expand their emotional vulnerability by identifying the unique cultural needs that each one of them considered would make their lives more fulfilling.

#### Step 5: Identifying Disowned Needs and Integration Into Relationship Interactions

I continued to encourage Pedro and Sofia to focus on themselves and their expectations of each other, rather than adopting a blaming stance. Sofia expressed to Pedro her desire to reach out and share with him her emotional distress. She also described her need to feel safe prior to sharing her feelings of sadness or anger. In addition, Sofia wanted Pedro to reassure her that he did not think she was inadequate and that he was committed to remaining in the relationship. In return, Pedro expressed to Sofia how important it was for him to be validated by her. He explained how

this was particularly important because she inspired his commitment to face adversity in life. Pedro also communicated to Sofia that he needed to know that she continued to love him, particularly because he had interpreted their increased emotional and sexual distance as an indication that Sofia was considering leaving the relationship.

### **Steps 6 and 7: Facilitating Acceptance of Each Partner's Experiences and Expression of Needs**

In addition to promoting a mutual acceptance of their attachment needs, I asked Sofia and Pedro to recognize and accept their differences in cultural identity. I invited them to challenge the expectation that they had to feel the same way regarding their cultural experiences, and encouraged them to express their cultural needs to one another. Thus, Sofia expressed to Pedro that she wanted to travel more often to their home country, and to become more involved in local Latino/a community activities. Sofia also talked about her desire to experience more financial independence by obtaining a degree in nursing. Pedro shared with Sofia that he wanted her to pay more attention to the numerous challenges he experienced at work as well as his plans for seeking opportunities for career advancement. He also expressed his desire for Sofia to become more involved with him in social activities related to his work.

### **Steps 8 and 9: Fostering New Solutions and the Consolidation of New Positions**

The final sessions focused on reminding Pedro of the importance of validating Sofia's feelings, particularly because it was challenging for him to remain emotionally responsive without acting on his desire to make Sofia feel better. As Sofia felt more understood by him, she realized that she needed to face the challenge of openly expressing her anger to Pedro, rather than distancing herself from him.

An important breakthrough in the final phase of therapy occurred when Sofia entered nursing school. This experience provided her with a sense of independence that she had not felt before. Pedro's capacity to overcome adversity was very important in helping Sofia face the challenges associated with pursuing her degree. In addition, Pedro and Sofia learned to respect and nurture each other's cultural needs without attempting to change their individual cultural experiences. Thus, Pedro supported Sofia by saving

money so she could return to her home country to visit family and friends one additional time per year. Pedro also started to attend several Latino/a community events with Sofia, where they were able to make new Latino/a friends. Sofia accepted that Pedro did not want to maintain the same level of contact with their home country as she wanted to, and she respected his desire to travel with her to their country of origin only once per year. Sofia also became involved in Pedro's professional plans, and she often engaged in conversations with him about possibilities for his professional development.

At termination, Pedro and Sofia reported that they had begun to enjoy a more fulfilling sexual life now that their relationship distress had diminished. They had also agreed to commit to finding time to go out on dates and enjoy each other despite the pressures of other obligations.

## Discussion

EFT is one of the few evidence-based practices capable of alleviating emotional distress within couple relationships by promoting the fulfillment of attachment needs. This case study illustrates the multiple positive outcomes that are possible through implementing a culturally informed model of EFT.

The culturally informed model of EFT presented here seeks to become relevant to Latino/a immigrant populations by considering the sociohistorical challenges this group has faced, as well as the cultural experiences that are most relevant to their lives. In addition, we consider it is necessary to overtly address issues of male privilege and power in couple therapy, especially because Latino/a immigrants are often raised in patriarchal societies. However, patriarchy can be observed in multiple ethnic groups, and is not a unique characteristic of Latino males (Bac-Zinn, 1982). Thus, we advocate for a strength-based perspective of Latino masculinity. We have found in our clinical experience that the notion of *hombre noble* can become a strong motivator for change and a precursor of emotional intimacy among Latino men, even among those who have engaged in extremely violent and abusive behaviors.<sup>6</sup>

## Application of the Model With Nonimmigrant Latino/a Couples

The case example presented in this chapter focused on a first-generation immigrant Latino/a couple. However, the basic premises of this model

can be applied to diverse Latino/a subgroups, provided therapists gain an understanding of the most relevant life experiences of their clients. Thus, it is critical for counselors to learn from clients about the cultural values and forms of cultural identification that are most relevant to them, as well as the ways in which these issues impact their couple relationship and the implementation of EFT. We provide a summary of suggestions for the application of EFT with diverse Latino/a couples in Table 17.2.

### Cultural Diversity and Becoming an EFT Therapist: Reflection, Questions, and Additional Resources

Overall, we believe the principles we have used for culturally informing the practice of EFT with Latinos can be extended to diverse minority groups through two main activities. First, clinicians should actively seek to learn from clients the key cultural values and practices that inform their lives. This step will help ensure the cultural relevance of the intervention and facilitate the engagement of clients in therapy. To facilitate this process, clinicians may ask themselves the following questions:

What assumptions do I hold about the culture and values of the clients I am working with?

How might these assumptions interfere with the clinical work?

What information have I learned from my clients about their culture and values that may challenge my assumptions?

What else must I learn from them in order to fully understand and appreciate the context of their lives?

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The second factor we consider essential is maintaining close adherence to the core components of EFT. To this end, therapists should receive close supervision from a professional with a thorough understanding of the EFT model, such as an EFT certified therapist. We refer the reader to the Web site of the International Center for Excellence in Emotionally Focused Therapy ([www.eft.ca](http://www.eft.ca)), as this site contains detailed information on EFT workshops, publications, and the process of EFT certification. We also suggest the book *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy: Creating Connection* (Johnson, 2004) and the companion workbook, *Becoming an Emotionally Focused Couple Therapist* (Johnson et al., 2005), as these resources include numerous case examples, exercises, and specific suggestions for clinical practice.

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**Table 17.2** Suggestions for the Utilization of EFT With Latinos/as

**Conceptualization of the EFT Model**

- Counselors should conceptualize the EFT process within a sociohistorical model capable of capturing *past and current* challenges experienced by Latinos/as.
- Counselors should identify specific contextual stressors that may negatively impact the process of therapy.

**Latino/a Cultural Values and Cultural Identity Formation**

- Counselors should be knowledgeable of relevant Latino/a cultural values.
- Counselors must avoid a simplistic conceptualization of cultural identity by recognizing that Latinos/as may develop diverse forms of cultural identity.
- Counselors should work collaboratively with clients in order to identify which cultural values are most valued by them.
- Counselors should recognize their clients' preferred expressions of cultural identity.
- Counselors should explore with clients the ways in which cultural values and issues of cultural identity influence their couple relationship.
- Counselors should explore with clients the ways in which cultural values and issues of cultural identity can facilitate change and promote emotional intimacy.

**Rigid Gender Socialization and the Promotion of Emotional Vulnerability**

- If the promotion of emotional intimacy is blocked because Latino male clients adhere to rigid gender identifications, counselors should reach an understanding of the role that such identifications have on their clients' lives.
- Counselors should examine the ways in which gendered privilege and power may be detrimental to the promotion of emotional vulnerability in the couple relationship.
- Counselors should challenge rigid patterns of male socialization that impede emotional vulnerability. However, this process should be informed by strength-based and cultural perspectives that highlight the importance of strength when facing adversity, as well as the way in which integrity can be associated with the expression of emotional vulnerability (e.g., *hombre noble*).

**Conclusion**

There is a great need to further investigate the ways in which EFT can effectively be disseminated among Latinos/as. We have proposed a culturally informed model that may be useful in the pursuit of this goal. A

key premise of this model rests on the assumption that EFT can greatly benefit Latino/a couples, but only if such interventions are implemented in a way that enhances the cultural experiences and strengths that inform the lives of Latinos/as.

## Notes

1. We utilize the term *Latinos/as* when making reference to inhabitants or individuals who can trace their origins back to Latin American countries in which Romance languages are predominantly spoken (e.g., Spanish, Portuguese). We also utilize the term *Latinos/as* in order to highlight the Indigenous ancestry of Latino/a cultures. For a more detailed explanation of the term *Latino/a*, we refer the reader to Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, and Gallardo-Cooper (2002).

2. Original names have been replaced with pseudonyms in order to protect clients' confidentiality. Specific details related to country of origin, immigration status, length of U.S. residence, and occupations have also been modified.

3. The first author (JRPC) was the lead therapist in this case.

4. We have informed our couple and family therapy interventions based on a feminist perspective that approaches males from a strength-based perspective while also challenging patriarchal structures. We have repeatedly confirmed the strong commitment of Latino men toward those they love; however, we have also witnessed the numerous ways in which rigid gender socialization can impact their lives negatively. Thus, we overtly address issues of masculinity and privilege prior to engaging in more emotionally focused therapeutic interventions.

5. It is important to clarify that, although we identify Sofia as the pursuer and Pedro as the withdrawer, in reality partners engage in diverse pursue/withdraw behaviors. In this case, Sofia also distances herself when Pedro seeks sexual intimacy. Our emphasis on identifying Pedro as the main withdrawer refers to the fact that in EFT it is helpful to identify the main pursuer based on an attachment perspective. That is, the negative cycle should be understood as unmet attachment needs that are often expressed through separation protest (Johnson et al., 2005). In this case, Sofia tends to verbally express her need for emotional connection as well as emotional pain associated with her attachment losses, whereas Pedro is more likely to avoid emotional vulnerability.

6. The first author facilitates therapy groups for Latino men referred by the courts for charges of violence against women. He has confirmed the value of presenting the notion of *hombre noble* as a way of promoting vulnerability among Latino men involved in therapy, as well as a way of developing accountability and a commitment to challenge rigid gender identifications that promote violence.

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# Section G

## Native and First Nations Couples

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