

# Understanding Hispanic Culture

Visiting or working in a multicultural setting requires knowledge about similarities and differences in cultural perspectives. Understanding people's diverse cultural frames of reference—those elements that cause a particular cultural group to interpret the world in a particular manner—is a continuous challenge.

Understanding some aspects of the Hispanic culture will help us not only to understand our Hispanic friends better but also to deal more effectively with the Hispanic communities we visit in Venezuela. It is important to note though, that within the larger culture, there are minority groups that may hold values that differ from the dominant ones. However, it also is important to recognize the strong influence that the established cultural values have on every member of a society.

## Interdependence

Generally speaking, interdependence is a value in the Hispanic culture. The family structure is that of the extended family. The concept of family goes beyond the nucleus of mother, father and children to include grandparents, aunts, uncles, grandchildren, cousins and even neighbors and close friends. Obligation towards all family members is expected and accepted as an important role to be fulfilled by all members. Since interdependence is a value, being dependent on someone is considered a positive trait and is not seen as a sign of weakness. Family members and close friends and neighbors call on one another for support when needed. To do things and face problems “on your own” is not the norm. On the contrary, a person might be considered arrogant or having feelings of superiority if he or she tried to resolve everything without asking for assistance. The individual without obligation towards others or dependencies on others is considered cold, uncaring and alienated from the family and circle of close friends. If people are not occupied by others, they consider themselves ignored, not needed, thus not important, which in turn affects their self-esteem.

## Child Rearing

In the Hispanic culture, grandparents perform a very important role in the family structure. They are very much involved in the child-rearing process. Grandparents are considered the pillars of the family, thus very important contributing members. Interdependence with family members gives the grandparents, as they grow older, a sense of worth.

At the other end of the spectrum, the children assume the responsibility for caring and providing, when necessary for their parents in their senior years. This role is both expected and accepted, stemming from the value of interdependence.

Child-rearing practices strengthen the value of interdependence. For most Hispanics, the family is not an entity that provides nurturing until the children reach

adulthood, but a unit of close affiliation and relations through their entire life. Education provides a means to financial stability and, thus, the ability to help the immediate and extended family; it is not considered a vehicle to independence from the family.

## Emotional Support

Self-sufficiency is not valued in most Hispanic families. It is interpreted as a characteristic of the arrogant, distant and cold. People are expected to be involved with the rest of the extended family, neighbors and friends. They are expected to be there for one another. This emotional support is manifested in many different ways. For example, if a Hispanic is going for a job interview, it would not be uncommon to be accompanied by some, just for emotional support.

Another way in which the emotional support is manifested is in caring for the ill. In most instances, when a Hispanic is hospitalized, the family and close friends are expected to be at the patient's bedside. Friends and relatives take turns staying at the hospital to ensure that there is always someone with the patient. In many instances, they literally move in with the patient. If this does not happen, the patient feels abandoned, unloved and that nobody cares. Leaving the patient alone, which in the North American culture might be considered as respecting the patient's right to privacy and quiet time for a speedy recovery, would cause the Hispanic patient to feel abandoned, which could be detrimental for recovery.

## Proximity

In the Hispanic culture, proximity is equated with closeness in relationships. To be apart is equated with disregard. Hispanics, in general, prefer to live close to family, thus allowing for daily contact either in person or by telephone. Sharing successes/failures and receiving the emotional support from family and friends is a necessity.

## Religion

Religion plays an important part in shaping the behavior of people. Many cultural aspects of a group are rooted in their early religious beliefs. Most Hispanics believe God is in control. This is rooted in their Christian tradition. Since tomorrow is not in their hands, they live today to the fullest. They take advantage of the here and now; now is more important than later. Thus the Hispanic concept of time is very different from that of cultures whose life orientation is towards the future. In the Hispanic culture, life orientation is towards the present, today. For this reason time does not play an important role in everyday life. Deadlines are considered ballpark figures that always can be extended since there is ample time. There is more time than life; life takes priority.

In the North American culture, wasting someone's time is considered rude, a major offense—some might even

consider it an insult. In the Hispanic culture, tardiness is non-existent, since no one would be concerned with the time as such. The term “o’clock,” or “en punto,” is not referred to when establishing time frames. For example, 9:00 a.m. would mean to a Hispanic “around nine,” not nine o’clock on the dot, thus arriving at ten after or quarter after nine would not be thought of as tardy in a Hispanic setting.

Since time is not that important for most Hispanics, to rush out would be considered rude. For example, if a Hispanic is speaking with a non-Hispanic, and that person notices he or she is late for an appointment or meeting and rushes away, the Hispanic would consider that person rude, due to the abruptness in terminating the conversation. Because in the Hispanic culture the now is more important and time plays a lesser role in life, people with a different orientation towards life might think of Hispanics as irresponsible or rude for not being on time. The same misunderstanding can occur if Hispanics think of North Americans, for example, as cold, uncaring and rude for rushing to get somewhere else on time or for expecting punctuality—a concept foreign to the Hispanic idea of time and life.

Also rooted in the Christian tradition, especially among the Catholic Hispanics, is the fact that women are more accepting of the double standard, or machismo. Catholic Hispanic women have Mary, the mother of Christ, as their role model. Therefore, any suffering is compared to Mary’s suffering, making it more bearable and acceptable. Women have specific roles that they accept, and men have some freedoms that women do not question. Women are thought of as being spiritually superior to men and, thus, can endure all suffering inflicted on them.

## **People and Relationships**

For the most part in Hispanic culture, people and relationships are valued more than expediency in accomplishing a task. People take priority over tasks. If a Hispanic is in the middle of a task and someone comes along, the task is set aside immediately, and attention is placed on the person, even though the person did not have an appointment or had not called ahead of time to ask if it would be convenient to stop by. Due to what in some cultures might be considered an interruption, the task may not be completed in what would have been a timely fashion. In a non-Hispanic setting, this might be thought of as neglect of duties or lack of responsibility on the part of the Hispanic. The Hispanic, responding to a different set of values, has given priority to the person. Giving priority to

the task would have gone against a basic value in the Hispanic culture, causing criticism and hard feelings.

## **Polycronism**

Another aspect of the Hispanic culture is that of attending to more than one task at a time, i.e. polycronism. Standing in line is not customary since the person taking care of matters can attend to several people at one time. For example, a Hispanic comes up to a counter and asks a question of a clerk who is taking care of someone else. This behavior is typical, and the person is not considered rude for not having waited until the clerk had completed the transaction with the first person. The clerk may be taking care of two or three people at one time, and no one feels neglected or imposed upon.

In cultures where monocronism (attending to one task at a time) is the orientation, this behavior could be misinterpreted as rudeness or lack of respect for those who were at the counter first. As a result, these cultural misunderstandings cause friction and ill feelings toward the cultural group as a whole.

Another example of monocronic behavior versus polycronic behavior can be observed in the interaction that takes place when two people are conversing and a third person needs to ask a question of one of the two who are conversing. In a Hispanic setting, when the third person appears, the other two would interrupt their conversation to attend to the third person. The third person does not need to wait until the first two finish their conversation. In the North American culture, on the contrary, the two people would finish their conversation while the third person thinks nothing of having to wait until they finish. In the Hispanic culture, it would be considered rude to make the person wait until the first two finish their conversation; in the North American culture it would be considered rude to interrupt or be interrupted. This is another example of how misunderstandings between peoples of different cultures develop, and, as a result, how negative feelings evolve between groups.

## **Understanding Cultures**

As Christians living in today’s multicultural, global society, we must strive to understand the differing frames of reference brought by our Hispanic friends. There is a need to continue to avoid the problems that can arise from the misunderstandings that develop as cultures intersect in today’s world. We can serve as role models as we promote more accepting attitudes between our two cultures.

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