

Dual Relationships and Counseling Latinos

By Lauren Disner, MFT Student

Dual and multiple relationships with clients often exist when therapists work with rural or close-knit communities. While sexual relationships with client(s) are universally prohibited, not all kinds of dual and multiple relationships are. In many Latin American cultures, a strong preference for interconnected relationships exists. This culturally held preference is present in Latino communities within the U.S. as well.

Immigrant populations within the U.S. are typically very close-knit communities because successful immigration often requires accessing social support networks of immigrants and those sympathetic to their struggles (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Close-knit immigrant community members often rely on people they perceive to be within their community circle when seeking assistance. When seeking mental health services, "...client(s) are likely to deliberately and systematically seek therapists who share their cultural heritage, spiritual or religious orientation, language, [or] history..." (Zur, 2007, p.24). Because of this tendency, therapists who have close ties to Latino immigrant communities in the U.S. may find themselves in dual or multiple relationships with other community members. This is not necessarily detrimental to therapy and might actually be beneficial to the therapeutic relationship.

In his chapter *Dual Relationships in Psychotherapy in Latin America*, Kertész stated that in Latin American cultures, "Family and community alliances are much more predominant than individual bonds" (Kertész, 2002). Along the same lines, Houser wrote "Hispanic/Latino culture, the needs of the family and community always take precedence over the needs of the individual... A strong sense of ethnic identity is also fostered through close relationships with extended family and community" (Houser, 2006). It can be said that a similar preference for "warmer human relations" (Kertész, 2002, pp.329) exists in Latino communities within the U.S. with the added complexity of dealing with pressure from the dominant culture to embrace a more individualistic form of interaction.

The AAMFT Code of Ethics states that therapists should "make every effort to avoid conditions and multiple relationships with client(s) that could impair professional judgment or increase the risk of exploitation" (AAMFT, 2001). This standard is somewhat vague, and it also leaves open the opportunity for dual or multiple relationships as long as they are not potentially exploitive. Permitting the existence of authentic dual or multiple relationships between therapist and client(s) could actually be beneficial to therapy, as it could show acceptance and support of a target group culture.

Although being a member of a dominant culture is not necessarily detrimental to the client(s), the client's perception of a therapist as a member of or having understanding of a Latino client's culture can be beneficial to the therapeutic relationship by building bonds of trust. "The combining of different roles between therapists and client(s) is normal in and congruent with

the Latin culture... Multiple relationships foster authenticity as well as provide great opportunities for us to grow and recognize our assets as well as our limitations" (Kertész, 2002, p.330). Being a culturally competent therapist may mean challenging conventional or dominant ideas of the practice of therapy in order to achieve the best possible outcome in therapy. American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy (2001).

Please visit "the News and Publications" page at www.aamft.org to see the references for this article.

About the Author

Lauren R. Disner is a second year graduate student at Lewis and Clark College in Portland. Ms. Disner has interest in both clinical practice and research, and her interest areas include Latino immigrants and their experiences, social networking, social capital, and spirituality as resilience. Ms. Disner plans to graduate from Lewis and Clark in 2012.