

## **Systemic Approach in Latino Families Surviving Domestic Violence in the United States of America**

### **Abordaje sistémico en familias latinas sobrevivientes de violencia doméstica en Estados Unidos**

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## Summary

This study is aimed at creating a treatment model grounded by professionals' knowledge and that allows the development of skills to work with families in crisis. The participants, health professionals of the Latina Domestic Violence Program (LDVP) in Philadelphia, were interviewed individually, and the answers were analyzed in accordance with grounded theory methodology. The answers of the participants were used to emphasize the important aspects related to the situation of survivors of domestic violence. The participants identified two main elements necessary for an ideal program. 1. The program must have the capacity to address all the biopsychosocial needs of the family (financial, occupational, educational and mental health needs). Undocumented and non-English speaking users' needs must be considered when developing a program for Latino families. 2. It is important that the work team should be trained in several appropriate theories and/or of intervention that help to understand the Latino culture of the users. In this way, the use of a model based on the American culture that does not meet the specific needs of the community is avoided.

**Keywords:** Domestic violence, intervention programs, Latino, mental health.

## Resumen

El objetivo de este estudio es crear un modelo de tratamiento sustentado por el conocimiento de profesionales y que les permita el desarrollo de habilidades de los profesionales para su trabajo con las familias en crisis. Las participantes, profesionales de la salud del Latina Domestic Violence Program (LDVP) en Filadelfia, fueron entrevistadas individualmente y las respuestas fueron analizadas de acuerdo con la metodología de la Teoría Fundamentada. Las respuestas de las participantes sirvieron para enfatizar aspectos importantes relacionados con la situación de supervivientes de violencia doméstica. Las participantes identificaron dos elementos centrales necesarios para un programa ideal. 1: El programa debe tener la capacidad

de abordar las necesidades biopsicosociales de la familia (necesidades económicas, laborales, educacionales y de salud mental). Las necesidades de las usuarias indocumentadas que no hablan inglés deben ser consideradas en la elaboración de un programa para familias latinas. 2: Es importante que el equipo de trabajo esté entrenado en varias teorías y/o modelos adecuados de intervención que ayuden a una comprensión de la cultura latina de las usuarias. De esta forma se evita utilizar un modelo basado en la cultura estadounidense que no responde a las necesidades específicas de la comunidad.

**Palabras clave:** Violencia doméstica, programas de intervención, latino, salud mental.

## Introduction

This study is aimed at developing an effective model to understand and address domestic violence in Latino communities of the city of Philadelphia. The need for research on theories and models designed to give assistance to Latino families suffering from domestic violence arose from the work in Latina Domestic Violence Program (LDVP), an organization providing the Latino community of Philadelphia with social services. The existing models did not meet the needs of this particular population. Previously, the view about domestic violence was focused only on the aggressor or on the victim. According to Varea and Castellanos (2006), a systemic approach will be more effective in addressing domestic violence.

After an extensive exploration of theoretical models used to understand domestic violence, Varea and Castellanos (2006) concluded that it is necessary to use a global approach explaining the origin and continuation of domestic violence. Domestic violence will be better understood through the combination of several theories such as the ecological model and the gender perspective (Alencar-Rodrigues & Cantera, 2012).

For that reason, a wider approach such as the grounded theory was needed to begin the study. According to Villarejo-Aguilar (2013), the grounded theory is a qualitative research design used in the creation of theories on health. Through a global question, the grounded theory generates concepts and hypotheses. “The grounded theory is not the voice of the participants, but an abstraction generated from their tasks and meaning taken as data for the generation of concepts.” (Villarejo-Aguilar, 2013, p. 1)

The qualitative research methodology was selected since it offers the best perspective of how to use “local knowledge” of the counselors. Graham-Bermann and Edleson (2001) suggest that a qualitative approach is the most effective way to study problems such as domestic violence, and a multisystemic understanding is necessary. For the purpose of this study, the role of counselors was crucial since they have contact with users, they could

contributed with useful information, establishing the first contact with the users and understanding the effects of domestic violence. -

The term domestic violence is described throughout this study. Based on the bibliographical analysis performed by Rodríguez Franco, López-Cepero and Rodríguez Díaz (2009), the term domestic violence is the most common term to describe intimate partner violence despite the multiple concepts used.

According to Corsi (2010), domestic violence is manifested in private contexts in relation to partner. It is the power and control over women to maintain men's power in the relationship. It can occur in different forms. It can be physical, sexual, economic and environmental abuse, as well as verbal and psychological. The consequences are damages in the physical, psychological and social health of women.

## **Method**

This study used three reference frameworks to explore, organize and explain the domestic violence in the Latino community of the USA. 1. The Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979) was used to explain that the violent behavior in the family is the result of the interaction between several variables. 2. The cooperative research methodology (Reason & Heron, 1995) was used to report how data were obtained. 3. The constant comparative method (Charmaz, 1995) was used to analyze the data and to develop a model to provide services to Latino families in the community. According to the Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979), the questions were designed to obtain a holistic view of the challenges found by women in the search of help to deal with domestic violence.

The cooperative research methodology was the ideal reference framework to study the problem of domestic violence in the Latino community since it reflected a continuous process established between the principal researcher and the rest of the team within the LDVP. This type of research promotes a systematic cycle of "action and reflection" that is part of the natural dynamics

of the program. Bausela (2003) proposes that the cooperative research is a methodology focused on the planned change and is based on the action research by taking the following steps: reflect before, during and after the action to plan and apply the improvement actions and collect evidences.

In this teamwork-oriented approach, according to the cooperative research, the members were assessed according to their roles. This caused a continuous reflection (through supervision and team meetings) of the services the agency provided to the community.

### Participants

Participants: Five counselors and two supervisors of LDVP. Counselors stayed in the program from six to twelve months. The average was 4.8 and the standard deviation was 3.5. Five out of seven participants were able to communicate effectively with the users. The remaining two participants could have a basic conversation. Four participants were from Puerto Rico and the remaining three participants were born in the USA; the parents of one of them were from Puerto Rico. The members of the team also held academic degrees that ranged from high school diplomas to master’s degrees. Some of the participants were survivors of domestic violence, and at the beginning, they were users in the program. To be included in the sample, the requirement was to be employee in the LDVP program and to provide direct services to the users. There were no exclusion criteria.

**Table 1.**

*Data of participants.*

Education Level	High School 1	Technical Level 2	Baccalaureate 2	Master’s Degree 2
Fluency in Spanish	Fluent 5	Basic Conversation 2		
Place of Origin	Puerto Rico 4	USA 3		

## **Procedure**

The procedure, based on the qualitative method, was carried out through structured interviews lasting 1 hour or 1 hour and a half. According to Torrecilla, (n.d.), the researcher conducts a previous planning of all the questions to be asked. The researcher prepares in advance a battery of questions coordinated with guide notes performed in a sequential and targeted manner.

All the interviews were conducted by the principal researcher and were audio-recorded to facilitate the transcription and translation of data. The participants chose the language that they felt more comfortable with to answer a questionnaire aimed at obtaining the opinion of the participants in relation to the services provided by the program and to know if the program met the families' needs.

## **Data Analysis**

The main objective of this study was to develop a culturally informed approach to understand and address domestic violence that affects the Latino community in Philadelphia. Although the main objective of this project was not to develop a theory, the qualitative design process is ideal to create models providing services that are more effective to the community. All the data collected during the interviews were transcribed and analyzed according to the Grounded Theory.

The process recommended by Charmaz (1995) implies the line-by-line analysis of what has been observed and naming each specific situation or behavior. It explains that this procedure has several purposes: a) keeps the researcher in close contact with data and does not allow them to make conclusions that are not based on facts. Since the researcher must pay attention to data, it is unlikely that they project their worldview in the answers of the participants. b) The line-by-line coding increases the probability that

the researcher experiences the ordinary and mundane in a new way since it generates distance between the interviewees and the preconceived ideas.

## **Results**

The results are shown in five sections: 1) description of the program 2) biopsychosocial needs of the users 3) limitations related to the system and the program 4) description of the community and its values. 5) Essential characteristics of an ideal program.

### **Description of the Program**

Upon the study, the LDVP team consisted of five counselors and two supervisors. The counselors were in charge of most services related to the users. The supervisors were in charge of the crisis intervention, of keeping watch if necessary and ensuring that the services were provided according to the regulatory entities.

### **Counseling**

Counselors provided families with several services, worked with other systems in favor of the users in the context of domestic violence, supported users in aspects related to other agencies and gave information about laws and services available to undocumented users. Unfortunately, the lack of funds hindered the provision of more specific counseling services to the community.

### **Management of Cases by Counselors and Supervisors**

Counselors talked about the different reference frameworks used to ensure that the management of cases/counseling was therapeutic and empowered



and that allowed building a relationship of collaboration and confidence between the user and service providers.

Domestic violence situation in the user along with several psychosocial stressors caused a perpetual state of crisis. At the beginning, the users resorted to counseling services since they needed to know what to do after a violent situation with their partner. However, the crisis was not reduced when the relationship problems were solved, whether providing the user with a safety plan or relocating them. In fact, while counselors assessed the options of the users, other significant needs arose such as the lack of legal documents or access to medical services and consequently, crises were constant.

In addition to counseling services, case management, crisis intervention and referral to other reference services, the community were provided with additional services such as crisis line to give assistance and educational workshops related to domestic violence. Due to the number of needs identified by the team, we must have services of other systems to ensure that users had proper assistance.

### **Biopsychosocial Needs of Users**

The effects of domestic violence on the users' mental health were an important factor in the report of the counselors. Mental health is a state in which the person uses their abilities to handle pressure and lead a productive life, thereby contributing to their community. According to the participant, the users frequently showed mental health situations related to a history of trauma and violence in their family, a recent experience of emotional and/or physical abuse and several problems of family relationships.

The participants also talked about the lack of parental skills in the users, as for example an abusive or neglecting attitude towards their kids. In addition, they observed children with "parental features" as well as children with severe mental problems and suicidal thoughts.

The team talked about the lack of financial resources in the users. Most of them were unemployed and provided with public assistance or were undocumented immigrants who worked sporadically and were paid too little. This along with the lack of education hindered them from being economically independent. Women who decided to abandon their abusive partner did not have any support and their options were to go to a refuge or stay in an unhealthy relationship.

Most users did not speak English and/or felt more comfortable speaking Spanish. The undocumented users, in addition to have biopsychosocial needs previously mentioned, presented other difficulties like the lack of access to a proper job, house and medical assistance. A factor that hindered them from feeling safe was the fact that it was difficult to obtain a Protection from Abuse Order (PFA) since they did not have legal documents authorizing their stay in the USA, which also restricted them from obtaining services from federal or state agencies. Although laws allowed them to process a legal residence, they needed to file charges against the aggressor. Most undocumented women, afraid of being deported, did not rely on the governmental employees and stayed in the abusive relationship.

### **Limitations related to the System and the Program.**

In view of the shortage of funds, each one of the counselors dealt with a great number of cases. In addition, many of them felt overwhelmed and even presented vicarious traumatization.

Some members of the team reported difficulties to keep safe limits with the users. It was mentioned that it could be to the fact that counselors wanted to help the users and to be their “lifesavers.” Although the intentions of the counselors were “to be available for the users all the time”, this relationship could hinder the users from being self-sufficient and developing important social relationships.

Unfortunately, there was only an available refuge for victims of domestic violence in Philadelphia. The program depended on the general shelters of the city to send the users who had urgent need to find an alternative house. Due to this, an available bed could not be guaranteed, and the number of shelters where Spanish was spoken was limited. Shelters were not designed to cover the needs of the families suffering from domestic violence and consequently, families did not have protection and continued being vulnerable to abuse. An additional difficulty was the fact that these shelters did not provide them with a permanent house at the end of their stay.

The family court and the police department did not have enough personnel who spoke Spanish and this affected the capacity to keep the users and their children safe. When the children were asked to translate what their mothers said, the children had to recreate the traumatic experience in a context that was not therapeutic and sometimes they felt their support to their mother as a betrayal against their father. This situation placed the children in a position of authority, in which their role was to assume the role of spokesperson to make sure their family was protected. Other organizations designed to help users to interact with the legal system provided unsuitable services since they were overworked and due to the lack of funds. Counselors spent most of their time trying to coordinate with external systems.

### **Descriptors of the Community and their Values**

To create a program that captures the cultural aspects of the community, exploration should be made through the eyes of those who live there. Fortunately, six out of seven women who were interviewed were living in the community or used to live there. Therefore, they had experienced the stressors that users had faced, not only through the eyes of a service provider but also through the eyes of a member of the community. According to Sánchez and Agudelo, (2008), it is necessary that social workers reflect and analyze their own reality to understand the meaning of the systems in which they intervene.

At the beginning, this community (north of Philadelphia) showed stressors like poverty, violence and lack of resources, in addition to the fact that it was discriminated and suffered from lack of services. Some participants talked about the psychological consequences related to violence inside and outside the house; others talked about how users have to wait too much time for a police officer to come when they call 911. The long wait is because police officers deal with other crimes that they consider more serious and due to the ideas they have on the fact that domestic violence is common in the north of Philadelphia.

**Cultural Values:** Cultural values play an important role in the way the individuals experience their role in the world and the relationships they build with others. In addition, values largely suggest which decisions to make for themselves and their families. Guitart (2008) proposes that participation in sociocultural contexts creates a certain image of the own identity and the necessary resources to be competent in society. Socialization occurs through the interiorization of behavioral rules, regulations, codes, records, values and beliefs.

All the participants talked about the importance of the family as a cultural value in the Latino community. This idea is a decisive factor in their decision to stay in a relationship. Women sacrifice their personal wellbeing to ensure their kids have their fathers present. The idea of providing children with an intact family causes many women to stay in an abusive relationship.

Machismo was another cultural concept they mentioned, and interestingly, they integrated it in their description as a positive aspect. Religion and spirituality were other relevant values in the culture since many users' behavior were based on religious doctrines or on spiritual beliefs. The participants talked about the importance of integrating religious and spiritual practices into the service provided to families to help them to build healthier relationships.

**Essential Characteristics of an Ideal Program:** The following section shows the particular attributes of an ideal program. The participants talked about the importance of having a “culturally appropriate” and bilingual program that can understand the needs of the community respecting their values. One of the major concerns was the fact that the program must be capable of solving the needs of the undocumented users without depending on external organizations.

The participants also talked about having a multidisciplinary team that could work with families. The team should be trained in domestic violence to understand what a family that resorts to the program is experiencing. Many participants expressed their wish to have a refuge in our agency that guarantees users a permanent home. The need for someone to legally represent the users and the need for a bilingual counselor that supports them in court were proposed.

Due to financial difficulties, a program should be capable of providing the users with assistance in relation to their basic needs. The program should offer care of children and money for transportation when users attend activities scheduled that do not involve children. The idea of a multidisciplinary team was recurring during the interviews.

It is common for crises to arise or that users who do not have access to therapeutic services end up having a pseudo-therapeutic relationship with the female counselors. Due to this fact, it is important that the functions of each member of the team are defined. The team should be trained in trauma, crisis intervention, empowerment and stages of the violence cycle.

The person responsible for case management should be in charge of the services in the city where they can refer the users, assessing and prioritizing their needs and helping them to navigate the systems. Some participants talked about the need to integrate the children and adolescents into the program, providing them with support groups and alternatives. Ideally, the person in charge of case management should provide these activities. All the activities should be performed in a safe and confidence environment.

Female counselors should be able to work with the users who are in different stages of their life (childhood, adolescence and adulthood) and to integrate their personal needs at the individual level. They should understand how the migration process has affected the wellbeing of the members of the family.

**Table 2.**

*Characteristics of the Ideal Program*

<b>Ideal Program</b>	
<b>Program Characteristics</b>	<b>Characteristics of Employees</b>
Culturally informed	Bilingual
Understands the needs of the community	Trained in domestic violence
Meets the needs of the community	Respect cultural values
Provides shelters	Understand and meet the needs of undocumented users
Multidisciplinary team	Each member of the team understands their function
Basic needs assistance	Training in trauma and crisis intervention
Child care	Training in the stages of violence cycle
Therapeutic services	Training in the empowerment model
Safe and confidence environment	Knowledge of services in the city where users can be referred and navigate the external systems to the program.
Understands the impact of the migration process	Understand the different stages of life of the users.

**Discussion**

The process of conceptualizing and preparing this research makes it possible to begin and document an important dialog between the members of the team since the information obtained may be relevant to develop a culturally appropriate program. The answers of the participants showed a series of

important factors in the design of a program that will address the needs of the community.

Most biopsychosocial needs of the users are related to poverty and lack of medical insurance. In fact, this supports the current literature that states that the family income is the best predictor of domestic violence (Cunradi, Caetano, & Schafer, 2000). Poverty was an aspect highlighted by the participants as an aggravating factor in the continuation of abusive relationships. The options were reduced for those who did not speak English or were undocumented, making it difficult to find healthy life styles. Most Latina users have no access to mental health services despite the stress caused by poverty and crime in the community. Moreover, traumatic migratory movements produce posttraumatic stress symptoms that are not properly addressed. To create effective programs in the community, it is important to understand clearly not only the causes of the problems, but also the factors that allow them to endure.

The prioritization of services for families by an aware and informed team must be only one of the first steps. In the community, it is necessary to create a set of programs providing families with services. The first objective is to share knowledge obtained by this research and help other programs to incorporate a similar self-reflection process. The second objective is to share resources and create a community of services providers that facilitate the user referral process.

Although some of the environmental descriptors indicated by the participants were related to the lack of resources in the community, they also talked about the prevalence of values that made users continue being in an abusive relationship and that play a main role in the decision-making process.

Three main values associated with the decision to stay in the abusive relationship stand out: familism, marianism and machismo. *Familism* is the most rooted value in the Latino community and dictates the identity of

the members of the family (Malley-Morrison & Hines, 2004). Therefore, the importance of maintain a family together is glorified since without the unit, they will lose the most important part of their identity. The family is one of the most important environments since it is a system that provides its members with family and personal identity, instilling values and patterns of behavior. (Castilla, Caycho, Shimabukuru & Validivia, 2014)

*Marianism* refers to the idea of the female gender, particularly the mother who reflects the attributes referred to Virgin Mary. Good women are those who sacrifice their wellbeing for the wellbeing of their children, since their main identity is to be mothers (Malley-Morrison & Hines, 2004). Women sharing this value stay in an abusive relationship due to the sake of their children. Many participants mentioned that for many women, it is inconceivable to break up with their partner since they thought that the fact of depriving their children of their father would cause an irreparable emotional damage to them. Consequently, not supporting this value and abandoning their partners redefine their identity as *bad* women, which would mean prioritizing their personal wellbeing over their family's wellbeing.

*Machismo* also plays an essential role in women's decision to stay in an abusive relationship. Machismo, as stated by the participants, has a positive and negative connotation. On the one hand, it shows that they are able to be financial providers and to provide physical security to the members of the family. On the other hand, it implies that men act as what Malley-Morrison and Hines (2004) describe as *hypermasculinity* that refers to an aggressive behavior. This is why the aggressive behavior of men are not frowned upon by some women and it is even accepted, which makes it difficult for them to abandon the relationship. It is difficult to separate these three values and the paper they play in women's decision to stay in an abusive relationship since they support different aspects of how to keep the family together.

One of the participant said, "We must respect" the values women considered important and we must use them to provide culturally appropriate



services. One of the greatest difficulties faced by the team was to be part of a program based on theories not appropriate for the community. For instance, the current program was based on the American values where success is measured by the fact if women abandoned or not the abusive relationship. However, the needs and values of the users put a greater emphasis on helping women to be safe if they wanted to stay in the relationship. In addition, since programs continued assuming that men's personality is the only factor that generates violence (Gelles, 1997), there is little work developed in which the abusive partner is involved to create healthy relationships.

The participants said that an ideal program should provide a variety of services including financial assistance for housing and access to medical and legal services, among others. Schorr (1989) explains that meeting the basic needs of the users is essential, so that they can be focused on developing parental skills and solve the abusive relationship. The participants also said that services should be provided in the same agency or in the community where familiarity with users facilitates the access. It is important that the team should be trained in several theories/models that include a deep understanding of the culture of the users as well as in being attentive to a possible collision between the values and assumptions of that culture, and the values of the American culture. This will allow that services be more effective. The participants highlighted that service provision is not enough if services are not provided in a way accepted by the community. A program that truly cover the needs of these users provides constant services on crisis intervention and is not only limited to appointments scheduled.

Finally, the participants highlighted the importance of developing a program that from the beginning provides users with a clear view of the services it provides, the functions of the different members of the team and other systems that can play a support role in its processes. Additionally, it is mandatory that the team have a clear view of the goals and priorities of the users. This recommendation in particular can be a challenge due to the circumstances for which the users looked for our services.

The most important challenge of this study implies being part of a programmatic team and maintaining long-term positive professional relationships with all the members of the team. Although, in some respects, this situation seems to facilitate the development of the study (for example, facilitating the interview process), it can lead to particular challenges. Familiarity of relationships also applies to the interview process. For the researcher it was a challenge to fulfill this role and to avoid being workmate or supervisor. As workmate and supervisor, the role was to explore clinical and programmatic challenges and to help the team to deal with them. It was difficult to hear that the team was experiencing multiple stressors and to not deal with them immediately.

This study tries to contribute to the increasing work in domestic violence and cultural sensitivity, giving voice to those who daily face the difficulties of the users. We partially agree with San Martín and Tuya, 2014, on the urgency of legal protection for women surviving domestic violence, as well as the implementation of a new approach in the family field. However, it is very important to consider the devaluation of poor Latino communities in the United States and in other countries of Latin America. This devaluation and indifference are reflected in the lack of funds supporting the needs of these families.

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## Appendix A.

### Interview

1. What are some of the ways in which you have had difficulty meeting the needs of our users?
2. What are some of the ways in which the program can be modified to be more appropriate in addressing these difficulties?
3. Can you tell me about a successful case? What enabled you to help the user? Is there anything the agency could have done to be more effective in cases like this?
4. Can you tell me about a case that posed difficult challenges? What could the agency have done to address it better?
5. Which aspects of your training were particularly helpful? What additional training should be provided?
6. Based on your personal experience and on the cases in which you have worked, how should Latino community's values be considered in cases of domestic violence?
7. Which are the things that someone not related to the Latino culture should know or understand? How can understanding these aspects of the culture help working with the difficulties of the Latina users?
8. Could you give me some examples of cases in which you have worked and in which the fact that you were Latina made a difference?