

## Chapter Eight

# Becoming a Puerto Rican Counselor

### *How My Twins Served as My Ethnic Mirrors*

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As a Latina doctoral student in counselor education at a predominately White academic institution, and as a married, middle-class mother of two-year-old twins living in a White suburb, I have experienced racialized critical moments that have served as transformative shifts in my development as a woman, mother, and counselor. This chapter will describe some of these critical incidents and explain how these events shifted my ethnic, personal, and professional development in transformative ways.

#### MY ETHNIC IDENTITY

My parents immigrated to the United States at a young age and were quite acculturated to the White-American culture, therefore, growing up, my parents spoke English at home, fed me baked potatoes, instead of rice and beans, and sent us to Catholic schools. My father taught us English, the value of hard work, individualism, and competition, which are typical White-American values (Katz, 1985) and made sure that we attended classical concerts, as a way of “getting culture”, as if Puerto Rican culture was not “culture”.

The one day of the year that I played the role of an *orgullo Puertorriquena* (a proud Puerto Rican) was during the annual Chicago Puerto Rican parade. I donned my straw hat, Puerto Rican flag t-shirt, and yelled, “*Viva, Puerto Rico*”. What was I doing? I was a White-American kid growing up in Chicago. I did not grow up hearing *Sabado Gigante* (Spanish talk show) in the background on the television; instead my mom watched soap operas, like

*General Hospital*. In every way, I was assimilated into the White-American culture. However, I was taught and upheld certain Latino cultural values, such as: (a) familismo, (b) personalismo, and (c) marianismo. For me, these contradictory messages, to be as White-American as possible, while upholding these Latino cultural values created a confusing situation.

It made me unsure of my ethnic identity and insecure in my sense of personal connection to either of the two ethnic identities. Growing up in this environment made me feel less grounded or rooted in a personal sense of ethnic identity and made me susceptible to external influences of what I should ethnically identify as—White or Puerto Rican.

I struggled with identifying as Puerto Rican and as White-American because I did not feel that I belonged to either. Learning about the Latino cultural values of familismo, personalismo, and marianismo made my lived experience as a White-American different from other White-Americans. I valued family, harmonious relationships, and self-sacrifice. For example, unlike most of my White-American peers who moved away from home for college, I did not. I could not leave my family and my father reinforced this belief and did not encourage me to move away for college. I found it hard to be assertive and to disappoint others. Still to this day, I sacrifice my needs for the sake of my children and family. These behaviors made me more Puerto Rican than White-American.

## LATINO CULTURAL VALUES

Being Puerto Rican meant that I believed and valued familismo, personalismo, and marianismo, amongst other prominent Latino cultural values. Familismo refers to a preference to maintain a close connection to family, and emphasizes interdependence, cohesiveness, and cooperation amongst family members. Personalismo, or valuing and building interpersonal relationships where there is a great deal of emotional investment, is part of the collectivistic worldview of Latinos. Marianismo is the concept that suggests that girls must grow up to be pure, long-suffering, nurturing, pious, virtuous, and humble, like the Virgin Mary (Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, & Gallardo-Cooper, 2002).

Familismo is a defining concept of the Latino culture, and has three components: (a) family obligations, (b) perceived support, and (c) that family members serve as role models (Miranda, Bilot, Peluso, Berman, & Van Meek, 2006). Here is a deep sense of family obligation that overshadows individual needs and maintains the family's harmony, which stems from a collectivist worldview (Guarnero & Flaskerud, 2008; Sager, Schlimmer, & Hellman, 2001; Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, & Gallardo-Cooper, 2002). Family members may feel that they represent more than just themselves and

desire to stay close to the family (Gloria & Castellanos, 2006; Lineros & Hinojosa, 2013). The family is the source of emotional and economic support, and is grounded with a sense of *orgullo* (pride), *dignidad* (dignity), *confianza* (trust and intimacy), and *respeto* (respect) (Falicov, 2010; Guarnero, 2007). Many times, I felt supported and loved by my family and nurtured. Other times I felt too overcome by the family's needs and my obligation to work at a young age to help support myself. As a highly acculturated Puerto Rican, I also received messages from the mainstream White-American culture to be independent from family and self-focused. Since I was bicultural, these conflicting messages coalesced into a more helpful one. I am both family-oriented and independent. I have learned to assert my needs and to maintain a healthy distance from family obligations, while retaining trust and respect from my family. I have done this by valuing my familial relationships.

Personalismo, or valuing and building interpersonal relationships where there is a great deal of emotional investment, is part of the collectivistic worldview of Latinos. Since lifelong relationships of mutual dependency and closeness are valued, positive interpersonal and social skills are valued (Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, & Gallardo-Cooper, 2002). For example, the behavior of *simpatia*, or being charming and sociable, is a reinforced social behavior in Latino families; it may become less important when interacting with people from other cultures and more salient when interacting with other Latinos (Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, & Gallardo-Cooper, 2002). For instance, I tend to smile often especially in situations that make me nervous. For some individuals, my smiling has been called into question and I have been asked why I smile so much and to "take that smirk off [my] face." For others, my smiling is well-received and adds to a sense of connection.

Females are taught to follow the concept of *marianismo*. This concept suggests that girls must grow up to be pure, long-suffering, nurturing, pious, virtuous, and humble, like the Virgin Mary. Following this concept, some mothers are seen as selfless, self-sacrificing, and nurturing individuals who provide the spiritual strength for the family (Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, & Gallardo-Cooper, 2002). For me, being a Latina woman meant that I had to put the needs of my family before my needs, that I had to be obedient and selfless, and non-complaining. Even though I have a strong feminist spirit and reject oppressive gender roles, I had to comply in order to maintain the harmony of my family and receive the approval of my parents. As a young woman, I lacked self-confidence and self-esteem.

I felt ashamed to say that I was Puerto Rican because of the erroneous beliefs and viewpoints that I had accepted about Puerto Ricans. I did not want to be "that" loud and lazy Puerto Rican woman who was objectified for her beauty and subjected to oppressive gender roles. As someone who identified as a White-American, I wanted to be independent, successful, and

educated, and assimilate into the White-American culture. I wanted to belong to the privileged racial group to avoid oppression. It was easier, or so I thought.

### MY ETHNIC IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Three years ago, I entered a doctoral program as the only Latina in my cohort of 10 other students. During my first year of academic studies, I was fully immersed in the experience as a doctoral fellow and volunteer in professional organizations. During this first year, I was involved in leadership and was one of a few ethnic minority members on various committees. In many ways, I was the token minority (Flores Neimann, 1999) and sought to live up to the expectations that I must be the perfect student and ethnic enough to represent diversity in the classroom and on the committees. For this first year, that is exactly what I did; I lived up to expectations of being the token Latina in the graduate program. I was agreeable, friendly, accommodating, and academically successful. When necessary to demonstrate ethnic diversity, I self-identified as Puerto Rican, but racially White. According to Ruiz' (1990) model of Latino ethnic identity development, I was in the first stage of development, since I ignored my Puerto Rican heritage.

Ruiz (1990) posited five stages of Latino ethnic identity development. The first stage, causal stage, is a time when a Latino person is humiliated by dominant environment messages that ignore, negate, or denigrate Latino heritage. A person in this stage may experience traumatic relationships related to being Latino and may not identify as Latino. In stage two, the cognitive stage, this person incorporates erroneous belief systems related to being Latino. In the consequence stage, the fragmentation of ethnic identity intensifies and this person may reject his/her Latino heritage. During stage four, the working through phase, a person begins integrating a healthier Latino identity. This stage is characterized by an increase in ethnic consciousness and reclaiming, and reconnecting with a Latino identity and community. The last stage, successful resolution, occurs when a person has a greater acceptance of self, culture, and ethnicity. This person has improved self-esteem and believes that ethnic identity is positive and promotes success. Before entering the consequence stage of development, this person usually experiences a transformative event or encounter that triggers movement to the next stage (Ruiz, 1990). For me, that encounter occurred last summer at a picnic.

### MY TRANSFORMATIVE PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

While attending my White husband's family picnic sponsored by his place of employment, I experienced my first overt racially-based experience that pre-

precipitated a major shift in my own thinking of who I am as a Puerto Rican woman, counselor, doctoral student in counselor education, and a mother of twins. This event served as my critical incident that propelled me into stage four, or the working through phase of my ethnic identity.

The event was as follows: I joined my husband at a picnic table with my twin son (who has olive skin, dark hair, and dark eyes) and daughter (who has fair skin, light hair, and light brown eyes), got introduced to his co-workers, and proceeded to share a meal with them. While making conversation, one of my husband's White co-workers asked me what my ethnicity was and if twins ran in my family; I replied that I am Puerto Rican and that my mother's cousins are twins. My husband and I conceived our twins via in-vitro fertilization (IVF), and therefore knew that we might have twins. She proceeded to ask me questions related to the IVF procedure, and if we had any frozen embryos that could be donated to other couples because "mixed race" embryos are in high demand.

MIXED RACE!!!! WHAT, DID SHE JUST SAY!!!!  
MY KIDS ARE NOT "MIXED RACE."

I could not believe what I was hearing. At that moment, I was transformed. Before this event, I considered myself to be an English speaking White American person with Puerto Rican parents. Yes, I was ethnically Puerto Rican, but with olive skin, dark straight hair, and dark eyes. I was racially White, and highly acculturated into the White-American culture. In other words, I passed as White, yet somehow this person viewed me as non-White and of a different race than I had always identified.

To this White person, I was not White, and thus my offspring were not White either; they were "mixed race." It was earth shattering for me because although I knew that my kids would be perceived as different, based on their contrasting skin colors, no one had ever actually said it. Nor had my White identity been scrutinized and invalidated. To have such an experience at a family picnic was uncomfortable, shocking, yet transformative. This event served as a catalyst for my personal and professional identity development that before then had been stagnant.

#### MY PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENTAL JOURNEYS

Before I entered stage four of my ethnic identity development, I had self-identified as White-American, had minimized my Latino heritage and incorporated erroneous beliefs about Latinos. For instance, I thought Latinos were lazy and uneducated. Since I was born in the United States, spoke English

fluently, and adopted White-American values, such as working hard for privileges and competing for wealth (Katz, 1985), I can be said to be highly acculturated.

A person's level of acculturation can fall on a continuum from low to high, and is a process of cultural learning that takes place when two or more culturally distant groups come in contact (Guarnero & Flaskerud, 2008; Kohatsu, Concepcion, & Perez, 2010; Sager, Schlimmer, & Hellman, 2001). I was not born in Puerto Rico, nor do I consider Spanish to be my first language (I learned how to speak Spanish as an adult), so to many "true" Puerto Ricans (those from the island), I am not fully Puerto Rican, but a "gringa", or White girl. Due to my high level of acculturation, I found myself without an ethnic identity. I was not fully White-American, nor fully Puerto Rican.

I did not physically fit the dominant image of a White-American with blond hair, blue eyes, and fair skin; nor did I fit the dominant image of a Puerto Rican with dark curly hair, darker skin, and dark eyes. I have olive skin, dark straight hair, and brown eyes. I also did not fully espouse the White American cultural ways of life, since I upheld Puerto Rican cultural values, as well. To White-Americans, I was not White and to Puerto Ricans, I was not Puerto Rican. I was a combination or a mix of the two. I was bicultural and lived in the borderlands. I lived in-between the two cultures, straddling them both and utilizing strengths from both cultures to succeed and navigate the differences between the cultures (Nguyen & Benet-Martinez, 2013).

For me, my twin children serve as *ethnic mirrors* through which I self-reflect on what it means to be a Puerto Rican-American. These ethnic mirrors, my twins, through which I see both my Puertoricanness (in my son) and my Whiteness (in my daughter), tells me that my olive skin, brown hair, and brown eyes make me look more White than Black, yet to others, I am not White, yet I am not Black. What am I as a Puerto Rican woman, counselor, and mother?

### As a Puerto Rican Woman

As a Puerto Rican woman, I am a mixture of three races—Spanish, African, and Taino Indian. This mixture has influenced who I am ethnically and racially. I am not White nor Black. I am a Latina with caramel colored skin. I carry an ancestral spirit that propels me towards social justice, equity, and action. I am a spiritual and optimistic person who honors the feminine spirit and womanhood. I am connected to my homeland of Puerto Rico and demonstrate passion for all endeavors I engage in. I am strong and assertive, especially when I have to protect my family and speak up against injustices.

## As a Bilingual Puerto Rican Counselor and Doctoral Student

For six years, I served as a bilingual (Spanish and English) mental health counselor for members of marginalized communities in Chicago and Paterson, New Jersey. Being bilingual and a Latina were both assets and sources of stress for me in my professional and academic career. For instance, I never had trouble finding a job since I was bilingual, yet I struggled with connecting with my profession. As a counselor, I belong to a predominately-White profession that upholds diversity, yet was founded on and continues to reinforce White-American worldviews and concepts that do not always align with my Latino cultural values. For example, while I believe in familismo, the psychodynamic training that I received encourages counselors to maintain appropriate boundaries and focus on individual and intrapsychic change. Here my ethnic and professional identities come in conflict and make me feel disconnected.

When I entered doctoral studies as the only Latina in my cohort, I continued to feel disconnected. I felt like the token minority who was obligated to serve as an ambassador for my culture. I was flattered to be asked to be on multiple diversity committees, and soon realized that I was serving as the token minority (Flores Niemann, 1999). During my first year of academic studies, I accepted this role as the token minority by excelling academically and accepting committee and leadership nominations. However, I felt undervalued and not supported in my research interests.

My advisor supports me as a student of color and the doctoral program values diversity and offers opportunities for multiculturalism. Since my research interest is on Latino professional counselor identity and no other faculty member is exploring this topic, I feel alone in my research. Since I value interpersonal relationships and collaboration, due to my Latino cultural beliefs of personalismo, I also find it challenging to engage in solitary research practices and to engage in an extensive dissertation project individually. As a Puerto Rican doctoral student in a predominately-White academic institution and profession, I struggle with being bicultural and often have to consider what cultural adaptations I will have to make to be successful, therefore making my academic experience complicated by race and culture.

## As a Puerto Rican Mother

Upon returning to my doctoral studies, after being on leave for a year, and as a mother of twins, I had to negotiate new familial and academic responsibilities. My twins are now my priority, yet I had to complete my doctoral studies, and I had to excel at it, at the same time that I was excelling as a mother of twins. It is part of my self-identity that is reinforced by the Latino cultural beliefs of *familismo* and *marianismo*, to excel in academics and in

my role as a mother. Education is highly valued in my family and my success in higher education is a gift and obligation to my family. Being a good mom is also highly valued in my family and culture. Yet, to satisfy both these demands is difficult, yet motivating.

As a Latina mom, I am responsible for the well-being and spiritual growth of my children. I am expected to stay home and care for them, and put their needs first. Trying to meet these obligations, while meeting my academic ones has proven to be a challenge. Also, as a Latina woman and mother, my cultural value of *marianismo* makes it hard for me to ask for help and to put my needs first. I am expected to be selfless and self-sacrificing. However, since I am highly acculturated to the White-American culture, I have been able to learn to ask for help and to take time for my self-care. By harnessing the strengths of the White-American culture, I have been able to strike a balance between the two cultures that I identify with.

## MY TRANSFORMATIONAL PROCESS

### Who I Was Before

Before this transformative experience, I was a community mental health counselor who was trained in the psychodynamic tradition. As a new professional, I applied what I learned in my clinical training to my clinical practice as a counselor, which meant that I conceptualized and treated Latino and African-American clients from a psychodynamic perspective by focusing on the individual, while negating the family. I also applied cognitive-behavioral strategies to help them learn coping skills. I provided counseling in Spanish to those who requested it, and felt obligated to work in the Latino communities. In a way, I was doing what I thought I was supposed to be doing as a Latino counselor.

I learned Spanish as a way to strengthen my marketability as a counselor. I worked in Latino communities out of a sense of obligation to my ethnic community, even though I felt disconnected from it. As the years progressed and I got married to a White man, and moved to a White suburb in another state away from my family-of-origin, I began to wonder about what being Puerto Rican meant to me. When another person commented that I had "mixed race" children, and a babysitter asked me where my son got his skin color from, my ethnic identity development became even more important and urgent to me.

### Who I Was After

After the transformative event, I began to answer the question, "What does being Puerto Rican mean to me"? By asking others this question, participat-

ing in a focus group addressing identity, and visiting Puerto Rico, I began to answer this question. Although this will be a life-long journey, I feel more confident in my ethnic identity development and have noticed changes. For example, I pronounce my name using the Spanish pronunciation, I speak Spanish with my twins and expose them to Spanish music, and I have changed my theoretical orientation to align with my ethnic identity.

My current theoretical orientation for counseling involves a multicultural, solution-focused, social justice perspective. This perspective aligns with my ethnic identity because it takes into account the cultural and social aspects of counseling concerns. Instead of applying a psychodynamic viewpoint to conceptualizing and treating clients, I now consider the multiple cultural and societal aspects that influence a person's life. Also, by knowing more about what Puerto Rican means to me, I feel proud to provide counseling in Spanish and working with Latino communities. I want to learn more about Latino studies, and I want to advocate for the fair and equitable treatment of all individuals, especially Latinos.

After my transformative moment when my twins were called "mixed race", I began to reclaim my Puerto Rican heritage. I understood why I smiled often, especially when interacting with authority figures, and why I played the mediator and peacemaker role in my family and social relationships. Instead of feeling ashamed of smiling and mediating, I now understand that I was enacting positive Latino cultural values of *simpatia* and *personalismo*. Also, by reclaiming my Puerto Rican heritage, I am solidifying my foundational ethnic identity that strengthens and motivates me to do what I do as a mother and as a counselor.

## CONCLUSION

My personal and professional developmental journey has led me through an ethnic identity process that has shaped how I perceive myself and others. In this chapter, I shared my transformative event that propelled me into the next stage of ethnic identity development. I realized that I do not have to choose to be either White-American or Puerto Rican; I can be both.

Being in the immersion stage, I am actively seeking other Puerto Ricans, cultural events, and literature to enhance my understanding of what it means to be a Puerto Rican woman, mother, and counselor. From someone who was considered racially non-White, and in many ways not part of the White-American culture that I had adored and adopted, to someone who is proud to be Puerto Rican, I have grown into a more integrated person ethnically and professionally. Although, the process can be upsetting and unnerving, at times, I am grateful to my husband's co-worker who labeled my children "mixed race" because she helped me learn to embrace my biculturalism. My

biculturalism is a source of strength, energy, passion, and perspective that is invaluable to my developing personal and professional identities.

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# Transformational Learning Experiences

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