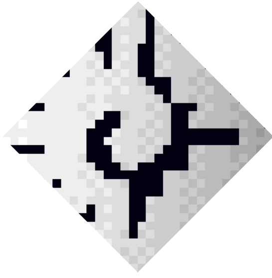
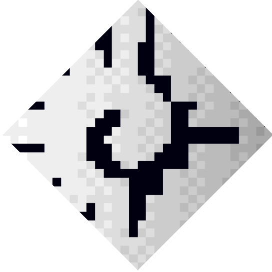
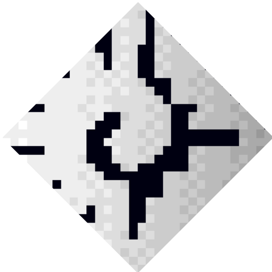
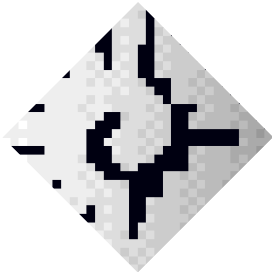
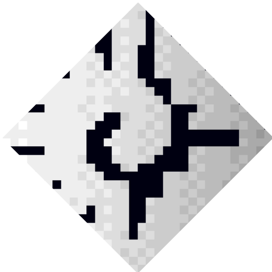
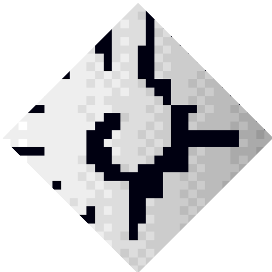

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Theorizing Justice in Chicano Families

by Yvette G. Flores-Ortiz, Ph.D.
University of California-Davis

Occasional Paper No. 43
March 2000

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I want to express my appreciation to the staff of the Julian Samora Research Center and its former director, Refugio Rochín, Ph.D. for the invitation to present at this conference. The challenge of participation gave me the space to crystallize nascent thoughts. I dedicate this paper to Rebecca Carrillo for her insightful feedback and her endless support of my writing, to Dr. Michelle Ritterman for being a mentor, to my students for their questioning, and to my clients for teaching me about justice. Finally, I dedicate my paper to my compadres, for holding me together the last few months. Above all, I thank my children for reminding me of what is truly important and for keeping me on the path of justice.

Abstract: This paper addresses the need for a paradigm shift in the study of violence in the lives of Chicana/os. A justice-based model of research and practice will be proposed which situates social, familial, and interpersonal violence. This model is derived from a 3-year study of Chicanos and Latinos whose life narratives contest oppression and re-tell stories of survival and hope.

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Theorizing Justice in Chicano Families

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The Julian Samora Research Institute is the Midwest's premier policy research and outreach center to the Hispanic community. The Institute's mission includes:

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- *Development of Latino faculty, including support for the development of curriculum and scholarship for Chicano/Latino Studies.*

Theorizing Justice in Chicano Families

Situating the Theorist and Her Work

In this paper I assume the grandiose task of outlining the context of injustice in Chicano families and offering research-based strategies for promoting justice. I have arrived at this juncture after 20 years of work as a clinical and research psychologist, and most recently, as an academic psychologist in a Chicana/o Studies program.

Over the past 10 years I have researched, theorized about, and provided psychotherapy for Chicano/Latino families with problems of intra-family abuse. Interweaving research, theory and clinical practice, I have created a model of family violence that encompasses the multi-determined nature of family injustice. The model proposes that violent outcomes, including domestic violence, child abuse, sexual, emotional, verbal and spiritual victimization of family members by those entrusted to care and provide for them, *la misma familia*, are propitiated by an interaction of specific forces within the context of the family and society. The forces which promote social injustice create imbalances of power within the family wherein strategies of disconnection and oppression replace the cultural ideals of *familismo, respeto y comprensión (*Flores-Ortiz, 1993, 1994, 1997).

Moreover, to completely understand how and why those who love us victimize us, often in the name of love, we must include an analysis of the larger context within which social and familial injustice develop.

Sources of Injustice

Almeida et al. (1992) propose that the roots of interpersonal injustice within the family and society are located in the historical legacy of oppression and colonization and the stratified caste system based on race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality and ability instituted when the first world collided with the American, African, and Asian continents. Injustice was historically institutionalized through education, employment, and access to power, resulting in a pyramid of oppression where belonging and dispossession are predicated on degree of acceptance by those in power. Interpersonally, Almeida et al. (1992) argue, injustice results in a hierarchy of oppression where those with more power use it *over* those perceived as having less. At an interpersonal and intrafamilial level, exercising oppressive power over relationships lead to a culture of terror "that humiliates women, teaches children to lie, and spreads the plague of fear" (Galeano, 1991, p.143).

At an individual psychological level, oppression, particularly exposure to injustices engendered by racism and racist policies, result in what Ken Hardy names "psychological homelessness" (Hardy and Laszloffy, 1995). Racism inflicts pain and discrimination in any form wounds the soul. The pain of disempowerment leads to a loss of community or site of belonging and to profound feelings of outrage which may in turn lead to rage and explosive anger. Thus we cannot isolate the violence engendered by racism from spousal abuse, child maltreatment, and acts of violence towards the self.

Effects of Injustice on People's Lives

In their work with Aboriginal people (Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia, 1995) the collective of the Dulwich Center (South Australia) identified a number of psychological and interpersonal sequelae of injustice which speak to Hardy's concept of *Psychological Homelessness*. As a consequence of the historical legacy of colonization and their subsequent colonial status, the staff at the Dulwich Center often encounter clients who present with feelings of guilt and shame, anger, self-hate, and a sense of powerlessness. These feelings are frequently accompanied by fear and depression, particularly fear of genocide. These are sequelae of disempowerment and internalized oppression. Likewise, oppression often leads to isolation, break-up of families, loss of identity, and the destruction of the culture. Ultimately, oppression leads to unauthentic human relationships as individuals isolate, disconnect from their own feelings, and take a stance that there are no more tears left. The sequelae of oppression can become multigenerationally transmitted legacies of disem-

powerment, hopelessness, and despair. A reservoir of pain is then available to transform into explosive anger or rage.

In conditions of social inequality, the oppressed often will experience a sense of diminished agency, and may actually internalize the seemingly repudiated dominant culture images of themselves holding themselves accountable for their own victimization (Flores-Ortiz, 1997, 1998; Hardy and Laszloffy, 1995). It is indeed this self-blame that can lead to self-loathing. Rage turned inward compromises the spirit and impairs the individual's ability to treat others fairly and justly. This is part of the link that leads to family violence. An individual who experiences rage as a function of oppression has a limited capacity to protect, nurture, and treat fairly those whom s/he purports to love. An individual or family wounded by injustice often cannot authentically connect to another human being. Instead he or she may feel toxic and unworthy, and engage in strategies of disconnection to prevent the other from getting too close. Familial and romantic relationships become the terrain where the pain and rage of oppression is avoided, engaged with, or contested, since intimate relationships are safer than those with individuals located in hierarchically more powerful positions.

Furthermore, the Aboriginal people, whose social conditions are similar to Chicanos in the U.S., draw a connection between individual and family injustice and multigenerational legacies. As long as injustices prevail and people are oppressed, the spirits of the ancestors cannot rest; particularly when these ancestors have succumbed to the effects of racism: police brutality, murder, suicide. Thus, in families where multigenerational patterns of violence prevail, we must understand the historical roots of that violence.

Moreover, future generations of Chicanos will continue to carry the burden of the legacy of 1848, and the multiple legislative efforts of the 20th Century to erase, circumscribe, or alter their history.

Manifestations of Injustice Within Chicano Families

In some of my earlier writings (Flores-Ortiz, 1993, 1994, 1997, 1998) I have addressed the problem of family violence in the lives of Chicanos. While specific figures of incidence and prevalence are limited and questionable given the methodological problems of most large scale studies (e.g. failure to note national or racial origin of Latinos surveyed), we know that women and children are hurt in Chicano families. I am proposing that while understanding the dysfunctional patterns that contribute to family injustice is important, we will not be able to eradicate the problem unless and until we understand the particularities of the Chicano experience, the role of oppression and injustice in the dynamics of family violence, and thus deconstruct our own subjective experience of victimization.

Particularities of the Chicano Experience

What are the mechanisms that leads us to accept the more powerful other's definition of ourselves? How do we internalize the message of disempowerment? The theoretical propositions of White and Epston (1990) and the Delwich Center (1995) concerning the role of dominant stories in shaping and constructing experience elucidate the effects of institutionalized oppression on Chicanas and Chicanos:

> The lives and relationships of people are shaped by the knowledge and stories that communities of color negotiate and engage in to give meaning to their experiences. These have real consequences. They [the knowledge and stories] are not merely reflections or representations of our lives-they actively shape, constitute and embrace our lives. (Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia, 1995, p.18)

What is the knowledge and what are the stories that actively shape, constitute and embrace our lives as Chicanos/as in the late 20th Century?

I invite us to turn to social science and popular culture as embodiments of our own self-narratives. In my work as an academic and practicing psychologist over the past two decades, I have been struck by the plethora of negative themes and analyses which offer little consideration of the larger social and political context. For example, a major theme in early social science was that of the Mexican (and by extrapolation, the Chicano) as the colonized, disempowered subject, as embodied in notions of *"el chingado."*

The Colonized Other

From Diaz-Guerrero's work to contemporary analyses of machismo (Mirandé, 1986; Gutmann, 1996) social science literature provides a narrative or testimony of disempowerment. While acknowledging the influence of racism as a by-product of the conquest, the exclusive focus on the intrapsychic sequelae of conquest obscures the fact that contemporary Mexicans and Chicanos remain under conditions of colonialism. Oppression is not only a historical reality, it is a current lived experience. Moreover, the focus on the narrative of conquest locates Chicanos origins *exclusively* in experiences of violation, overlooking the fact that the mestizo survived, indigenous people still exist in Mexico, and many Chicanos thrive. The elucidation of the psychodynamic manifestations of oppression is helpful, yet insufficient as it depicts a colonized other without agency, a victim, a *pobrecito,* or in other words, a disempowered male. I argue that the prevalence of this theme in literature, social science and popular culture contributes to the construction of self narratives for and about men as individuals out of control, helpless, without agency, and therefore unaccountable, which in turn impacts gender relationships profoundly.

The social conditions of men are blamed on the conquest, but since the conquest is often blamed on one woman, La Malinche (Flores-Ortiz, 1993), women are then ultimately held accountable for the victimization of men. By essentializing and reducing the victimization of peasant and working class men to intrapsychic processes rooted in the conquest and on female treachery, we avoid discussing and challenging continuing and institutionalized social injustices in Mexico and the United States. By locating the impact of the conquest intrapsychically and making its sequelae a character feature, we avoid painful conversations of race, class, gender and sexuality.

While Chicano scholars have debated the limitations of psychodynamic theories and challenged the myth of *la Malinche*, the theme of *el chingado y la traidora* are pervasive. In my own research on the impact of exposure to family and social violence among Chicano/Latino college students, three main themes emerge: woman as treacherous *Malinche,* man as *descontrolado, and* woman as protector and nurturer of men (Flores-Ortiz, 1997).

Influence of Dominant Stories on Self Development

I maintain that the narrative of conquest and disempowerment has become a dominant story among Chicanos. These dominant stories "shape, constitute, and embrace our lives." As such, they create scripts for negotiating injustice which ultimately result in self-blame. Let me provide you with an example of a narrative that embraces the myth of woman as treacherous Malinche:

> I could not tell anyone what was happening to me. I knew from the time I was small *la chota* used any excuse to beat up our guys. The cops never came when we needed help, they only came to harass or arrest us for no reason. I could only imagine what they would do to my dad if I told… Besides, what was my mom going to do with all of us kids and no job and no husband… I just couldn't tell. I didn't want to be a *traidora*. So I just betrayed myself. (Flores-Ortiz, 1997, p.59)

In this testimonial from an incest survivor, the narrator assumes responsibility for protecting the man whom she knows is likely to fall victim to the injustices of the judicial system. She feels forced to choose among untenable options: herself, her mother and siblings, her father. But a central organizing theme in her narrative is treachery: she did not want to be a *traidora.* So she *just betrayed herself.*

Another incest survivor compares herself to *la Malinche,* and thereby assumes responsibility for her own victimization: "I knew I was a *Malinche,* I knew it was my fault, how could a father, a brother, hurt a child this way. I had to be doing something to provoke them" (Flores-Ortiz, 1997, p. 62). This is a common pattern among incest survivors, but here we see the particularities of the Chicano experience, the theme of treachery and the association with *la madre de los chingados.*

Men who batter women and victimize children often describe themselves as *pobrecitos, burros, hombres desenfrenados:*

> *Pues yo le pego porque soy un burro, sin educación ni cultura. Pues así' nos criaban en mi casa, a punta de palo. Pero fue bueno, pues así' me hice hombre.* [Well, I hit her because I am a burro, without education or culture. That's how we were raised, with beatings. But it was good, that is how I became a man.] (Juan, 26-year-old man in a batterer's group).

Juan has internalized the repudiated image of the peasant so prevalent in Latin America; moreover, he attempts to exonerate his father and family by crediting the beatings for making him into a man. Juan is not yet able to connect his violence towards his wife with the violence he suffered as a child, or the relationship of his victimizing and his own victimization to the larger social context that led to injustice in his family of origin in the first place.

What are the consequences of dominant stories of disempowerment and victimization? I argue that they perpetuate a context of injustice within the family and obscure the social, political and historical roots of race, gender, and class oppression. With the example of these narratives I try to show how an internalized dominant story of disempowerment serves to obscure the political roots of injustice. I argue that such dominant stories lead to what Pinderhughes (1982) calls the "victim system" among African Americans, an expectation of pain and suffering as inalterable realities. We often see these beliefs in battered women and abused children.

Psychodynamic notions are not unique contributors to dominant stories that obscure a class and race analysis. Contemporary functionalist analysis of the Chicano Family, as critiqued by Hurtado, (1996) argue that the absence of gender analysis in contemporary family sociology have reified the ideals of the *sagrada familia* to the detriment of women. The functionalist analysis of the familia articulates the tensions and challenges families face as they negotiate survival within a context of race and class discrimination; furthermore, their analysis is grounded on a critique of the depiction of the Chicano family within the European American social science, which were clearly narrow, stereotypic, and generally negative. To counter such depictions, early Chicano sociologists idealized the notions of familismo and romanticized heterosexual relationships. The negative portrayals of Chicano families were replaced by idyllic narratives of interdependence, solidarity, and female loyalty. While providing a script of how families might be, such narratives erased the reality that children and women suffer in families. Furthermore, essentialist notions of Chicano family functioning obscured the role of oppression in families which were dysfunctional. Idealized notions of family typically fall on women to implement, given the gender-based assignment of family obligation and loyalty. Not all harmful dominant stories are negative, and narratives which reify the family as an idealized unit can also potentiate gender oppression and unfair family relationships.

Rescripting the Past

The theme of woman as nurturer and protector of men appears in many narratives of young college educated Latinas as well as working class women. Here we see a woman uncritically offering to do for her family. Her voice in the narrative is typically rooted in a relational, but self-sacrificing self.

> It is a woman's responsibility to have children, to move the race forward. Chicanos have a hard enough time negotiating the outside world. It is our duty to insure they have a safe place to return to at the end of the day. Together we must ensure our survival as a *gente*, but us women, we are natural nurturers so we should fulfill that role. Our men need us to do that for *la Raza*. (23-year-old Chicana college student).

On many college campuses a movement has begun to return Chicano families to pre-conquest cultural relations, when men and women were believed to have more balanced roles. The danger of such longings is that they are often fueled by the myth of *la sagrada familia* and avoid the realities that over 500 years of colonization have constructed namely the potential for abusive family relations.

> We need to go back to how things were before the Spaniard came, before the colonizer brought us sickness of the body, mind and spirit. We need to remember our place as *mujeres*, alongside our men, supporting them, taking care of them. All we have to do is go back to how things were (21-year-old college student).

Rescripting the past is not sufficient to alter family life and promote family justice. Instead, what is needed is a critical, active engagement with our past, a deconstruction of our legacies of oppression in order to create liberatory narratives, preferred stories, that are rooted in agency and reality, not idealization of a past that may never have existed.

The Path to Healing

"Moving from dominant stories about one's life to preferred stories is like making a journey from one identity to another…" (*Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia*, 1995, p.18).

Indeed healing from legacies and experiences of injustice often requires a journey from victim to survivor. The path to healing from injustice requires an active engagement, not passive acceptance, with the realities of oppression, a questioning or deconstructing of one's internalized "isms." The key step in that journey is naming the injustices:

> Enabling people to rename the dominant story as one about survival in the face of tyranny, injustice and exploitation can have the effect of substantially freeing them from many of the real effects of the abuse and injustice that have been perpetrated in their lives… (*Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia,* 1995, p.19).

Naming the injustices clearly necessitates an acceptance that injustices have occurred. This isn't always easy, particularly when the family is the source of the injustice.

> I now walk down the street with my head raised high, I understand my invisibility had to do with carrying my father's shame about being Mexican. I now understand he tried to protect me by rendering me invisible. I no longer blame him, although I do hold him accountable. I do not need to render myself invisible in order to survive. I am a powerful Chicana, *y al que no le guste, pues* too bad. I am, I am visible, I can do whatever I want, sin verguenza ni temor (Ana, 40-year-old Chicana secretary).

To facilitate the naming process for those victimized, as Chicanas y Chicanos we must be willing to engage in open dialogue about the pyramid of oppression, our own psychological homelessness, and the sequelae of tyranny. The goal is not to perpetuate the dominant story of victimization, instead we must rename the story as one of survival. The Dulwich Center staff suggests strategies for facilitating that journey which include: the use of humour, fostering self-pride, and instilling in our children – and supporting in each other – determination and hope. Relying on a learned optimism that helps turn negatives into positives, we must instill in future generations pride in identity/ies, which means challenging our own notions of preferred identity as well as being willing to engage in active exchange with youngsters as they struggle to forge a coherent sense of self in the face of dominant stories of marginality and dispossession. As elders in our communities, and as elders and young scholars in our respective disciplines, we need to theorize justice and create strategies to build connections among ourselves and our families.

To foster justice in Chicano families we must critically examine what works and what doesn't, what the dominant paradigms are for family living and the degree to which they perpetuate injustice. We must inoculate ourselves and future generations against the ravages of racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia. We must reconnect to our past, not to reify or romanticize it, but to identify the mechanisms of oppression, to rescue the silent history, to identify strategies of connection that are culturally congruent, to exorcise injustice. Ultimately, we *can*

build authentic, mutually fair family connections. When we then "see ourselves in our family's eyes," we shall see liberation, not victimization. The Dulwich center staff finds that for the Aboriginal people, spirituality, sharing stories, caring for and sharing with one another, remembering the past, joining organizations, reclaiming cultural ways and knowledge, and naming injustice are essential steps in healing the effects of oppression.

Healing takes place in community, and healthy communities foster healthy families, which in turn promote individual health. As a dominated group Chicanos cannot wait for outside sources of healing, as Galeano points out "Human rights should indeed begin at home" (1991, p.43). As educators, scholars and activists we are uniquely positioned to engage in such acts of healing. Let me restate the Council's journey metaphor:

> The provision of metaphoric maps of the sort of experiences, feelings and pitfalls that can happen on this journey by other people who have already made it, can play an important part in enabling people to move forward in their lives. (*Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia,* 1995, p.19)

The role of the Chicano psychologist

We will not be able to eradicate the problem of family violence unless we understand the particularities of the Chicano experience and deconstruct our own subjective experience of victimization. Our narratives of victimization must be transformed into narratives of resilience, *entereza,* wholeness.

As Chicano scholars we can actively engage with our disciplines, communities and families to foster accountability in ourselves and others relative to fighting injustice. By building community we can counter psychological homelessness, and by influencing policy through our research, and educating the next generation of scholars and practitioners we can reclaim our stories, and thereby our lives. Our research, pedagogy and lived practice must promote justice and challenge injustice. As we look to the next century, we must engage collectively and individually in liberatory practices.

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