

**A Community Psychologist's Perspective on Domestic Violence:  
A Conversation with Julia Perilla, Ph.D.**

**Interview by  
Theodora Ooms, CLASP**

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**Intro (Ooms):** Julia, you are a clinical community psychologist who conducts academic research and teaches at Georgia State University and have for a long time had a special interest in domestic violence, especially among Latino populations. In addition you are an advocate and have also done a lot of work in the community, specifically founding a program in Atlanta, *Caminar Latino*, which provides domestic violence services to the whole family—abused women, male batterers and children.

**Q: Can you describe what is distinctive about the perspective of a community psychologist?**

A: As a clinical community psychologist my work is guided by a framework that requires that individuals and families be considered (i.e. studied, served, understood) always within the context in which they find themselves. Thus, I must consider the ways in which their culture, ethnicity, social class, immigration status, gender, religion, history, sexual orientation, level of education, etc. affects their worldview and the ways they interact with and respond to systems, laws, agencies, organizations, etc. In other words, rather than attempting to diagnose people based only on the individual's symptoms and behaviors, I would first attempt to understand the environment in which they find themselves and the forces that are at work in their world. As a result of this stance, I cannot focus on individual pathology without also understanding the ecology in which it happens, the role of societal norms in its occurrence, and the systems that may need to be transformed. Other distinctive perspectives of community psychology are that we tend to work with groups of people and systems rather than individuals; approach interventions and research from a strengths perspective (as opposed to a deficit model); consider the role of power (including my own) in all formulations and interventions that I attempt; focus on prevention strategies; and generally try to use my work and myself as tools for social justice and change.

**Q: How does a community psychologist strive to understand the phenomenon of domestic violence in general?**

A: Clinical community psychology is very useful to understand the phenomenon of domestic violence, given the emphasis on understanding the role of culture, gender, power, and societal norms on individuals and groups within a particular society. Rather than looking at the individual pathology of women who have been battered (as some theorists have tried to do), or even the dynamics within a couple (as others have focused on), community psychology provides the framework of a society in which gender-based oppression is the result of social norms that not only accepts violence in its many forms, but at the same time supports an imbalance of power based on gender. From there it is not difficult to understand how, in order to eradicate domestic violence, societal norms (at the same time as individuals) need to be changed.

**Q: What insights does your perspective bring to understanding domestic violence in the Latino community?**

A: When I began to work in this field about 17 years ago I quickly realized that existing conceptualizations did not take into consideration the myriad experiences of Latino people in terms of our history, our traditions, our familism, the social expectations that deeply affected our lives. The perspective that I brought to my work allowed me to conduct research and design and implement interventions that emerged from a Latino ecological perspective. It was not about throwing out all existing knowledge or ideas about domestic violence, but rather examining and determining the pieces that seemed to fit our people and those that needed to be modified or left aside. This approach also allowed me to be open to learning from a great number of teachers, most of them outside academia. Community members, most especially Latina women who were survivors, were some of the most effective and wisest of my mentors. Together we have

developed ideas, tested them out, enhanced our common understanding, and created approaches that seem to work quite effectively for our people.

**Q: Are the reasons Latino men batter different from those of Anglos?**

A: I believe that the phenomenon of domestic violence has both universal and culture-specific elements. Basically, I think that Latino men use violence against their partners for many of the same reasons than Anglo men and men from any other ethnic/racial group do: they learned it early on in their lives; they figured that it was a viable way to get what they wanted; and, overwhelmingly, there were no negative consequences. The difference, I think, is in the nuances of their misuse of power (i.e. threatening to call Immigration if she called the police), the specific cultural codes from which they learned that violence was a viable way to get their way (i.e. men, but not “good” women, have the right to have sex outside marriage); and the particular cultural values that can be used to work with them (i.e. using the effect of their violence on the children as an extremely powerful incentive for changing their violent behaviors and attitudes).

**Q. Are the reasons that abused Latinas stay in abusive relationships different from those of Anglos?**

A. In addition to the reasons that compel women in general to stay in an abusive relationship (i.e. financial concerns, belief that the children need their father, hope that things will change, fear for their lives and those of their children), Latinas are also affected by the often rigid gender roles and expectations that are still present in many of our communities (i.e. religious beliefs about the indissolubility of marriage, ideas of what constitutes a “good” woman, feelings of responsibility for keeping their families together, etc.).

**Q. You generally use the term domestic violence, and yet you write about the overlap between domestic violence and child abuse, and the traumatic effects on children of witnessing violence between their parents. Do you think it would be more appropriate to use the term “family violence”?**

A. I believe this is a question of semantics and usage. I think that I have followed the terminology of the battered women’s movement, in which “domestic violence” was (and in many cases still is) the accepted term for the violence that occurs between intimate partners. In my work, however, it has been impossible to ignore the different types of abuse that happen within a family in which violence against the mother is present. This, of course, is the reason why Caminar Latino works with the entire family. It’s interesting to note that in many parts of Latin America (from where I have obtained a great deal of knowledge and information), the term used is “violencia intrafamiliar” [inter-family violence] – which is reflected in their formulations that include all the types of violence to which you refer.

**Q: We are often enjoined not to make generalizations about Latinos in the US since they are a very diverse group. From the perspective of understanding patterns of domestic violence and male/female relationships which is more significant the background of nationality or the degree of assimilation (first, second, third generation of immigration) ?**

A: This is a wonderful question. First of all, it is very true about the pitfalls of generalizing about Latinos. We are an extremely diverse group and the differences within our communities at times are more noteworthy in terms of relevance than those between Latinos and other ethnic groups. Although this issue still needs to be studied in much greater depth, a recent study found important differences between people

from different countries of origin, as well as between immigrants and second and third generations. Immigrants were found to be less likely to use violence against their partners than second generation Latinos. Interestingly, this finding mirrors those of other studies regarding psychological outcomes, substance abuse, etc. Recent immigrants appear to bring with them characteristics or abilities that that enhance resilience and that unfortunately disappear after a generation in the country. My personal belief is that country of origin and acculturation into U.S. mainstream society interact in ways not clear to us right now, but undoubtedly important to any future programs and interventions. This, of course, implies that a lot more research needs to be conducted to understand these within group phenomena.

**Q. Why is it important to understand the cultural, historical and economic context in which domestic violence occurs? Doesn't this approach simply lead to "excusing" unacceptable (violent) behavior?**

A: The reason to understand the historical, cultural, and economic context in which domestic violence takes place is not in any way to excuse it or condone it. Rather, as I mentioned before, it is to extract specific elements, experiences, beliefs, values, codes, that can be used as tools in interventions and services. For example, emphasizing the importance that being a responsible father is to a Latino man, and thus the tremendous impact of their violent behavior on the children is a strategy that we have found extremely helpful in our work with Latino men.

**Q. One of the major themes in your articles is the importance of understanding the continuing influence of traditional gender role ideology (cultural scripts?) on Hispanic communities in the US and the tensions created when these values encounter the more egalitarian and flexible gender roles played out in the US. How does this clash of values affect Latinas? Latinos? And the relationships between them?**

A. Undoubtedly, the process of immigration and adaptation to a new culture and worldview creates clashes – both internally in the individual, and externally between partners and between parents and children. Whereas Latina women are often relieved to learn about laws that protect them from the violence of their partners, they are at the same time forced to understand what happens within their intimate relationships when they begin exercising some of the more egalitarian roles of this society. Latino men often bring up the idea that the "freedoms" available to women in this country (i.e. learning to drive, exercising their right to call the police) negatively affect their roles as wives and mothers and thus the well being of the family. This is one of the main reasons why we have found it imperative to work with groups of men at the same time as their partners are working with other women, so that they have the opportunity of redefining and expanding their gender roles and expectations and have a better chance to create relationships based more on mutuality than on the strict gender role ideology that resulted in violence.

**Q. What should service providers know about the concepts of macho/machismo/marianismo/machista/respeto? Can these concepts be redefined to accommodate better to American cultural values? (This is not well phrased!)**

A: I have often said that Latinos have been carrying the burden of "machismo" as a result of the fact that Spanish has a word for this concept. The set of expectations for males in Latino culture is not that different from the set of expectations for males in any culture – except that we have the word that clearly describes it, whereas other cultures don't. I personally try to stay away from these terms, because they tend to evoke stereotypes that preclude a more in-depth analysis of the very complex dynamic of gender asymmetry and its consequences – regardless of the culture in which it happens. The same happens with the term "marianismo." Although not nearly as well known as "machismo", "marianismo" (the set of expectations for

women in Latino cultures) has both religious and cultural connotations that place women as subservient, passive, dependent – obviously not the image of the nearly 2,000 women with whom I have had the privilege of working in the past 17 years. “Machismo” can be regarded as a set of cultural codes that must be questioned, examined, and modified, keeping what is worthwhile (i.e. ideas of respect, responsibility, honor, family) and leaving aside what is noxious and harmful (i.e. heavy drinking, womanizing, using violence to maintain masculine “superiority”, etc.). “American” values as they relate to gender expectations also require that kind of scrutiny and modification, since American men who batter are also working based on their own cultural expectations and values that condone their violence.

**Q. Another major theme in your work is the importance of understanding the many ways in which violence can be experienced, and how these forms are linked. For example domestic violence is only one form of oppression that disadvantaged populations experience daily and historically.**

**Can you explain what you mean by this?**

A. Because the roots of violence are so deeply embedded in the texture of society, there are common threads that tie war, gang violence, police violence, child abuse, sexual abuse, etc. to the violence that occurs between intimate partners. We have learned throughout the years that when we have families who come from a country in which war has been present, we can expect – in general - that the types and severity of violence are going to be more drastic than those of people from places in which war is not happening. We also know from experience that some of the most violent men with whom we work have had horrendous experiences of violence in their childhood. It is also not uncommon to see families affected by domestic violence who have also experienced abuse of their human rights at the hand of police, immigration authorities, child protective services, schools, and other community and government institutions. In those cases we are often forced to consider both the domestic violence and/or child abuse that has occurred within the family and that must be stopped regardless of any other circumstance impinging on the family, and the concurrent advocacy that we have done on behalf of the family in places like courts, schools, child agencies, etc. Looking at our work as a tool for social change requires that the ambiguity and complexity present in people’s lives become part of our formulations and actions.

**Q. Although you write mostly about the experience of oppression among Latinos, isn’t this also an important factor in African American populations?**

A. Absolutely! Although I have not done work directly with African Americans, we collaborate very closely with agencies and organizations that have that community as their main focus. The problem among African Americans is just as complex and severe as it is among Latinos and many other ethnic and racial groups. From what I understand from the literature and also from my friends and colleagues who are working on these issues in the African American community, culture-specific interventions and research strategies also seem to work best for them.

**Q. You point out that the Church (both Catholic and Protestant) remains a very important institution in Latino communities in the US and its influence can be either a negative or positive one in terms of domestic violence. Can you describe how the Church may (inadvertently) support domestic violence in Latino communities? Alternatively can the Church play a leading role in combating family violence?**

A. Earlier this month I was asked just this question by Catholic News Service. Dr. Marie Fortune from the FaithTrust Institute and I wrote companion pieces regarding the two sides of this issue. My comment is pasted below:

*Religious teachings can undoubtedly be a roadblock in stopping domestic violence. In my work the past 17 years with families affected by this tremendous social problem I have heard many women talk about responses by some priests, religious sisters or lay workers when survivors shared their experiences of domestic violence. These church figures could have comforted with biblical passages on God's unwavering love and the importance of respect and equality within a couple. They could have held the batterer accountable for the violence he had committed against the woman he had promised to love. Instead, abused women are often told that they must not do things that anger their spouses so that the spouses do not respond with violence. Women are reminded of the permanence of marriage and the need to "bear their cross" for the good of their children and family. Biblical passages are misinterpreted to validate the tremendous power imbalance present in these couples. These responses are of grave concern because women who have been abused often seek support from the church first.*

*"When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women," published by the U.S. bishops' conference in 1992 and addressed again in 2002, affirms many realities that confront my daily work, including the problem's epidemic proportions. As a statement from the bishops, this document contains important messages for families in crisis due to violence. The letter speaks of Jesus' love and respect for women, and the biblical image of a kind, merciful and loving God. It names domestic violence a sin. It calls for clergy and lay church workers to obtain training so that parishes can enhance victim safety and batterer accountability. So, why do we not hear more often about this document from the pulpit?*

*I suspect it has to do with our individual and collective fears about tampering with the institution of marriage, with issues that are best kept as "family secrets," with our anxiety about exposing untenable situations within couples. Fortunately, the bishops' letter provides an excellent roadmap for the church's involvement through direct, caring action. Reading the document will allay fears and provide clear and scripturally based guidelines for using the pulpit as a tool for justice-making.*

*The misguided advice that women often receive obviously reflects a lack of knowledge regarding the dynamics of violence. In stark contrast, the bishops' message teaches that "a correct reading of Scripture leads people to an understanding of the equal dignity of men and women, and to relationships based on mutuality and love," whereas misinterpretations of Scripture and church teachings "can contribute to the victim's self-blame and suffering, and to the abuser's rationalizations." Silence from the pulpit on the topic of domestic abuse can indeed become a roadblock for victims and lend support to their victimization.*

*Obviously, it's not the absence of church teachings or episcopal guidance that prevents parishes from becoming the haven that many battered women consider them to be. The Catholic Church has created a document that affirms the basic human right of each person to live without violence at home. It is time that we begin to make good use of this important tool. I believe it will significantly enhance our work in creating God's kingdom on earth.*

**Q. You have critiqued the current approach to domestic violence interventions as being too punitive, focusing on one individual only and ignoring the context. **What, briefly, are the key principles and components that should inform the design of domestic violence intervention services which flow from your perspective?****

A. I think this has specifically to do with the viewpoint from which I work. Domestic violence is a social problem of epidemic proportions that must be eradicated. In order to do that, we have to go beyond the necessary services to decrease the risk to women and children (i.e. domestic violence shelters, criminal justice remedies to hold the batterers accountable, “babysitting” for children who have witnessed violence while their mothers attend support groups). These provisions are absolutely essential to our work. But if we stop there, women who do not want to leave their partners and who feel responsible for the well being of their families will not make use of services that only targets them ; batterers will change their overt behavior to avoid re-incarceration during the time they are being supervised by the criminal justice system and very often will return to their behaviors after the courts are no longer in the picture; and child witnesses will continue to be at high risk for carrying the cycle of violence into the next generation. This is – in general – the approach that has been developed in the past two and a half decades, with very mixed results – especially for communities of color and immigrant communities.

If we step away from a stance of service provision into the arena of social change and justice, we see that it is not only about providing services, “rescuing” people, “empowering” survivors, while holding batterers accountable through the criminal justice system and treating children as an “add-on” to our strategies. Social change and justice regarding domestic/family violence requires that we engage those around us with whom we work in horizontal relationships (as opposed to creating hierarchical structures based on “them and us” dichotomies) that will provide spaces for changing not only behaviors but, most importantly, attitudes, beliefs, values, cultural codes. That can only be done if we see the people with whom we work as our equals (regardless of the level of education attained) and set about the task of justice making together. Interestingly, when we do that we realize how very enriching this exercise becomes and how much we learn about ourselves in the process.

Based on what we have learned from the community regarding interventions, some of the key components of our work with Latinos are the following:

- ◆ Provide services for each member of the family – in our case, men, women, and youth (0-18) – but in established communities in which grandparents, godparents, and other extended family are present, they too should be invited to participate in order to enhance the potential gains of the intervention beyond the time that the families are participating in the program.
- ◆ Set up non-hierarchical structures so that people with whom we work can see alternative approaches to those based on gender, education, class, etc.
- ◆ Insist that all people who work in this area (and very specially those who work with women survivors and male batterers) engage in ongoing self-reflection regarding their own power, privilege, values, history, beliefs, etc., so that we don’t inadvertently recreate the abusive structures that brought the families to our programs in the first place.
- ◆ Involve participants (including the youth!) in developing new topics, activities, research studies, advocacy, community education, etc.
- ◆ Use cultural traditions, values, ideas, etc. to enhance the intervention, always being careful not to “romanticize” and deify the culture, as a critical lens is necessary to figure out what elements of our cultures are worth keeping, and which need to be discarded.
- ◆ Make sure that the intervention reflects the ethnic, racial, cultural realities of the people who will participate – this of course requires that we not only be involved with and knowledgeable about the local community, but also that we take into consideration the subgroups present within it. The increasing numbers of indigenous families and individuals from Guatemala and many of the Mexican states, for example, are an important addition to the Latino presence in this country that may need linguistic and culturally-specific interventions.
- ◆ Approach the work not from a service provider’s perspective (even if that is what we actually do), but from a social change perspective. Changing our lens will radically change our stances, ideas, expectations, and approach to the work at hand.

- ◆ Create and maintain strong networks with other agencies, organizations, systems with which we can collaborate to enhance our work for social change and justice.
- ◆ Regardless of the specific work that we do, be sure to keep the realities of the survivors and their children, central to our work.

**Q. If a community (or a state) wanted to focus on a collective effort at domestic violence prevention, what kinds of activities do you think would be most effective, especially in Latino communities?**

- ◆ The first thing, of course, is to involve the Latino community at the grass roots. Going into a community without this type of endorsement and support would probably be extremely difficult, if not impossible. Each community is very different, so a good knowledge of the demographics, history, and “gatekeepers” is an essential element in our work.
- ◆ Personal outreach can be much more effective than written materials (even in Spanish or other languages used by Latinos), given the limited formal education of many immigrants and our cultural emphasis on oral – rather than written – communication.
- ◆ As mentioned earlier, church communities can be an asset – or a liability – so one must approach these potentially key allies with “hopeful caution.”
- ◆ Radio stations in Spanish are an excellent medium for public service announcements, as they are widely listened to in Latino communities, even during work hours. A word of caution here is the type of program that airs the PSAs, as some radio announcers and/or stations can be extremely insensitive to the issue.
- ◆ Youth involvement is essential for prevention efforts. Adults need to remember that youth listen to each other much more than they listen to older people. Outreach by teens and young adults can be extremely effective.
- ◆ Schools are an excellent place to conduct violence prevention campaigns. For this to happen, however, interested communities or states may need to do some prior advocacy regarding the need to talk to youth of all ages about sensitive – but potentially lifesaving – topics.
- ◆ Along with prevention strategies, courts, police departments, schools, mainstream organizations and agencies need to engage in ongoing training and awareness regarding diversity. Here it is important to note that simplistic, “cook-book” approaches to any culture run the risk of fueling stereotypes and usually leave out important subgroups within the culture.
- ◆ In general, the idea of incorporating Latino populations into existing structures by means of translating materials that were not developed specifically for the population and adding one bilingual person to the staff does NOT constitute cultural competency. On the contrary, a lot of effort, resources, and funding may be wasted as Latinas and Latinos may not access the services or may not remain in the program for very long, thus seriously decreasing the potential effectiveness of the intervention.

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