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Core Cultural Values

Although it is sometimes dangerous to make generalizations about people groups, it is necessary to make some general observations about a culture in order to understand it. There are certain characteristic values of Hispanic culture that can be contrasted with equivalent elements of Anglo culture. Understanding these core values will help us avoid making wrong judgments of Hispanics and will make us more effective in building effective bridges of communication with them.

Core Values In Hispanic Culture

Hispanic culture has been shaped over half a millennia by a unique set of historical circumstance. Unlike Anglo culture, which originated in the predominantly Protestant Northern Europe with minimal or non-existent Native American influence, Hispanic culture was born out of Southern Europe with heavy influence from Catholic Christianity, and then later crossed with a strong influence from Native America along with a lesser but significant element of African culture.

Spain itself was heavily influenced by Arabic culture for over 800 years. With the conquest of America, Spanish Catholicism encouraged a mixture of Catholic and Native American religious elements as well as intermarriage between European Latins and Native American Indians. As Native American populations died out from smallpox and mistreatment, African slaves were imported to carry on the heavy, menial work of the sugar plantations. The diversity of mixture between European, Native American and African populations varies greatly among Latin American nations. Countries that were centers of Native American empires at the time of the conquest today tend to be very "Indian" in their physical features as well as culture. These would include Mexico, Guatemala, Peru and Paraguay. Countries that had small or marginal Indian populations are today very European, such as Argentina, Uruguay and Costa Rica. Some Caribbean countries that were heavily involved in the sugar economy today have heavy African influence such as the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and Cuba. The rest of the Latin American countries are varying levels of mixture between European, Native American and African as well as Asian influences. These would include Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Chile, Panama, Nicaragua, Honduras and El Salvador.

These historical influences have molded and shaped the core values of the cultures. Although there are specific divergences, several generalizations can be made about "core values" of general Hispanic culture.

Family

Hispanics place an extremely high value on family. You can tell when you succeed in making a real friendship with a Hispanic because they will almost immediately want to introduce you to their parents and/or grandparents. Family ties and loyalties are far more important to Hispanics than Anglos (the term, "Anglo," refers to European, English-speaking Americans). When Anglo young people arrive at early adulthood, they quickly become independent of their parents; Hispanic young people tend to continue living with their families well into their twenties. Hispanics expect their children to support them in their old age. Hispanic adults work hard to send money to their parents and find the idea of "assisted living" or retirement homes to be abhorrent. This is why reaching an Hispanic head of household has a high probability of winning the entire family. Hispanics are more likely to process things and make decisions as a group, whereas Anglos tend to be more individualistic.

¹*My Family* is a movie starring James Edward Olmos, Jimmy Smits and Jennifer Lopez. The film follows three generations of Mexican immigrants living in Los Angeles. The movie is rated "R" for profanity. Nevertheless, the movie effectively shows the challenges Hispanic immigrants face in adapting to life in the US. The central theme of the movie is the overriding value of the family, in good times and bad.

Relationships

Along with the emphasis on family, there is a much higher emphasis on relationships in general. In Latin America, it is not what you know, it is whom you know. Even their view of law is different than the Anglo-Saxon view. Anglo-

¹Gregory Nava, Director *MY FAMILY*, 1995. 126 minutes.

Saxon law is "depersonalized" and based on precedent and principles. The Hispanic view of law is embodied in a "person." For centuries their secular law was embodied in the king; the religious law was embodied in the Pope. Hispanics cherish relationships and cultivate relational networks expected to last a lifetime. Gift giving, hospitality and introductions to family members are all important aspects of the process of bonding into a friendship. All of the friends Debbie and I made 16 years ago in Colombia are still good friends.

Courtesy Or "Culture"

It is relatively more important for a Hispanic to be polite than it is to keep their word. Whereas "keeping one's word" is a high value for Anglos, for a Hispanic it is more important to save face and to preserve a relationship by not giving offense. This is derived from the high value on relationships. Anglos tend to exchange relationships fairly easily in the different seasons of life or when there are job changes. Hispanics want to protect relationships and guard them for life; therefore, they are very careful about not giving offense by being rude to someone's face.

This is why Hispanics may often seem to say they will do something and then don't do it. There is a difference between a true "yes" and a "non-committal yes" that is really a "probably not." They don't want to risk the relationship by saying "no" or by causing their friend to lose face, so they give a "non-committal yes" that is really "no" but is more indirect. They do not realize that they often offend Anglos even more by appearing not to keep their word. On the other hand, Anglos have trouble distinguishing between the true yes and the polite yes. It could be argued that rather than Hispanics not keeping their word, the Anglo failed to understand what was really being communicated.

Saving Face

For Hispanics, saving face is important. This is true [in most developing nations]. It is considered terribly rude to ask a friend for a favor in a fashion that requires a simple "yes" or "no" answer. It is considered more appropriate to offer hints about needs and approach the matter indirectly, hoping that one will pick up on the need and offer to help without being asked (keep in mind that this varies from one Hispanic country to another).

This is difficult for Anglos to understand. We feel that this is "beating around the bush." We don't realize that our directness is very uncomfortable and even offensive to Hispanics.² I once made a huge cultural mistake with a young leader in a church in Colombia. In response to a prophecy in a meeting, he came to me and confessed an area of moral failure. Because he was one of the leaders of the church, I felt that the correct thing to do was to require him to confess his sin to the other leaders, which he reluctantly did. The other leaders (also Colombians) seemed shocked and unsure of how to respond.

Because I was new in the culture, I did not realize that I had shamed him and caused him to lose face before the others. Although he eventually overcame the moral failure, he attended our meetings less and less and eventually dropped out. I had interpreted the scriptures on sin and accountability through my Anglo core values, failing to contextualize my application of church discipline to a different culture.

How could I have handled the situation differently? I could have affirmed him for taking the initiative in coming to me and putting his sin in the light. I could have suggested that for his own good, he take a low profile in leadership for a while and work on correcting this area. I could have also suggested that he pray about talking voluntarily with some of the other leaders one-to-one, to also confess to them. I could have given him several weeks or a couple of months to try to overcome his sin before I uncovered him in front of the others. I could have helped him while preserving the relationship.

Unfortunately, although I technically did the "right" thing as viewed through my own cultural lenses, rather than restoring him in a "spirit of gentleness," I lost influence with him. I put the principle before the person. It was a costly and painful lesson,

Event Driven, Not Time Driven

²Duane Elmer. CROSS-CULTURAL CONFLICT. (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove; 1993) p. 46

Hispanics are not generally as "time conscious" as Anglos. They tend to be more "event-driven." If they are invited to a birthday party, the party is an event. They may arrive late and stay late. Rather than operating on a tight schedule, they freely flow from event to event. As long as one is no more than an hour or an hour and a half late, it does not require a serious apology in Latin culture, unlike Anglo culture where a serious apology is required after being 20 minutes late.

There is a rational reason for this. If a resident of Bogotá is on his way to an appointment across town, chances are he will be taking the bus or a taxi. Public transportation is plentiful, but notoriously unreliable. If it is raining, there may be long delays. It may take two hours to get across town instead of one hour.

If the person is on his way to the appointment, and he runs into an old friend, he will feel obligated to pause and spend some time "sowing" to the relationship. Remember, protecting a relationship is a core value. It is more important for him to honor his relationship than it is to arrive on time. Therefore in Hispanic culture, it is simply understood that there is flexibility in appointments, something that Anglos have a hard time understanding.

Respect For Authority

Hispanics understand the concept of authority. They are much better at submitting to authority than are Anglos, who tend to be more independent. Their society has been authoritarian for centuries, with the highest authorities being the king and the Pope.

Unfortunately, their understanding of authority is somewhat distorted from the Biblical understanding. The Jesus concept of servant-leadership is not the same as authoritarianism. Authority figures in Latin America tend to use coercion and self-aggrandizement for their own personal benefit; hence, the problem with dictatorship, corruption, civil war and revolution.

Along with the misapplication of the nature of authority, there is a distorted view of fatherhood. Especially in Mexico, the cultural archetype of fatherhood is a Spanish conquistador who rapes Indian women and fathers mestizo children indiscriminately. Contrast this image of fatherhood with the maternal image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the "dark-skinned" Madonna. Since there is resentment of the coercive and abusive authority figure, there is an exaggerated ideal of motherhood. This leads to an excessive veneration of the Virgin Mary as well as an unhealthy view of the role of women. "Machismo" in Latin America is really an insecure view of manhood in a culture that has a dysfunctional form of fatherhood.

Core Values In Anglo Culture

In the context of this paper, when we use the term "Anglo" as opposed to Latino or Hispanic, we are referring to white, English-speaking Americans of European heritage. There is some difference of opinion among Spanish speakers about whether they should be described as Latinos or Hispanics. "Latino" refers to the Latin heritage of Spain and Southern Europe. "Hispanic" more specifically points to the cultural heritage of Spain.

It may be helpful for us to identify the core cultural values of Anglo culture in order to contrast them with Hispanic cultural values. Anglo cultural values find their roots in Northern Europe during the Protestant reformation whereas Hispanic values trace their roots back to Southern Europe and medieval Catholicism and mediated through syncretism with Native American culture and, in some cases, Afro-Caribbean values.

Work Ethic

One clear contrast between the Anglo and Hispanic cultures is the disparate approaches to the work ethic. Anglos have inherited what Max Weber called the "Protestant Work Ethic."³ It is the basic Calvinist idea that work is holy and blessed by God, and that the "elect" are destined to prosper through hard work and savings. Among many Anglos, working long, hard hours is a mark of honor. In my own heritage on a family farm, doing hard physical work was the mark of a real man.

³ Max Weber. THE PROTESTANT WORK ETHIC AND THE SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM. (Charles Scribner's Sons. New York, 1958 -Translation by Talcott Parsons).

Imagine my surprise when a young, middle class Colombian staying with me in the U.S. reacted to my suggestion that he could help me by cutting the grass in my yard. After struggling with my lawn mower for about an hour, he told me "I'm not cut out for this kind of work. I work with my head, not with my hands."

This young man was by no means lazy. He excelled in college, graduating with honors in engineering. He has been highly motivated and successful in his career. As I became more acquainted with Colombian culture, I discovered a strongly defined class system that separates middle class professionals from blue-collar workers who work with their hands. This distinction between professionals and working class goes all the way back to the conquest of America.

This is not to imply that Hispanics are not hard working. To the contrary, Hispanic immigrants are likely to be far more hard working than American workers in similar positions. The attitude toward work is different, however. To put it simply, one could say that Anglos "live to work," while Hispanics "work to live."

Integrity

The concept of integrity is defined very differently in the Anglo and Hispanic cultures. Anglos tend to see integrity as being on time, keeping promises, not breaking one's word. Hispanics would see integrity as loyalty to friends, being socially polite, honoring parents and eventually caring for them in their old age. Both definitions of integrity are biblical, but are nonetheless very different.

Anglos are offended when Hispanics arrive consistently late or do not arrive at all when they seemed to commit themselves. In a study of cross-cultural issues at Ohio State University in 1987, I learned that among Anglos in the U.S., one could arrive up to 20 minutes late without giving serious offense. After 20 minutes, a serious apology is required with some excuse. In Latin America, one can be up to one hour late without giving serious offense.

Hispanics often deal with issues indirectly in order to protect relationships. Anglos may misinterpret non-committal responses from Hispanics as firm commitments and later be offended when the person does not follow through. On the other hand, Hispanics often see Anglos as brutally direct and impolite.

While Anglos are offended by Hispanics arriving late, Hispanics are unable to fathom why Anglos do not care for their elderly parents. Hispanics would never consider putting their parents in "assisted care" facilities. One must ask oneself which cultural value is closer to Biblical values; being on time or caring for one's parents? There are many different ways to culturally define the concept of integrity.

Materialism

Anglo culture places a high value on materialism. It is standard for an Anglo family, when entertaining guests, to show them around the house. Most Hispanics would consider this a bit crass. Hispanics are not as inclined to draw attention to their "stuff."

If an Anglo is visiting a Hispanic household, he may be tempted to compliment some item in the house in an attempt to be friendly. An Anglo friend of mine once complimented a Colombian on his tie. Imagine his surprise when the Hispanic man removed his tie and handed it to the Anglo. Another Anglo was visiting in a Mexican household in Mexico and made the mistake of complimenting an original painting on the wall. He was shocked when they removed it from the wall and gave it to him. Anglo materialism implies that to affirm someone's property is to affirm the person. The Hispanic form of hospitality and value placed on relationships obligates Hispanics to give away material objects that a guest is impressed with in order to not offend the person.

Success

American culture is very success oriented. We love winners. In the United States, the word "loser" is a very derogatory term. The success ethic even infiltrates the mentality of the church. A successful church is a big church with expensive property. Most famous role models and heroes of US culture are successful athletes and movie stars. While Hispanics also value success, they would define success differently, and it is not a dominant value. American Anglos tend to see success as individual achievement, whereas Hispanics would view success more in terms of their family and social network.

Individualism

Americans are notoriously independent. It has been a national characteristic since our war of "independence" from England. Western writer, Louis L' Amour has popularized the image of the hard-fighting, self-reliant American cowboy in over 80 novels. Gary Cooper immortalized the image of the independent American who stands alone, in the Western classic, *High Noon*. John Wayne and Clint Eastwood continued the tradition.

I first noticed this difference when I was an exchange student at Los Andes University in Colombia. Most of my Colombian classmates preferred to study in groups rather than alone. They actually met after school to do their homework as a group! The idea was inconceivable to me as an Anglo. I would find trying to study with two or three other people a tremendous distraction.

This approach to individualism affects the way families function and rear their children. My wife and I have friends who are from Guatemala. They happen to have three daughters and a son in the same birth order and the same ages as we do. It has been interesting over the years to observe the differences in the way we raised our children.

Our Guatemalan friends always went everywhere with the entire family. Our family tended to scatter in several directions when our children reached the teen years. Guatemalans tend to be very protective of their children, particularly daughters. We chose to grant our teens a lot of independence from an early age, preferring to allow our children to learn through their mistakes rather than be "overly sheltered" (at least from our perspective).

Unfortunately, this individualistic mentality has deeply affected the Anglo church. Anglo Christians do not understand the concept of the corporate body of Christ. We have trouble understanding the concept of the family of God. We approach our spirituality as individual consumers.

Creativity - Entrepreneurialism

Anglo culture is amazingly innovative. One must spend time in another culture to fully appreciate the entrepreneurial spirit of the United States. We create, innovate, adjust, adapt and invent. Our culture rewards individual initiative and flexibility.

While many Hispanic immigrants are very resourceful in finding business or self employment opportunities, Hispanic culture in general does not encourage individual initiative in the same way U.S. culture does.

When we lived in Colombia, I frequently noticed a subtle streak of rigidity among store employees. Often, when ordering food in a restaurant, we ran into a stare of incredulity and the inability to "think out of the box" if we tried to ask them to hold or add a certain item. If the hamburger came with pickles and ketchup, then that was the way we had to eat it, like it or not.

For North American Anglos, this seems unnecessarily rigid. We fail to understand why an employee cannot take the initiative to adapt a product or service to fit our needs as the customer. The answer may be found in the authoritarianism of Hispanic culture. Employees do not feel the liberty to depart from the norms and policies of the company without permission of their supervisor. This would also explain why self-employed Hispanics display a greater capacity for creativity.

Reaching Out To Hispanics

What can the church in the U.S. do to begin to more effectively reach Hispanics living in the US? How can individual church members participate in reaching Hispanics for Christ? There are a number of steps that people can redemptively take to build bridges of communication between the local church and local Hispanics.