

PRACTICE

Machismo sustains health and illness beliefs of Mexican American men

Mary Sobralske, PhD, MSN, CFNP, CTN, RN (Nurse Practitioner)

Pediatric Orthopaedics, Shriners Hospitals for Children-Honolulu, Honolulu, Hawaii

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Correspondence

Mary Sobralske, PhD, MSN, CFNP, CTN, RN, Shriners Hospitals for Children-Honolulu, 1310 Punahou Street, Honolulu, HI 96826. Tel: 808 951 3723 (office), 808 348 9871 (home); Fax: 808 951 3708; E-mail: msobralske@shrinenet.org

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Abstract

Purpose: To inform nurse practitioners (NPs) about Mexican American men's health and illness beliefs and the ways in which these are influenced by their masculine identity and how they view themselves as men in their culture.

Data sources: The data sources used were based on a selected review of the literature about Mexican American men's health and illness beliefs and the concept of machismo. Several studies, including the author's study on Mexican American men's healthcare-seeking beliefs and behaviors and experience in providing primary health care to men across cultures, contributed new data.

Conclusions: The meaning of manhood in the Mexican American culture is critical in understanding how men perceive health and illness and what they do when they are ill. Machismo enhances men's awareness of their health because they have to be healthy to be good fathers, husbands, brothers, sons, workers, and community members. Pain and disability are motivating factors in finding ways to regain their health.

Implications for Practice: Men's health beliefs across cultures need further investigation by nurse researchers and NPs. How culture influences healthcare delivery to men should be better understood. If NPs are aware of men's views on masculinity, they are better prepared to understand and assist men in becoming more aware of their health status and to seek health care when appropriate.

Culture determines gender roles through a complexity of learned and socially transmitted values. A man's identity develops as he interacts within his culture and it is a long-term process (Mundigo, 1995). Masculine values, attitudes, and behaviors are mostly acquired through socialization and modeling (Kimmel & Messner, 2001; Sabo & Gordon, 1995). In many cultures, men strive every day to prove their qualifications to be recognized and esteemed as men, and men must perform specific and culturally determined rites or tasks to become masculine and prove their manhood in the eyes of other men and women (Hoga, Alcantara, & De Lima, 2001).

A man's identity in traditional Mexican American culture is deeply imbedded within the values of *machismo* (Villarruel, 1995). Machismo—literally manliness in English—is the Spanish word for a set of attitudes and identities associated with the Mexican concept of masculinity and manliness (Urrabazo, 1985). Men are expected to exhibit behaviors that are considered masculine or *macho*.

The ideal in traditional Mexican American culture dictates that men need to be strong, reliable, virile, intelligent, and wise. They are expected to exhibit valor, dignity, self-confidence, and a high degree of individuality outside the family and be knowledgeable regarding sexual matters (Caudle, 1993; Zoucha & Purnell, 2003). Urrabazo (1985) found that men want to be worthy of being good in society, be regarded as being honest, be considered compassionate, have integrity, and be indebted to no one. The ideals of tradition command that men are supposed to be proud, brave, courageous, devoted, loyal, honorable, the head of the family, the unquestioned authority figure, the authoritative caring parent, and the leader and protector of their families (Caudle, Reinert, 1986; Urrabazo; Zoucha, 1997).

Men have the primary responsibility for making major decisions for the family (Zoucha, 1997). Urrabazo (1985) explains that machismo is a complex phenomenon and concludes that men's identities and their ideas of

machismo vary. Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) believes that machismo endures because it is a way Mexican American families adapt to change and cope with everyday survival. Baca Zinn (2001) questioned whether the manner in how machismo is portrayed in the media and in the literature is unfair and inaccurate stereotyping of Mexican American men.

Many factors, such as household income, are creating changes in the traditional Mexican American family structure (Burk, Wieser, & Keegan, 1995; Mundigo, 1995; Sobralske, 2004). Gender roles are becoming more diverse, and families are more democratic than in the past. The patriarchal role of men in the family is being challenged, and new roles for men are emerging. Women are assuming more authority for decision making within and outside the family and are seeking opportunities for education and employment outside the home. Fathers are taking more responsibility for the care of their babies, like changing dirty diapers and feeding them bottles of formula. Adolescent boys are insisting that they and their girlfriends use contraception to prevent unwanted pregnancy. These changes may be a result of assimilation into the dominant American society or the acculturation of younger Mexican Americans adapting to societal changes within the Mexican American culture itself.

Men's health and illness beliefs

Culture and health are closely linked. How people respond to stress, aches, pains, and illness and then what they do about them are highly influenced by cultural beliefs and values, family traditions, social structure, and their worldview (Leininger, 2001). Health is culturally defined and valued, and it reflects the ability of individuals to perform their activities of daily living in a culturally meaningful and beneficial manner (Leininger). Illness is also culturally defined and encompasses much more than physical symptoms or pain. The concept of illness includes perceived problems with physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, and psychological states.

Understanding the meaning of manhood in the Mexican American culture is critical because a man's health beliefs and behaviors are a reflection of how he perceives himself in society. Machismo continues to exist and was found to be responsible for sustaining the health and illness beliefs of Mexican Americans (Sobralske, 2004). Even though traditional cultural values of Mexican American men may be changing as they adapt to mainstream society, inevitable changes in values do not necessarily change the basic meaning of being a man. This is not necessarily a negative attribute. In fact, machismo enhances men's awareness of their health because they have to be healthy to be good fathers, husbands, brothers, sons, and workers. Illness

impairs their ability to work and perform activities of daily living, so illness will eventually force them to find ways to regain their health so they can return to work and provide for their families.

Men do not necessarily have a strong belief in fatalism or a belief that they have little control over personal health outcomes (Sobralske, 2004). Talavera, Elder, and Velasquez (1997) speculate that Mexican Americans who feel they have control over life situations are generally optimistic about the future; they are not fatalistic. However, some researchers (e.g., Burk et al., 1995; Stasiak, 2001; Suarez & Ramirez, 1999) found fatalism to be a strong element of health and illness perceptions and actions.

Zoucha and Purnell (2003) suggest that men may not seek health care until they are incapacitated and unable to go about their activities of daily living. Men believe that illness occurs when they can no longer take care of their families (Sobralske, 2004).

Relying on faith and prayer is often a normal part of maintaining and regaining health. Elderly Mexican Americans hold the belief that everything is in the hands of God (Stasiak, 2001). Good health is seen as a gift from God (Zoucha, 1997).

Men may not want to admit that they believe they have a folk illness like *empacho* because it will mean taking a risk that the nurse practitioner (NP) may laugh at them. *Empacho* is described as an acute digestive distress caused by a complex interaction between social and psychological forces, such as eating against one's will or disliking a food dish (Baca Zinn, 2001). One experiences an upset stomach, believed to be caused by a ball of undigested or improperly cooked food clinging to the wall of the stomach (Ripley, 1986). This condition usually occurs when a man is stressed during or immediately after eating or from eating cold *tortillas*, for example (Marsh & Hentges, 1988). Men may be embarrassed about this belief, which may keep them from seeking allopathic health care. If NPs keep an open mind and are nonjudgmental about cultural and religious beliefs a patient may hold, they will avoid embarrassing the patient and themselves.

Despite busy healthcare facilities and having to rely on translators, NPs should assess health promotion behaviors at each healthcare visit. When presented with an opportunity to engage men in health care, assess as thoroughly as time will allow. It may be the only opportunity for intervention if a problem exists. This concept is congruent with the present oriented time concept of Mexican American culture.

Pain and disability are motivating factors in seeking health care and finding ways to regain health (Sobralske, 2004). Some men seek health care only when they have enough pain to keep them from working. Zoucha and Purnell (2003) claim that good health to many Mexican

Americans is to be free of pain, be able to work, and have a general feeling of well-being.

Culturally competent health care reflects the unique cultural values that patients have. It is care based on knowledge and interpersonal skills that enable NPs to understand, appreciate, and deliver health care effectively across cultures (Jackson & Lopez, 1999). Because the process of healthcare seeking is integral to health, to the perception of illness, and in deciding how to treat health problems, a clear understanding of what motivates men to seek help for their health, how they make decisions to seek health care, and for which problems they do seek help becomes imperative to culturally competent health care (Sobralske, 2004).

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