For My Mother: 
Latin@ Youth Letters on Family, Relationships and Violence

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on Family and Social Change

Crear cambio
Celebrar nuestras culturas
ALCANZAR nuestras metas
LIVE FREE of violence
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Background

There are many studies that document the effects of domestic violence on children and youth. Most studies look at stressors in the family, behavioral or emotional negative outcomes or barriers to success. There is, however, little research which pays attention to youths’ perspective and reality or that document the context of their lives beyond (and including) the violence that they have experienced.

The Latin@ Youth Letters study does that, serving as a window into the complex reality of Latin@ youth’s lives. The topics of pride, forgiveness, admiration, and true connection with their mothers are mixed with the realities of racism, violence, fear, and acculturation stress.

The Latin@ Youth Letters study is a launching point for policy makers, practitioners, family members and friends to truly understand the lived realities of Latin@ youth in our communities within the context of domestic violence.

Casa de Esperanza has chosen to use “@” in place of the masculine “o” when referring to people or things that are either gender neutral or both masculine and feminine in make-up. This decision reflects our commitment to gender inclusion and recognizes the important contributions that both men and women make to our communities.

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Current Study

The study involved 35 Latin@ adolescents in Minneapolis and Atlanta. Although only the Atlanta youth were participating in a sharing group for Latin@ youth from families in which domestic violence had occurred, several youth from the Minnesota group mentioned domestic violence in the letters to their mothers. Participants were asked to write a letter to their mother in English, Spanish, or Spanglish. They were also told that they didn’t need to include their name and that the letter would not be shared with their mother. The information was then coded by seven individuals who worked in a domestic violence intervention program, but who had not participated in the data collection portion of the study. Analysis of the themes was conducted by Dr. Julia Perilla, Director of the National Latin@ Research Center on Family and Social Change at Georgia State University (GSU). The study obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at GSU to make sure ethical standards were upheld.

Findings

There were three primary categories of experiences that emerged in the data analysis—family issues, community issues, and experiences with violence. These categories are explained here for a fuller understanding of the participant’s realities.

Family Issues

There were five sub-themes that emerged under the broad category of family. The following list highlights these themes and gives a brief explanation. Where possible, we have included direct quotes from the letters to ensure that the spirit of the letters was captured in this report.
Theme 1: Gratitude, Love and Admiration

Nearly all of the participants expressed gratitude, love and admiration for their mothers. Many wrote of the sacrifices their mothers made for them. Others wrote of their mothers’ positive role model or outlook on life. Finally others spoke of opportunities that their mothers created for them. A few participants attributed their positive relationship with their mothers to their relationship with God or involvement in a religious group.

…especially I want to thank you for supporting me with my education, always encouraging me to be the best in school. Not because you give me rewards if I get good grades, it’s because of the love and understanding you give me…

Theme 2: Secrets

The majority of participants talked about secrets that they kept from their mothers. Most youth gave concrete examples of secrets they had and expressed the reason that they kept the secrets from their mothers. Most reasons fell into two categories: they didn’t want to hurt their mother or they were afraid that she would be very angry. Topics such as drugs and alcohol, sexual experiences, and hanging out with inappropriate friends were some of the examples given by participants.

…I lied to you …over and over again, every time you brought up sex I really wanted to tell you, but you made that face, telling me you hoped I didn’t do that stuff until I was married… I couldn’t ruin your hope.
Latin@ youth also described a sense of their increasing independence here in the U.S.A. The majority of youth asked their mothers to respect this process and acknowledge the cultural clashes that may arise.

**Theme 3: Forgiveness**

The majority of participants expressed feelings about disappointing their mothers (potentially because of the secrets highlighted in Theme 2). Many then asked her for forgiveness, suggesting that they knew that they had caused her pain.

*Thank you for being my mom… I thank God for sending such a good mom like you… I wanted to say that I’m sorry for those times that I disrespect you and those times I talked back…*

**Theme 4: Lack of Trust**

Some youth wrote about a lack of trust—that their mothers did not trust them or that they had trust issues with their mothers because of their different generational experiences.

*You are the best mom I could ask for, but sometimes you make it hard for me to trust you because your way of thinking is way different than mine.*

Other youth indicated their lack of trust in their mother had to do with the violence they had witnessed or experienced in their home.

**Theme 5: Increasing Independence Clashes**

Latin@ youth also described a sense of their increasing independence here in the U.S.A. The majority of youth asked their mothers to respect this process and acknowledged the cultural clashes that may arise.

*…first thing I want to say is that I love you and I’ll always love you no matter what…I love being at home with the family but sometimes I need space. I’ve tried talking to you about my teen life but you guys as adults just don’t understand us… There’s no trust between us… I want to tell you all my secrets and feel loved by my mom.*

Some participants also reported frustration of being placed in a “parenting” role; taking care of younger siblings.
Community Issues

There were two sub-themes captured in this category—being Latin@ and immigration.

Theme 1: Being Latin@

The vast majority of participants wrote about their experience being Latin@ in the U.S.A. Some participants wrote about their sense of pride while others wrote negative feelings. These negative comments were usually a reflection of how other people saw the Latin@ community and how those views reflected negatively on them as individuals.

Throughout my life you have inspired me to be a perfect gentleman by being a good Mexican boy.

…I am Mexican and very little Italian. I wish I was fully Italian. Latinos just creep me out and make me feel ashamed of being Latina. Latinos are always in the news for killing, robbing, rape, crossing the border, and drugs. Another thing they make no effort of learning English or becoming citizens. I’m so grateful that I was born here and that you and dad are both citizens...

Moreover, participants expressed frustration, hurt, pain, and past negative experiences surrounding their ethnic identity. Some also reported negative views on other racial and ethnic groups.

Theme 2: Immigration

Some participants talked about immigration issues and how salient they are in the youths’ lives. The youth who talked about immigration expressed fear as well as confusion for the future.

Most of my reasons are mainly about other Hispanics giving us a bad image. I hate it when I get called a Mexican or illegal because they always have the worst jobs. Most of them are in factories and gardeners…I don’t like…when illegals just come here or bring their children to the public schools and they slack off or don’t ever graduate. They waste tax money… end up going to prison...
Exposure to Violence

Few participants brought up the issue of violence and their exposure to violence, even though the Atlanta group was specifically for youth exposed to domestic violence. This suggests that violence may not be the most salient issue for Latin@ youth. Of those who wrote about violence, some talked about witnessing their mother and her partner.

Thank you for making the decision of getting out of the house, where my dad was supposed to live, because I was getting tired of you two fighting about things that were stupid. Now that it’s only the three of us living together, I know that we don’t have enough money to buy things that we want, but the most important thing is that we are happy together y con la bendición de Dios vamos a estar juntos siempre… [and with God’s blessing, we are going to be always together…]

Others talked about their own exposure to violence at a young age, while still others talked of violence within the context of gang involvement, drug and alcohol activity, and stealing.

Conclusion

*For My Mother: Latin@ Youth Letters on Family, Relationships, and Violence* is a unique research study because it provides a glimpse into the lives of Latin@ adolescents from their own perspective. The youth’s words—through hand written letters to their mothers—show the complex reality of their everyday life. Even though many of the youth were exposed to domestic violence, the study shows that it is only one aspect of their experiences, and that other issues (both positive and negative) may be more salient in their lives. This study highlights the complexities in the world of Latin@ youth by listening to their lived realities and highlighting aspect that are not widely studied or talked about in the field of domestic violence research.
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National Latin@ Network  
for Healthy Families and Communities

The National Latin@ Network for Healthy Families and Communities is a project of Casa de Esperanza, an organization that has pioneered efforts to create and implement culturally and linguistically relevant support and advocacy for Latinas and their families for over 30 years. The project is an official partner of the U.S. Office on Violence Against Women and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that uses public policy, training and research to enhance the field’s capacity to work effectively with Latinas experiencing domestic violence. Over the past year, the National Latin@ Network led efforts to reauthorize the Violence Against Women Act; trained 600 organizations in 48 states and 4 countries; and conducted a national survey to identify barriers to support for Latinas. To learn more, visit www.nationallatinonetwork.org.

National Latin@ Research Center  
on Family and Social Change

The National Latin@ Research Center on Family and Social Change is the research division of the National Latin@ Network, which engages Latin@ community members to generate accurate, relevant, valid, and reliable research using unique and cutting-edge approaches. The research center is directed by Dr. Julia Perilla, a clinical community psychologist and Associate Professor at Georgia State University and is guided by an advisory council of nationally recognized researchers and academics. As one of the cornerstones of the National Latin@ Network for Healthy Families and Communities, the research center seeks to increase academic and practitioners’ knowledge about Latin@ communities’ experiences in the U.S.A. and promote the training and mentoring of Latin@ researchers.

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