

Opinion: What social work students should know about working with Latinx clients

October 14, 2025 11:00 AM Dr. Audrey Hang Hai
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As social workers, we're trained to see people in their environments. We learn to ask: What social and cultural forces shape this person's life? What barriers do they face? But here's what often gets lost in our textbooks and case studies—we spend so much time cataloging problems that we forget to look for strengths.

During Hispanic Heritage Month, I want to flip that script. Yes, Latinx communities face real disparities— economic inequality, healthcare access issues, discrimination. You'll read plenty about those challenges in your courses, and you should. But if that's *all* you see when a Latinx client walks into your office, you're missing the whole picture.

Let me tell you about something researchers call the "Hispanic health paradox." Despite facing lower socioeconomic status on average, Latinx people in the U.S. actually have longer life expectancies and better health outcomes than non-Hispanic White and Black people. How? The answer is not yet fully settled, but cultural protective factors likely play a significant role. These aren't just interesting academic observations. They're resources you can recognize and work with in practice.

Familism is probably the most important concept to understand. This isn't just "family is important." It's a deeply held value system that emphasizes loyalty, interconnectedness, and mutual support across immediate and extended family networks. Behaviorally, it manifests as shared living arrangements, pooled finances, collective child-rearing, and regular daily contact. Research shows that familism offers protection against depression, suicide, substance use, and even physical health problems. It functions as a stress buffer: when life gets hard, high familism combined with high stress actually correlates with better self-esteem and health outcomes.

But there's a nuance here: familism isn't universally protective. In families with low cohesion, it may not help. It also may not buffer against the negative impacts of discrimination or acculturation stress. So instead of making assumptions, ask your clients about their family relationships. Are they a source of strength or stress? Both?

In Latinx populations, support often extends beyond family to include the broader community, such as neighbors, friends, and cultural institutions. **Personalismo**—the practice of warm, respectful relationships even with acquaintances— creates wider safety nets. Informal mutual aid includes things like meal sharing, childcare

exchanges, and pooling money for weddings or funerals. These aren't signs of financial instability. They're sophisticated systems of reciprocity that distribute burden across networks.

Spirituality also deserves special attention. For many Latinx clients, faith isn't separate. It's woven into daily life through Catholic traditions, indigenous beliefs, and communal activities. During difficult times, spirituality offers comfort, reduces stress, and sustains hope. Shared religious practices also strengthen community bonds and affirm cultural identity, thereby buffering against acculturation stress and discrimination.

So, what does this mean for you as emerging social work practitioners? Stop defaulting to deficit-based thinking. When you assess a client, you're not just identifying problems to fix; you're also identifying existing strengths to leverage. Does your client have strong family ties? That's a resource for your intervention plan. Are they connected to a faith community? That's social capital. Do they participate in neighborhood networks? That's resilience already in action.

The people-in-environment perspective we all learn isn't just about understanding barriers. It's about seeing the full ecosystem, including the protective cultural factors that have sustained communities for generations. Your Latinx clients aren't just surviving despite their culture. Often, they're thriving because of it.

[Dr. Audrey Hai](#) is an Assistant Professor at Tulane University School of Social Work. As an immigrant and woman of color, she has witnessed firsthand the devastating impact of pervasive substance use in marginalized communities. Dr. Hai is dedicated to developing culturally appropriate and effective interventions to interrupt this cycle. She has developed a research program that bridges the areas of health disparities, intervention science, digital health innovation, epidemiology, and spiritual diversity. One of Dr. Hai's current research projects, funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, targets health disparities among Latinx young adults with alcohol use disorder. The project aims to transform the underutilized evidence-based Twelve-Step Facilitation intervention into a culturally appropriate, accessible, and scalable smartphone app-based solution.