



GENDER AND CULTURE

GENDER AND CARETAKING

EARLY MESSAGES THAT IMPACT SELF-IMAGE & CULTURAL STYLE

CWW and women from other cultural groups were asked to share messages they heard most from their mothers when they were growing up. The most frequent response from CWW is, "Be caring [of everyone]" and, "Be nice and don't hurt anybody's feelings, especially Mom's". The number one message African American women report having heard growing up is, "Be strong; be self reliant." Obedient/rule governed women who grew up with authoritarian parents also report receiving similar messages of "self-reliance" (e.g., German Baptists) but, unlike African Americans, within an ascribed role that emphasized duty and obedience over subjectivity and agency.

For example, one African American woman reported that when she got married and left Mississippi after high school, her mother warned her, "You're grown now; you can't come running home." A woman from St. Louis was advised, "Make sure that it is your name that is on the lease, because you have to rely on yourself." The second message that African American women heard most frequently was, "Don't let anyone disrespect you."

Traditional role-oriented Latinas report hearing, "A woman is good if she is submissive. She is supposed to serve others. Nobody wants a woman who is for herself; you have to learn to cook and sew and clean house." One traditional Mexican woman said, "The thing that I hear my mother saying in my head is: 'Always make fresh tortillas'". In another instance, a former Latina migrant worker reported having asked her mother if she could work inside spraying vegetables instead of outside in the hot sun. Her mother said, "Other people know better what is best for you."

COMPARATIVE SELF-ESTEEM

The American Association of University Women tracked a group of African American, Latina, and white (non-Hispanic) girls from grade school through high school and asked them at each level, "Do you like yourself just the way you are?" In grade school the self-esteem of Latinas was the highest



(68%) of the three groups followed by African American girls (65%) and then White girls (58%). Although the self esteem of all girls dropped in high school, in high school, the African American girls had the highest self confidence/self esteem of the three groups (58%), followed by White (non-Hispanic) girls (45%); Latina responses reflected the greatest drop in self esteem/self confidence (32%).⁷

Although the data was not accompanied by an analysis, I would suggest that the high school responses reflect the degree to which agency is encouraged or allowed within each group of young women. African American socialization (messages to be strong, be self reliant) encourage agency. White girl people-pleasing undermines agency. For Latinas, it is people pleasing that undermines agency accompanied by pressures to satisfy traditional role requirements, and being subjected to increased levels of parental control stemming from the father's responsibility to protect the virginity of daughters.

7 AAUW Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America (1991) Also, Growing Smart: What's Working for Girls in School (1995)

NATURE OF CARETAKING

Women in every culture care about their mothers but the nature of caretaking is different. White mainstream women are rewarded and punished on the basis of how nice they are and how caring and attuned they are to mother's feelings, rather than, as with ethnic white women and women of color, how respectful and obedient they are regarding their mother's behavioral expectations, or how respectable they make their mothers/family look in the wider community.

African American women, for example, also receive messages that they should be caretakers, but the nature of the care-taking is situational and concrete, rather than emotional. On a day to day basis, African American women deal more directly with matters that affect the physical wellbeing of others, saving emotional caretaking for more dire situations.¹⁰ The different focus of caretaking: feelings vs. physical needs, also leads to different levels of preoccupation. The white women emphasis on feelings leads to a constant monitoring of other people's feeling states to ensure their emotional well being. So it is not surprising that a common topic of white woman gossip is who is or is not being caring and nice. In contrast, parental responsibility for African Americans is being attentive to other people's



physical needs when the need presents itself. It is preoccupying within a set time frame, but is not a constant (cultural) mindset. So, it is also not surprising that for African American women what is important and upfront is not caring for other people's feelings and being nice, but being strong and "on your game".

Among authoritarian women generally, behavior is more the focus than feelings. So it should come as no surprise that first generation Russian American women, parented by authoritarian mothers, should only discover the focus placed upon feelings, or interior states of being, upon arrival to the U.S. For example, when our Russian colleague, Tatyana Fertelmeyster, began to study clinical counseling, it shocked her that there actually was such a subject as an interior self that could be doing things in the present that were caused by behaviors in the past. Up until that point, she did things because she had to for her survival and that of the family. This was a new concept of feelings and interiority. I asked her if, in Russia, little girls would say, "You hurt my feelings". She replied: "Are you kidding? Maybe they would say to someone else that so and so hurt them, but it wouldn't be feelings." The monitoring and repairing of feeling states is distinctively a category of mainstream U.S. white women. African American girls also do not acknowledge hurt feelings. For Asian women, hurt feelings are connected to shame, and for Latinas, to shame, suppressed anger and resignation.

These patterns express themselves in the different ways parents discipline their children. At one women's shelter a woman from Sweden and an African American woman were discussing what they do when their children refuse to put on their seatbelts. The woman from Sweden said, "I tell my daughter, if she doesn't put on her seatbelt, we can't go to the store, and then we won't have any dinner when Daddy gets home from work." The African American woman said, "Oh, no, I tell my kids, 'Then get out of the car!'" The Swedish mother used guilt based on consideration of other people's feelings, while the African American woman threatened abandonment as a result of disobedience.

8 Diaz-Guerrero, R. 1975. *Psychology of the Mexican*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

9 —. 1987. "Historical Sociocultural Premises and Ethnic Socialization," in *Children's Ethnic Socialization: Pluralism and Development*. Edited by J. S. Phinney, Rotheram, M.J. Newbury Park: Sage.

10 See the discussion (pp.240ff) in Carothers, S. C. 1990. "Catching Sense: Learning from Our Mothers to be Black and Female," in *Uncertain Terms: Negotiating Gender in American Culture*. Edited by F. Ginsburg, Tsing, A.L., pp. 232-47. Boston: Beacon.



HISPANIC BEHAVIOR -TRUST

LATINAS -- RECOGNITION AND TRUST

Latina gossip follows a pattern similar to that of white women, except that Latinas seem to gossip even more than white women do. Perhaps the more conflict avoidant a culture is, the more it relies upon gossip as a way to deal with issues and align relationships. A common gossip theme of Latinas in the workplace (Hispanics, generally) is over recognition and parity (or lack thereof). For example, at a week-long training program in Southern California Latinos were unhappy with the representation of the Latino segment which began the second day of the program. This unhappiness was registered quickly with the resident Hispanic diversity focal who, acting as the authorized and designated broker, brought the matter up to those of us in charge of the program. At issue was a) the amount of information that was covered and b) the amount of time given to the program relative to the amount of time that had been given to the African American segment the day before. The matter of representation and proportionality - respect or dignidad is the ultimate issue-- was especially strong because the program was being done in Southern California which, demographically, is heavily, if not preponderantly, Hispanic, and the considerable number of Hispanic participants in the program. Culturally relevant was the collective way the matter was handled among Hispanics themselves and then, through a broker or mediator, communicated to those in charge. Also relevant was the difficulty in trying to repair the damage after the fact. At issue were not only matters of proportional representation -we were ultimately able later to create a better program balance there—but residual matters of hurt pride and anger that the group felt over having been initially disrespected, which, no matter what we tried to do afterwards, we were not entirely able to dispel.

Another gossip theme revolves around trust. Deep levels of trust develop among insiders, often by creating personal relationships outside of the workplace. Insiders of a clique spend time creating solidarity and getting to know each other's families. Latina women have their "chismes" or gossip. Sometimes whispering even happens in the presence of others. Covering one's mouth with fingertips is sometimes considered "private". For Latinas, it is not considered rude to do this in the presence of



others. One Latina talked about connecting with another within the company. She said, “We kept each other sane. In order to survive within the company, and try to get ahead, we would process collectively, going over data points and information, trying to figure out white people. She had an amazing work ethic. She was also very nurturing, taking care of both people and things. Once you have loyalty with her, she is fiercely loyal!”

2 Harrison, P. C. 1972. *The Drama of Nommo*. New York: Grove.

3 Kochman, T. 1981. *Black and White Styles in Conflict*: The University of Chicago Press.

4 Ibid.