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Communicating Across Cultures With People From Latin America

Contributors: Dianne Hofner Saphiere

Editors: Janet M. Bennett

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Latin America is one of the world's most diverse regions. It includes more than 600 million people, hundreds of languages and ethnicities, a centuries-long legacy of colonialism, huge socioeconomic disparities, and a diversity of histories, geographies, and political systems. How people from Latin America communicate, or how best to communicate with them, obviously depends very much on the context.

With approximately 10% of the world's population, a gross domestic product of more than US\$5 trillion, and Brazil and Mexico forecast to be two of the world's top five economies by the middle of the 21st century, Latin America is an important global region. Its music, literature, visual art, cooking, and dance are appreciated worldwide with UNESCO naming traditional Mexican food as the first world heritage cuisine in 2010.

This entry provides a brief summary of the area's history and demographics as context for understanding Latin Americans, some of the core values informing patterns of communication, and normative communication styles in various contexts.

Brief Demographic and Historical Overview

Latin America is a term used frequently but often defined in various ways. It most commonly denotes the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking countries of the Americas, ranging from Mexico to the southern tip of Chile, as well as the Caribbean: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico (technically, a territory of the United States), Uruguay, and Venezuela.

Latin America has been populated for more than 30,000 years and was home to very advanced civilizations, including the Aztec (Mexico), Inca (Peru), and Maya (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Mexico). In 1494, the Treaty of Tordesillas ceded most of the area that is now Brazil to Portugal and the remaining portions of Central and South America to Spain. The French, the Dutch, and the English quickly followed the Spanish and the Portuguese. Over the next 400 years, the indigenous population of

the Western Hemisphere declined 96% (from 50 million to 1.8 million), mostly due to epidemic diseases, such as smallpox and measles, brought by the Europeans.

Nearly 80% of the population of the region claims some European ancestry (primarily Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and German), though the vast majority are of mixed race. Fifty million Latin Americans belong to one of the region's 600 indigenous groups, which constitute 40% of the rural population and 13% of the total population in the region. Indigenous populations are especially large in Peru, Mexico, Guatemala, Bolivia, and Ecuador, with these five countries having 90% of the region's indigenous groups. In some coastal areas, African ancestry is prevalent, particularly in Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Colombia, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, and Ecuador. People of Asian ancestry are also found throughout Latin America; they make up 5% of the Peruvian population, and Brazil is home to the largest group of Japanese descendants outside Japan.

Sixty percent of the area's population speak Spanish, which is different from Castilian Spanish. Vocabulary varies by country and region, and there are many colloquial or slang terms as well. The use of the formal (and sometimes informal) *usted* versus the informal *tu*, use of *vosotros* versus *ustedes*, and use of *vos* in Argentina and some other areas illustrate the variations in pronoun usage throughout Latin America. A sentence may be grammatically correct in Argentina but not in Colombia, for example. It is usually fairly easy for a Latin American to tell where a fellow Latin American comes from by the person's accent.

Thirty-four percent of Latin Americans speak Portuguese, almost exclusively in the region's largest country, Brazil. Brazilian Portuguese is distinct from that of Portugal and has regional variations as well. The remaining 6% of Latin Americans speak [p. 85 ↓] a variety of other languages, including 7 million who speak the indigenous Southern Quechua. At the time of the European conquest, the region was home to thousands of indigenous languages, and hundreds are still spoken to this day.

European colonizers brought African slaves and introduced a racial and socioeconomic caste system in Latin America. While the official *casta* system died out in the 18th century, its effects are felt to this day: According to the United Nations, Latin America is the most socially unequal region in the world. Higher socioeconomic status tends to

correlate with lighter skin color, and darker skin with poverty, lack of opportunity, and low social status. According to the World Bank, the richest 10% of the population earn 48% of the region's income, while the poorest 10% earn less than 2%. The region has a lengthy history of basing economic prosperity on the export of its rich natural resources, including minerals and hydrocarbons.

Most of Latin America gained independence by the early 19th century, following the models of revolution in the United States and France, though a few colonies remain at the time of writing. Initial independence of countries in the region was followed by multiple wars and conflicts, dividing and redividing territory. It is important to note that while outsiders, and even insiders, may refer to the region collectively as *Latin America*, many of these nations have, at various times, been at war internally or with each other, and like any neighbors, they frequently hold prejudices against one another.

The end of the 20th century saw industrialization and nationalization throughout the region, followed by privatization, and political and class struggle. Much of Latin America has suffered from the drug war and arms trade, both involving its northern neighbor, the United States, and guerrilla fighters have been an internal issue in Colombia and Mexico. The territory is home to a diversity of political systems, from rising democracies to dictatorships. The range and variety of geographies, climates, and economies is stunning. The economy of Brazil, at the time of writing, is ranked sixth in the world, and that of Mexico is ranked 13th. There are numerous innovative, noteworthy projects aimed at promoting regional unity, political coordination, and trade liberalization within the hemisphere (e.g., North American Free Trade Agreement [NAFTA], Common Market of the South [Mercado Común del Sur, MERCOSUR], Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas [ALBA], Andean Community [Comunidad Andina, CAN], Community of Latin American and Caribbean States [CELAC], Integrated Latin American Market [Mercado Integrado Latinoamericano, MILA], Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership [TTIP], and Union of South American Nations [Unión de Naciones Suramericanas, NASUR]). Chile has led the way in signing free trade agreements with countries worldwide, and others are quickly following suit.

Latin America has assumed a key leadership role on the world stage in exploring innovative solutions for restructuring societal inequity, promoting responsible development, and the sustainable use of natural resources. Many of these efforts

are based on popular, direct-democratic movements, including indigenous social movements. Eleven nations include multiculturalism and multilingualism in their constitutions, and an additional four recognize indigenous rights. In 2008, Ecuador became the first country in the world to give constitutional rights to Nature, and the nation has forged novel plans with the United Nations Development Program to protect its biodiversity.

In the early 21st century, 70% of Latin Americans claim to be Roman Catholic, with Protestantism on the rise. There is a growing middle class and an increasingly educated population; women occupy 35% of decision-making positions; and there is a gay rights revolution. Although the society is aging like others worldwide, overall, it is a young population, with 53% of Latin Americans of working age. There are progressive programs to break the cycle of poverty, and the region's gross domestic product is forecast to reach US\$15 trillion by 2025. The United Nations Economic Commission predicts that by 2015 China will overtake the European Union as Latin America's second largest trading partner.

Understanding something about the region's history and social reality is a prerequisite to establishing credibility in the eyes of Latin American friends and colleagues, and thus to effective communication.

Core Values Informing Communication Styles

Values are those abstract concepts that society (via families, schools, spiritual traditions, clubs) teaches [p. 86 ↓] are right or wrong; they tend to motivate behavior. Thus, a basic understanding of the core values of a society can help one learn how to communicate most effectively with members of that society. Remember that Latin America consists of very diverse nations and hundreds of millions of people. Each person is unique, and regional values should be used to stimulate observation, thinking, and discussion, not to stereotype.

One of the predominant values in Latin America is *relationship*. Family and friends bring meaning and joy to life. Extended families and good friends tend to be those who are trusted and relied on to do a good job. One may do something for the good of the family rather than for one's own personal benefit. It is wise to have a personal connection (e.g., *palanca* in Mexico) or an introduction by a known person when trying to accomplish a goal (e.g., find a job, enter a business contract). People generally want to get to know one another before working together; tasks are easier if there is a trusting relationship. Latin Americans tend to respect relationships so much that they may be reticent to implement change. It may not make sense to reassign people and break up a functioning team or to hire an outsider when an insider will know all the players and how to influence them. It is important to help others who are less fortunate (*paletearse* in Chile) or, at a minimum, to be perceived as doing so.

This respect for the people in one's circle of family, friends, and colleagues means that time will often be taken for a conversation, even though someone with an appointment may be waiting. It also means that Latin Americans frequently multitask; for example, they may talk on the phone, or someone else may be in the room while they are serving someone. Frequent interruptions during meetings or social events are common and expected, and often are necessary to express one's point of view or get involved in a conversation. Failure to interrupt or actively engage in a conversation may be perceived as a lack of interest in the topic or lack of empathy. This is particularly true in social events with people with whom some trust has been established. In more hierarchical societies in the region (Colombia, Ecuador), however, interrupting during meetings may be perceived as impolite.

Partly out of this concern for people and their feelings, tasks are generally allotted the time needed to get them done. There is not generally the sense of urgency or the deadlines that one might experience in some other parts of the world but, rather, a traditional *ahorita* ("right now") mentality that typifies a fatalistic, *ni modo, what is meant to be will be* approach to life. The present moment is to be savored, the past is valued, and the future is unknown and uncontrollable. Punctuality may be valued, but relationships, the time to talk, and peace of mind tend to be valued more. Generally, stress about getting something done on time, and imposing that stress on others, is seen negatively. Planning can be seen by some as tempting fate, as taking on the role of God. Frequently, even if plans are made, they are not followed, being trumped by

a desire to act or a regard for relationship or tradition. There is usually a respect for spontaneity, resourcefulness, and improvisation: Those who are able to juggle last-minute schedule changes or adjust to a lack of resources are highly sought after. *Street smarts*, knowing by whom and how to get something done, tend to be valued, as is *jeitinho* (Brazil) or *pillería* (Chile), meaning the creativity and ingenuity to know how to circumvent the bureaucracy and find alternative ways to achieve one's goals.

Latin Americans tend to value hard work and sacrifice for a better future and the good of the family. Given the region's history and economic challenges, people are generally predisposed to working long hours and feel the responsibility and pressure to study or work hard. They also commonly greet life with a positive outlook, looking on the bright side, so to speak. Life is to be enjoyed no matter how difficult the journey is. There is a desire for a job, a family, a set of friends, and a lifestyle in which one can *sentirse a gusto* ("feel good about things"). If one feels comfortable, communication flows much more openly. Successful people tend to be likeable, *simpático*, and get along well with others. To *caer bien* ("be likable") is one of the highest compliments. Jokes, laughter, and compliments are heard frequently in both social and work venues. Irony and sarcasm are well received in some countries and very risky in others. Most Latin Americans demonstrate very generous hospitality; everyone is included in a party, for example, and they are usually happy to contribute whatever they can in the way of food, drink, music, and [p. 87 ↓] merriment. Closely related is the importance of *pride* and *face* in Latin American society, *boa imagem* in Brazil and *no hacer el oso* in Colombia. While treatment of subordinates may occasionally shock those from more egalitarian societies, care is generally taken to maintain the self-esteem of colleagues and superiors.

In most of Latin America, there is definite deference to superiors, and therefore, assertively advocating ideas to those higher up in the hierarchy is not common; subordinates tend to say what the boss wants to hear. This, of course, varies by region, social status, educational level, and context. In Argentina, for example, subordinates tend to question their superiors and express disagreement more openly, and they may view Mexicans or Chileans as *sometidos* or *sumisos* ("apple polishers" or "yes-men"). The region is huge, and there are many variations, so context must be considered first and foremost.

Mixing socially between the various socioeconomic levels tends to be awkward for everyone involved. Status is a very important feature of Latin American society; one's house, car, and clothing tend to indicate one's social stature, and an *educated* person is one who is well-spoken and well-groomed and demonstrates polite manners. Status tends to be based on one's birth and upbringing and the university one attended, though there are more egalitarian areas (Argentina, Uruguay, some cities in Brazil) and many variations within the region.

Throughout Latin America, there tends to be a great pride in history and tradition. Showing a basic knowledge of, or interest in, the local music, dance, literature, poetry, and visual art and in traditional or regional dishes or handicrafts can go a long way in helping establish rapport. However, it is worth mentioning that despite the fact that Latin American nations rank low on Geert Hofstede's Individualism index, there tends to be a very strong sense of individualism and self-protectiveness, to the point that it may seem that people are not considerate of others. In fact, they assume that each person will take care of himself or herself; there tends to be general pessimism about help coming from the state or an organization. Due to high levels of corruption in some areas of the region, there may be a level of doubt about other people's honesty, competence, and reliability.

Latin American individualism is frequently described in Spanish and Portuguese literature (e.g., by Germán Puyana in *¿Cómo somos? Los colombianos*) and may be partially explained by the Globe study's *group collectivism versus institutional collectivism*. The value of *self* counters the tendency toward indirect communication, as many Latin Americans will strongly and emotionally defend their opinions and ways of doing things, especially among equals and those they trust, as knowledge and experience are believed to give people that right. The huge inequities in wealth and power also motivate people to believe that personal dignity and pride may be the only thing, in the end, that they have control over. Latin Americans can demonstrate incredible wherewithal, retaining their composure in the face of untenable circumstances.

Communication Styles

Communication style refers to the culturally influenced patterns of verbal and nonverbal behavior with which people prefer to communicate in specific situations. In Latin America, communication tends to be *high context*, a term coined by E. T. Hall to indicate that meaning resides more in the interaction itself and the elements surrounding it (the body language, the placement of furniture, who is present, etc.) than in the words that are used. A characteristic of this style is that both the listener and the speaker are responsible for communication, rather than just the speaker. Explanation style in the region tends to be deductive, proceeding from the general to the specific.

It is often said that Latin Americans are indirect communicators, though they can also be surprisingly direct. For example, it is quite rare, other than for a joke, to hear someone say “no.” They may agree to attend an event and then just not show up, rather than sharing the uncomfortable truth that they have another engagement. Maintaining good feelings can thus take precedence over verbal truthfulness. Such indirect communication is more prevalent in hierarchical situations or those in which the parties don’t know each other, though it also occurs among trusted friends when the obligation is just too heavy or the pull in opposite directions too strong. Despite this indirectness, when there is closeness and trust in the relationship, [p. 88 ↓] frankness is very common in most areas of Latin America. To an outside observer, such directness may seem insulting, abrasive, or rude.

Most of Latin America uses an affable communication style: cordial, informal, and quick humored. Official interactions (e.g., business, government, school interviews) are, of course, more formal. Verbal eloquence is generally equated with intelligence; it is expected that one will use extensive description and repetition to make one’s point. As with other traits, this varies by country and region. An Argentine might view a Peruvian as *chamuyo* (“one who drones on or exaggerates”). Similarly, young Argentine women may be cautioned, “ *no te dejes enredar por esos hombres* ” (“Don’t be fooled by the beautiful things the young men may tell you”). Being well-read and having good manners also communicate one’s intelligence and breeding.

Latin American thought patterns and reasoning styles tend to be highly systemic; there is a belief that almost everything is related to everything else. Thus, linear, compartmentalized thinking may be perceived as naive and brevity as hiding something. Speaking briefly by outlining the essentials and focusing on one thing at a time will feel very slow and pedantic to most Latin Americans, as they will most likely already be thinking several steps ahead. Explaining in detail the process used to arrive at one's conclusions, the *how* rather than the *what*, will generally earn credibility. Foreigners may accuse Latin Americans of lacking logic, objectivity, focus, or clarity, when they may just be using a reasoning style different from that to which their accusers are accustomed. It is wise to check and confirm meaning in various ways with a variety of people when specificity is needed.

Animated facial expressions, intonation, and hand gestures, as well as touching to demonstrate *cariño* or interpersonal warmth, are very common. Communication in Latin America is often called a contact sport: hugging, kissing, touching the other's arm or hand, and patting someone on the back are all part of the process. Touching within the same gender is more frequent than across genders, though both are common. Interpersonal distance tends to be fairly close as touching is so common. Those who do not use a personable communication style or who stand or sit at a distance may be perceived as cold, aloof, or bossy. Enthusiasm, energy, and exaggeration are common. Do not expect that such communication ensures follow-through; neither should one assume that floweriness indicates insincerity.

It is generally assumed that women and men are different, that they enjoy different things and have different talents. Women and men tend to be valued for their gender traits, a reality that can feel quite sexist to people from societies with less gender differentiation. Many Latin American businesswomen may like to be perceived as powerful, capable, *and* sexy, for example. Social occasions frequently become segregated by gender, with women talking to women and men to men, though this is not as common in Brazil and some other areas of the region.

The ability to verbally hold someone's attention or to keep a group engaged is highly valued, much more so than one's ability to listen. In typical Latin American conversation, particularly in Brazil, interruptions are frequent. In most places in Latin America, it is the norm in both Spanish and Portuguese to speak over the last few words of what

someone else is saying when turn taking in a conversation. An exception to this is Chile, where interruptions are often considered impolite. The volume of communication may be louder and more animated than outsiders are accustomed to, and the conversational pace is rapid in most areas of the region. Persuasion style is normally based on relationship or likability. If one wants service, it is generally in one's best interest to approach the service provider affably and establish a basic rapport.

Trust is built through human connection, which in Latin America includes the importance of sharing meals and drinking and dancing together. It's best to spend mealtimes simply getting to know one another, avoiding talking about money, politics, or business. Common topics of conversation include family and mutual friends or shared experiences, travel, leisure, sports (*futbol*, or "soccer," is extremely popular), holidays, current events, wine, and food. In some cases, one needs to be mentally prepared for drinking and ribald humor while socializing. Throughout most of Latin America, the knife and fork are used in the European fashion, and the hands are kept on the table while eating, with exceptions, of course.

[p. 89 ↓] Religious beliefs may be expressed much more frequently than outsiders may be accustomed to. The inquiry "How are you today?" may be answered with "Thanks to God, all is well!" The response to "I'll see you next week" may be "God willing!" Such expressions and mind-sets can probably be traced back to Islam and the Moorish influence in Spain, and to this day, they remain common exchanges in many parts of the region. In addition, Latin America is home to many folk remedies and social practices that might be perceived as superstitions to those who don't share them. This is particularly true among the lower socioeconomic classes.

Many Latin Americans pride themselves on their grooming and may dress more formally, or at least more fashionably, and be more *put together* than some foreigners may be accustomed to. Suits are common in cities and *guayaberas* in the tropics; shorts are rarely appropriate, at even the most informal professional gatherings. A good haircut, polished shoes, a high-quality pen and notebook, a manicure and pedicure, all communicate professionalism and self-respect.

Titles are frequently used, even among close colleagues: *licenciado* (someone with a bachelor's degree in law), *ingeniero* (engineer), or *doctor* (a term of respect not limited

to those with doctoral degrees), for example. However, there are exceptions to this. In Argentina and Brazil, people tend to dislike it when others ask to be addressed by their title, or even as *señor* or *señora*, feeling it's an attempt to flaunt power or status. By contrast, in Mexico, when asking someone to repeat what another has just said, a person might say “*Mande ?*” (“What is your command?”). Similarly, they might refer to themselves as *tu servidor* (“your servant”). To those from a more egalitarian society, such expressions may be felt as submissive, false, or deceptive.

In the work environment, it is important to set clear targets and expectations, explain accountability, and provide support, all in a cordial manner. Critical feedback may not be well received, so creativity and closeness are required for successful mentoring. Impulsiveness may override planning, and deadlines are often seen as initial estimates; there is usually more of a focus on process than on outcome. It can be wise to harness these facts to one's advantage rather than spend time and energy attempting to change them. Outsiders learn to expect delays; so one can demonstrate courtesy when dealing with them. Constant tracking of projects (what some outsiders may view as micromanagement) is often needed, whether for a home improvement project with a vendor or a project at work. Lack of communication tends to indicate that a project is not a priority; if an individual doesn't stay in frequent contact, the odds are the job will not get finished.

The key to successful communication is to treat one's Latin American friends and colleagues as individuals who are influenced by their multiple cultures, nationality, age, gender, ethnicity, professional training, organizational culture, and so on. Knowledge about the region should be used to inform, never to stereotype. As with any region in the world, there are a variety of images and ideas people may hold about Latin America, and for each of them, there is often a contrasting reality to consider. For example, consider the following:

- Latin America is not just a society with two social classes, the extremely wealthy and the terribly poor. In most areas of the region, there is also a quickly growing and progressively vibrant middle class.
- While *machismo* is alive and well, it is not what it used to be. Women are increasingly gaining power and leadership positions within the society and in the international arena.

- Latin America is not all warmth and smiles: Vociferous disagreement is common among equals.
- While statistics show that the vast majority are Roman Catholic, gay marriage and gay rights are legalized in several Latin American countries. The region has the highest rates in the world for childbearing outside marriage.
- Latin Americans aren't just laid-back; they also are some of the world's hardest working and most perseverant people.

Latin America plays an increasingly important role in the world today and may be home to many of the solutions for the problems facing the planet. Therefore, it behooves everyone to learn to communicate and collaborate more effectively and enjoyably with Latin Americans.

[p. 90 ↓] **See also** [Beliefs, Values, Norms, Customs \(Definitions\)](#); [Body Language \(Haptics\)](#); [Cognitive Styles Across Cultures](#); [Cultural Patterns](#); [Facework/Facework Negotiation Theory](#); [Facial Expressions/Universal](#); [High-Context and Low-Context Communication](#); [Intercultural Nonverbal Communication](#); [Intercultural Verbal Communication Styles](#); [Politeness Strategies: Rapport Theory](#); [Time \(Chronemics\)](#); [Trust](#)

Dianne Hofner Saphiere

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