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# Murals in Latino Communities: Social Indicators of Community Strengths

*Melvin Delgado and Keva Barton*

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*Latinos invariably live in substandard housing in high crime and distressed areas of large urban locations. Social workers and other human services professionals, in turn, are well acquainted with all of the physical signs associated with life in these areas of a city. Murals, however, have not received sufficient attention in the professional literature. This article examines murals painted by Latino youths from a perspective of community strengths and assets and raises implications for the field of social work.*

**Key words:** *community strengths; Latinos; murals*

The professional literature on Latinos has generally focused on the socioeconomic challenges facing this community. Latinos consistently have a disproportionate number of families in poverty; high rates of school drop-out; alcohol, tobacco, and other drug abuse; and HIV/AIDS, to list just four social problems (Chachkes & Jennings, 1994; Holmes, 1996; Mayers, Kail, & Watts, 1992). They, in turn, generally reside in sections of urban areas that are often referred to as “ghettos,” “barrios,” “slums,” “inner cities,” or euphemistically are called “distressed.” Social workers and other helping professionals quickly learn to identify social indicators related to “urban despair,” for example, billboards selling alcohol and tobacco, large numbers of bars and liquor establishments, vacant lots, boarded-up buildings, abandoned cars, and so forth.

Although the concept of strengths and assets has emerged slowly in the professional literature (Delgado, 1997a, 1998, in press; Logan, 1996; McKnight & Kretzmann, 1991; Saleebey, 1992a, 1992b), not enough attention has been paid to indicators of community health. A so-

cial-political appreciation of murals can help social workers and other helping professionals better understand Latino communities from an asset perspective. According to Holscher (1976–77): “Murals . . . are newspapers on walls and a wealth of information is contained in them. They can be valuable to educators, politicians, sociologists, political scientists, architects and planners” (p. 45). Social workers can also be added to Holscher’s list.

Diego Rivera, arguably the most famous muralist in the Western hemisphere, summed up the importance of murals quite well when stating “mural painting must help in [a person’s] struggle to become a human being, and for that purpose it must live wherever it can; no place is bad for it, so long as it is there permitted to fulfill its primary functions of nutrition and enlightenment” (Rivera & Wolfe, 1934, p. 13).

This article provides social workers with a multifaceted perspective on Latino murals and the important functions they serve for youths and their community. It is critical for social workers to view murals from an asset perspective to better understand community strengths

and the issues and struggles of its residents. For community revitalization, for example, social workers must systematically consider the role murals can play in bringing a community together (Herszenhorn & Hirsh, 1996). The article presents and analyzes a case study, drawing on themes and competencies social workers can translate into strategies for community (youth) participation.

### **Concept of Free Space and Strengths**

The theoretical work by Evans and Boyte (1986) and Saleebey (1992a, 1992b) set an excellent foundation from which to analyze the importance of murals in Latino and other communities of color across the United States. Evans and Boyte (1986) developed the concept called “free spaces” to explain places where community residents can come together and articulate common concerns, hopes, and shared values. According to the authors:

The central argument . . . is that particular sorts of public places in the community, what we call free spaces, are the environments in which people are able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills, and values of cooperation and civic virtue. Put simply, free spaces are settings between private lives and large-scale institutions where ordinary citizens can act with dignity, independence, and vision. (Evans & Boyte, 1986, p. 17)

Applying the concept of free spaces to Latino communities highlights numerous institutions and places controlled by and for the community. These places can be beauty or barber shops, grocery stores, social clubs, fundamentalist houses of worship, and parks, to list but a few types (Delgado, 1996, 1997b). Free spaces vary according to the community. However, the question is not whether they exist but how they are manifested in the community.

Building walls, interior and external, must also be considered free spaces. Murals are very often painted on the free spaces found in urban communities. Some are painted in “official” buildings such as schools, police stations, and other public buildings. However, most are painted on building walls that have been

“claimed” by the community as their own, even though they are not owned by community residents. These spaces are transformed from their original purpose as part of a building structure to a message board for the internal and external community to see, read, and learn from. These spaces, as noted by Cooper and Sciorra (1994), are a canvas for expression: “The energy is still there—energy to create, energy to be seen, energy to be heard” (p. 9).

Saleebey (1992a) is widely credited with popularizing the concept of strengths in social work practice. A strengths perspective stresses five key elements for social work practice (Saleebey, 1992b): (1) unquestioned respect for a client’s abilities, innate resources, and perspectives; (2) use of strengths as a central theme in any intervention; (3) stress on collaboration among clients, their communities, and providers; (4) avoidance of using a “victim” mind-set throughout a professional relationship; and (5) use of indigenous community resources whenever possible in assessment and development of interventions. The concepts of free space and strengths form the basis for analyzing murals within communities of color.

### **Review of the Literature**

The topic of murals (sometimes referred to as spray can art) in Latino communities, with few exceptions, has not been addressed in the professional literature (Chalfant & Prigoff, 1987; Drescher & Garcia, 1978; Holscher, 1976, 1976–77; Treguer, 1992). The press, however, has been quick to understand their significance in urban communities (“California Town Hopes,” 1996; Madden, 1996). There is recognition that murals represent much more than a community’s effort to find artistic expression.

Graffiti, a popular art form often covered in the popular press, is commonly referred to as “tagging.” This form of artistic expression is usually initiated by individuals rather than groups or communities and is not restricted to communities. Tagging can be manifested on subway trains, doors, mailboxes, and other less significant locations. The messages contained in graffiti art generally reflect the struggles associated with urban living and issues of oppression (Ferrell, 1995). Murals differ from tagging by

their coordinated effort at involving a community, the nature and extent of project planning, and the location in communities (Cooper & Chalfant, 1984; Kurlansky, Naar, & Mailer, 1974; Walsh, 1996).

On the East Coast, more specifically New York City, there is an art form involving memorial murals (Cooper & Sciorra, 1994). This art form involves the use of aerosol paint cans by artists who are commissioned by an individual or group of community residents. In short, murals represent a community effort, whereas tagging is a much more individualized effort at creative expression. In addition, murals represent one dimension, although a significant one, of urban arts projects that also encompass other forms of expression such as sculptures.

For murals to have cultural meaning and impact, they must target the internal audience, namely the community (Treguer, 1992). It would be simplistic to think that murals can be easily classified into categories: "One is impressed by the heterogeneity of the mural styles, subjects, and locations. The typical mural does not exist. There are too many of them, depicting numerous ideas and themes, painted in literally hundreds of different places, to allow us to form an unsophisticated conclusion about the reasons for their existence" (Holscher, 1976, p. 25). Drescher and Garcia (1978) examined Latino murals (primarily focused in Los Angeles) from an artistic and social (historical, political, and economic) perspective. Treguer (1992) considered murals as a cultural-based form of self-expression for communities that have few unregulated outlets for their public voices. As noted by Jon Pounds: "Murals express more than ethnic pride. It's about people expressing what their own issues are" (personal communication, 1996): Holscher (1976-77), one of the few social scientists to study this phenomenon, has identified the sociopolitical value murals play in undervalued communities.

This art form takes on added significance because of the limited market for artists of

color. Some geographical areas of the country are fortunate because there are centers devoted to this art form, as is the case in Chicago (Chicago Public Art Group), Los Angeles (Social and Public Art Resource Center), and San Francisco (Precita Eyes Mural Arts Center). However, these centers are rare in other cities across the United States. This art form provides many artists with an opportunity to earn a living and serve as socially constructive outlets for their art. Artists have a community-sanctioned medium for expressing their emotions and communicating those of the community. Latinos generally do not control media outlets such as radio stations, newspapers, and television stations.

Consequently, messages specifically developed by and targeting their community are sadly lacking.

Although there is no typical mural, a content analysis of Latino murals will generally uncover seven key themes that communicate a central message and the importance of this art form to the community. Each of the following themes has impli-

cations for social work practice: symbols of ethnic and racial pride, religious symbols, issues related to social justice, decorative symbols, homages to national and local heroes, memorials commissioned by local residents, and symbolic locations.

### **Symbols of Ethnic and Racial Pride**

Themes related to ethnic and racial pride can be manifested in a variety of ways (Coleman, 1994; Drescher & Garcia, 1978; Holscher, 1976-77; Laird, 1992; Treguer, 1992). Treguer (1992) stated, "Pre-Colombian themes, intended to remind Chicanos of their noble origins, are common. There are motifs from the Aztec codices, gods from the Aztec pantheon, allusions to the Spanish conquest and images of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a cherished Mexican icon" (p. 23). Cooper and Sciorra's research (1994) in New York City also noted the importance of ethnic and racial pride among Puerto Rican and other Latino groups.

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Cultural pride serves as a cornerstone of culturally competent social work practice. Cultural competence, in turn, also relies on a strengths perspective toward individuals and communities (Delgado, 1997a, 1997b). Consequently, murals provide a "canvas" for Latinos to demonstrate knowledge of their history and pride in their cultural heritage, as well as articulate their struggles against oppression.

### Religious Symbols

Spirituality, in the form of religion and folk beliefs, plays an important role in the lives of Latinos (Coleman, 1994; Cooper & Sciorra, 1994; Treguer, 1992). Religious and spiritual symbols often represent a community's hopes for the future, its history, and, depending on the symbols, the value it places on the metaphysical. These symbols are not uncommon in Latino murals. Mexican American communities very often have the Virgin of Guadalupe, an important Mexican icon. Cooper and Sciorra (1994) commented on the mixture of images and symbols of memorial artists in New York City: "Drawing from sources sacred and profane, memorial artists creatively juxtapose an array of images and symbols in their work. Their innovative mix allows for individual input while establishing the parameters of this recent genre of graffiti art" (p. 17).

The subject of spirituality is slowly being recognized within the social work profession (Bullis, 1996). Spirituality, which can be manifested in beliefs and in organized religion, plays an important role in communities of color, Latinos not being an exception. In the form of organized religion, it can also serve as a method for bringing people together in an affirming activity. Social work agencies, in turn, can develop collaborative relationships with houses of worship to better serve communities that may be reluctant to use formal social services. Space can be used, social work staff can be out stationed, and workshops can be held in community-based religious institutions.

### Issues Related to Social Justice

There is no escaping the toll oppression has extracted on the Latino community (Chalfant & Prigoff, 1987; Coleman, 1994; Dowdy, 1995;

Holscher, 1976; Valdes, 1995). Murals, as noted by Holscher (1976), are a natural form for expression of protest: "The concept of art as a revolutionary tool, as a weapon in a propaganda campaign against the oppressor, or as revolution itself has been carried over into the murals by Chicano artists in Los Angeles today" (p. 27).

Scenes of police brutality, arson, alcohol and other drug abuse, prison, U.S. imperialism (particularly related to government-sponsored terrorism in the Caribbean and Latin America), and infant morality are almost commonplace in some Latino communities: "These neighborhood billboards are used to elicit critical examination of the root causes and solutions to the daily onslaught against inner-city youth . . . documenting community life and . . . to kindle discussion on the untimely deaths of neighborhood residents" (Cooper & Sciorra, 1994, p. 14). In essence, mural scenes are based on historical events and are a daily reminder of the trials and tribulations of being Latino in this country and the search for social justice.

Issues of oppression and social justice are central to social work's mission. A content analysis of murals can assist social workers in developing a more in-depth, and specific to the locale, understanding of the issues the community considers of importance. This understanding should translate into interventions that address these concerns. Themes related to historical events, police-community relations, impact of crime and drugs, and so forth, will emerge, highlighting priority areas for intervention.

### Decorative Symbols

Murals do not have to have significant social meaning to be important to a community ("California Town Hopes," 1996; Coleman, 1997; Chalfant & Prigoff, 1987; Fishman, 1996; Treguer, 1992). According to Treguer (1992) murals translate commonplace, or even unsightly, areas into memorable spaces: "What had been a hideous forest of concrete pillars soon became a pleasant and attractive place, a park decorated with paintings of remarkable beauty whose subject matter was critical, even subversive" (p. 24). Fishman (1996) reported on a mural project combining environmental

concerns and art. Patricia Rose stated it quite eloquently: "A blank wall is just waiting for something" (personal communication, 1997).

The decorative dimension to murals is well illustrated in Twentynine Palms, California, a town seeking to make itself the "Mural Capital of America," although it is estimated that Los Angeles has more than 1,000 murals ("California Town Hopes," 1996). A large public works campaign is currently underway in an effort to make the town more appealing to tourists; murals are viewed as windows to the town's history.

Social work interventions stressing murals can serve as a means to rally a community to take pride in their environment. Murals, when combined with community gardens, are an excellent means of involving a community in projects that are nonstigmatizing and a means for a community to engage in dialogue and mutual planning.

### **Homages to National and Local Heroes**

Murals, if they are to be accepted by the community, must be painted by residents and must involve the community in all stages of the process (Coleman, 1997; Cooper & Sciorra, 1994). One mural artist noted that mural themes are influenced by whether the artist is internal or external to the community and whether the artist shares the same ethnic or racial background as the residents: "There's a certain stereotype perpetuated by some of the white artists doing public works projects. . . . You see the same thing over and over again: Say no to drugs, stop the violence. I wanted to do a mural that reflects us as we really are. We don't just kill each other and sell drugs. We have other aspects to our lives. We need a variety of murals and public arts projects" (Valdes, 1995, p. 54).

Latino and other communities of color rarely have the opportunity to honor their own. With the exception of national heroes like Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Cesar Chavez, and so forth, many local heroes never make it into history books. Consequently, murals provide local residents with opportunities to validate their experiences through their heroes. School social workers, for example, can help teachers develop projects that use local heroes in their assignments. Murals can make excellent

schoolwide and agency projects for involving students, parents, and other interested community residents.

### **Memorials Commissioned by Local Residents**

Unlike murals for national and local heroes, residents may elect to commission a mural for a dead relative, close friend, or gang member (Cooper & Sciorra, 1994). Gonzalez (1994) focused most of his article on murals commissioned by local residents: "The walls, sometimes playful in spirit and other times dripping with menace, are also a visual chronicle of each beleaguered neighborhood's history. Played out from block to block, the results of bad luck, bad health, or just plain badness are etched onto brick and concrete looming as a cautionary backdrop for those who survive another day, an uneasy reminder of how chaotic city life has become . . . death is the ultimate scene stealer. (pp. 67-68).

The rituals associated with murals honoring the dead are very elaborate and symbolic: "The idea of honoring the dead and remembering is very visual. . . . People watch while the murals are painted; they have a ceremony at the end. It's a way for the community as a whole to deal with these losses" (Gonzalez, 1994, p. 68). Murals, in situations such as these, help residents mourn and honor their dead in a public arena.

The number and extent of murals dedicated to community residents who have died can be an excellent indicator of key issues within the community. The assessment can provide important data on gender, age, cause of death, as well as other information. Support groups can also be developed when the themes and numbers warrant such an intervention.

### **Symbolic Location of Murals**

The content of murals represent one, yet a very important, dimension. The location of a mural adds a different, yet equally important, perspective. There are three perspectives concerning location: (1) limited audience exposure—small public places such as alleys or infrequently traveled areas, (2) targeted audience exposure—inside select buildings such as schools and police stations, and (3) maximum audience exposure—public areas with high volume traffic.

Murals in maximum audience exposure locations and high profile buildings provide the greatest prestige for the paintings and have the highest potential for conveying a message about the community.

Limited audience exposure places do not have a great impact on a community but still represent an effort to convey a message. This message, however, may not have wide saliency, or the group seeking to send it does not have a high enough status to warrant a high exposure location. Memorial murals, however, must take into consideration another factor, namely location of where the deceased died, lived, or congregated with friends.

Social workers can play an instrumental role in helping communities negotiate with government authorities and private parties for the painting of murals using their spaces. Murals in prime locations can also serve to empower communities to organize to seek services and other resources to help them develop their capacities to help themselves.

### **Development of Competence in Youths**

Murals also provide an outlet for educating youths on a variety of topics that can be transferred to school and other arenas. School social workers and others actively working with Latino youths can use murals to enhance youth and community capacities. Mural development necessitates the development or enhancement of 11 knowledge and skill areas.

### **Research Skills**

Research skills are necessary in the development of murals. Youths must develop ways of seeking input from community residents and other stakeholders. They must also undertake library research to learn more about cultural symbols (Fishman, 1996). For many Latino youths this experience in learning more about their cultural history represents the first and only instance in studying their history. Few urban-based public schools provide Latino students with an opportunity to learn about Caribbean and Latin American history. Ethnic pride may be an important secondary gain in mural painting. Youths, in turn, must present their ideas to the group and the community and be prepared to

explain why a certain design has historical and cultural meaning. They are then entrusted with the role of educator for youths who are not part of a project.

Social workers can facilitate this research process by brokering with school officials to sponsor murals within their respective schools. Agency-based social workers can help organize mural festivals, walking tours, and other activities that stress development of research skills. Youths who have participated in mural painting can be used as mentors for younger children who are just learning the art.

### **Negotiation Skills**

Murals cannot be painted without an extensive period of negotiation and dialogue involving multiple sectors of a community. This negotiation takes on added significance if bringing a community together in pursuit of a common goal is a desired objective (Dowdy, 1995; Drescher & Garcia, 1978; Fishman, 1996): "Many admirers of subway graffiti found the appropriation of city property a particularly alluring and provocative feature of the art form. Memorial artists, on the other hand, are more inclined to seek permission for coveted wall space" (Cooper & Sciorra, 1994, pp. 12–13). Numerous numbers of meetings are required involving individuals and small and large groups. Youths must exercise negotiation skills that later can be easily transferred to other situations (with the implications of these skills going far beyond murals).

Needless to say, negotiation skills play a critical role in conflict resolution. The impact of violence on the lives of Latino youths is overwhelming, particularly youth-on-youth violence. Thus, negotiation skills transfer very well to everyday life. Social workers can take the lessons learned from negotiating murals and directly apply them to violence prevention.

### **Safety Consciousness and Following Rules**

Murals require participants to be acutely aware of safety concerns. There are too many points in a mural project where participants can be hurt if they do not follow safety procedures. The preparation of the surface to be painted and the application of paint, as well as falling from

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scaffolds, can result in serious harm. Consequently, participants must be totally aware of rules and be prepared to follow established procedures, for their good as well as that of their team members.

Development of safety consciousness translates well to everyday life. Latino youths, as a result, can take the lessons learned about safety and the importance of following rules and apply them to their homes, schools, and communities. Social workers can take the subject of environmental safety and make it relevant to the Latino community through workshops, demonstrations, discussions at local health fairs, and so forth.

### **Teamwork**

Murals should never be an individual project; successful murals involve countless numbers of participants (Fishman, 1996). Skills related to effective teamwork must be stressed throughout an entire project's existence. The research phase, for example, necessitates a team of participants taking individual or small group assignments to study particular aspects of a symbol or theme. Upon completion of the task, they must reassemble and compare notes. Failure on the part of an individual results in a delay of the project. If the project is being undertaken during the summer months, then there is not very much time to waste. Similar challenges are also applicable to the other phases of a mural project. A team approach also allows for members to find their individual voices and to use their unique talents and abilities, making for a successful team effort (A. Lopez, personal communication, 1997).

The lessons learned from teamwork will serve Latino youths the rest of their lives. Social workers can use Latino youths who have worked on murals to teach other youths the advantages and challenges of teamwork. Youths become an indigenous resource in helping their school and community. Adults can also learn about the importance of teamwork, and youths can serve as models on how this goal can be accomplished.

### **Starting and Completing a Project**

An often overlooked experience in mural painting is the starting and completion of a project.

As already noted, much planning and research goes into a mural before painting commences. Youths, as a result, develop an appreciation for the importance of planning and the compromises that are associated with implementation. Furthermore, the experience of completing a project provides youths with an opportunity to showcase their talents before the community. There generally is a ceremony for unveiling a mural, and this is an opportunity for the community to come together with their youths to celebrate this accomplishment.

The importance of planning and completing a mural is also applicable to other projects. Social workers working with youths can help them develop problem-solving skills and greater self-awareness of how they cope with frustrations in all aspects of a project. These lessons can translate very well to school assignments or to starting community initiatives involving youths.

### **Work Habits**

The development of proper work behavior enhances the value of murals. Youths must be able to work together; this can only be accomplished if members can rely on each other. Thus, attendance and punctuality are critical. Members who are absent must inform their supervisors; members who must leave early must take into account how their departure will affect the production schedule. The development of a mural can be thought of as an art project; it can also be thought of as a job. These two ways of viewing murals are not mutually exclusive and can serve to teach youths the necessary skills for employment.

Social workers assisting with murals must endeavor to reinforce the importance of good work habits and the importance of following through. These lessons not only help Latino youths involved with murals, but also help their friends and siblings who may not be part of this venture. The responsibility that goes with good work habits will assist youths in all aspects of their lives.

### **Communication Skills**

The importance of communication cannot be over emphasized. Communication entails verbal

and written skills. Youths need to assess the sentiments of the community to better design a mural. They also have to express themselves within the group throughout all phases of a project. Failure to communicate clearly can create misunderstandings and hard feelings. Furthermore, failure to communicate effectively can result in accidents during the painting process, which often requires youths to paint at different heights simultaneously; falling from a high height onto painters at lower levels can be dangerous.

Good communication skills do not just happen. Consequently, social workers must stress all aspects of communication in the process of developing murals. Written and oral communication skills are necessary in all aspects of an individual's life. However, they take on greater significance for youths in their efforts to navigate many of life's challenges, in and out of school. Social workers can help youths develop a better appreciation of how important good communication skills are in group and community projects.

### **Knowledge of Math and Chemistry**

The roles of math (primarily geometry and use of scales) and chemistry (mixing of paints) are central to a mural project. Youths not only must understand these principles, but also must be able to apply them in "real" life situations. For some youths these principles are well understood; for others, they are not. As a result, youths must teach youths. The role of teacher is one that must be carried out in a sensitive and supportive manner to foster team spirit. Murals provide an excellent mechanism for the teaching of academic concepts.

Few topics can turn young people off as much as mathematics and chemistry. Social workers, particularly those in school settings, can help translate how math, chemistry, and other subjects that are essential for murals can be relevant in other aspects of life. The teaching of academic subject matter does not have to be boring and irrelevant. When academic subjects are made "relevant" and "fun," learning is not a struggle. Thus, social workers can also consider themselves to be teachers in their quest to help youths with mural painting.

### **Working across Generations**

Murals require several generations working together (Coleman 1994; Dowdy, 1995). Youths not only work with other youths, but also work with community residents and local stakeholders, who invariably are adults. Sometimes these parties come together and form advisory groups for a mural project. Youths also have to enlist the support of individuals responsible for the space on which a mural will be painted. Adults, in turn, must trust youths and turn over space for murals. Sometimes adults must be prepared to accept a concept that may be presented verbally or, in some instances, a sketch. Communities consist of multiple generations; mural projects, as a result, must also involve multiple generations.

The negotiations skills Latino youths learn through murals can also be used in working with adults. Cross-generational work takes on great importance for youths, because a great deal of power resides with adults. Social workers can help Latino youths better understand the challenges and rewards of convincing adults about the merits of a mural. These lessons, however, can have tremendous benefits in other dealings with adults.

### **Budgeting and Scheduling Abilities**

Murals are not inexpensive community projects. It is generally estimated that a "typical" mural costs approximately \$20,000 and can cover a period of eight weeks (N. Abbate, personal communication, 1996; Fishman, 1996). Youths are forced to comparison shop for materials, estimate costs according to phases in the development of a mural, and develop time lines. The length of time associated with painting murals combined with the importance of proper weather conditions make them excellent projects for summer employment (Dowdy, 1995).

An understanding of money and scheduling is essential to mural projects as any other aspect of life. Social workers must endeavor to translate how budgeting and scheduling apply in other situations, although there are countless numbers of opportunities to do so during a mural project. This should not prove to be too challenging if placed within the context of a goal, be it individual or group.



## Contribution to the Community

Murals provide youths with an opportunity to be constructive members of the Latino community. There are few opportunities for youths to work collaboratively together and with the community. Murals, as a result, provide youths with a chance to make a lasting, and highly visible, contribution to the well-being of the community. A group of youths is no longer another term for gang; youths contribute to the physical and social fabric of the community.

Social workers must stress how youths can make contributions to their community once a mural is completed. Although a mural painting brought together a certain group of youths, there are other ways they can make contributions. This serves not only to empower them but also to empower the community.

## Case Study: Holyoke, Massachusetts

The city of Holyoke is located approximately 100 miles west of Boston. Its mills have a rich history of playing an instrumental role in the Industrial Revolution. In 1990 it had a population of 44,000, of which 12,700 were Latino (28.9 percent). Puerto Ricans are the largest Latino group, representing 93.5 percent of the community (Gaston Institute, 1992, 1994).

Holyoke's Puerto Rican community has a disproportionate number of families living below the poverty level (59.1 percent); high school dropouts (60.0 percent); and not part of the labor force, with 27.1 percent unemployment (Gaston Institute, 1994). Approximately 5.2 percent of Latino households own their own home compared to 50.3 percent of white, non-Puerto Rican households; 3.1 percent of black households; and 59.4 percent of Asian households (Gaston Institute, 1994). The Puerto Rican community is primarily located within several distinct geographical sections of the city, with the South Side (the focus of this case study) having the highest concentration of Puerto Ricans.

The following is based on events surrounding a mural project in Holyoke by 20 Puerto Rican youths, ages nine to 17 years. The project, as well as the resulting events, symbolized much more than a painting on a wall. As with many murals in Latino communities, this project

brought together a community and effectively depicted the conflicting values between internal and external communities. This case study can easily be titled: "En Busca de Unidad" (Hard Lessons Learned by Holyoke Latino Youths).

In the spring of 1996, El Arco Iris (the Rainbow), an after school program of Nueva Esperanza (New Hope), a local community-based organization, received funds to create a mural (Gomez, 1996; Plaisance, 1996; Woods, 1996). After receiving permission from the owner of an abandoned building that faces a vacant lot which was to be used as a community garden, the youths painted a mural of a nature scene. Included in the mural was a painting of two flags (Puerto Rico and the United States), as a representation of the youths' two communities. Shortly thereafter, a controversy ensued after several veterans voiced their discontent to a councilwoman. Their discontent focused on the mural showing the U.S. flag upside down and below the Puerto Rican flag. The councilwoman and veterans threatened to paint over the mural. After much debate that touched the entire Holyoke community, the youths decided to paint over the U.S. flag by extending the Puerto Rican flag.

Ironically, this mural project was the youths' attempt to show unity between Puerto Rico and the United States. This was their way of showing how they negotiate the two communities in which they exist. This unfortunate event helped to perpetuate the very alienation and oppression the youths were challenging. Fortunately, a positive experience arose from this struggle. The obstacles faced in doing this mural project galvanized the Puerto Rican community. They came together as adults and youths to fight for their beliefs and to strengthen their voice within the community. Youths developed a better understanding of how change within a community context tested all of the lessons learned in the process of painting a mural. They also witnessed the importance of a community acting in unison. The leadership and bravery demonstrated by the youths was widely recognized within and outside of the community. Ultimately, the lessons learned went beyond the painting of a picture. If it is true that a painting speaks a

thousand words, then the mural painted by the youths will be speaking for years to come.

If one of the goals of a mural is to encourage community participation, it will also serve to unify Latino communities in search of social and political justice. The "incident" sparked by the mural served a valuable lesson for the internal and external community. If one of the primary goals of a mural is to cause thought and dialogue, then the Holyoke mural exceeded the artists' expectations. The incident served to promote dialogue within and between communities. In short, no sector of the city was not touched by the mural.

## Conclusion

The presence and role of murals in Latino and other communities of color are often overlooked or misunderstood by the external world. Murals, as this article has pointed out, represent a lens from which social workers and other helping professionals can better understand and appreciate the Latino community's strengths and struggles for social justice. No two murals are ever alike, yet their role and function within communities generally address several major themes.

Holscher (1976), commenting on Chicano murals, summed up the importance of this art form for other Latino groups: "In a sociological sense, it is difficult to assess the murals from the artist's perspective. . . . What does exist in the murals by Chicano artists is a common bond based on language and on points of view which have been tempered by direct and indirect experiences with Mexico and by the situations that Chicanos have encountered in the United States" (p. 28).

This art form also serves important functions that go far beyond communication. Murals teach youths many skills that can be transferred to school and work arenas. The social work profession, with an emphasis on community and undervalued groups, is in a strategic position to use murals to bring greater community participation, to help inculcate valuable academic lessons, and to help foster this form of artistic expression. Viewing murals as a sign of the strength of the Latino community represents a dramatic departure from prevailing deficit perspectives. Such a change in paradigms

also facilitates the engagement of Latino communities by better conveying an inventory of their resources, history, and needs to the external community. ■

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**Melvin Delgado, PhD**, is professor and chair, *Macro Practice*, School of Social Work, Boston University, 264 Bay State Road, Boston, MA 02215; e-mail: delgado@bu.edu. **Keva Barton, MSW**, is program coordinator, Quincy-Geneva Housing Development Corporation, Dorchester, MA. The authors thank Nancy Abbate, Jon Pounds, Ana Lopez, Patricia Rose, and Maria Salgado for their time and their insights on murals. This article was made possible through funding from the Carlisle Foundation, Framingham, MA.

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