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Mindfulness Interventions for Latinx Immigrant Couples: Contextual and Cultural Considerations

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ABSTRACT

As Latinx are the largest minority and immigrant population in the United States, therapists are increasingly likely to work with this population. The high rates of psychological distress that Latinx face in response to ethnic-based discrimination, anti-immigrant sentiment, and/or acculturation-related stressors necessitate contextually and culturally appropriate treatment modalities. Emerging evidence suggests mindfulness practices can improve individual and relational well-being and reduce distress. Although these practices have not yet been applied to work with Latinx and other ethnic-minority populations, we suggest the present-time orientation and collectivist values inherent to mindfulness pair well with Latinx culture. This paper reviews the relevant literature on mindfulness practices and discusses the utility of mindfulness for use with Latinx couples, calling on cultural similarities and attending to contextual factors. Finally, a case example paired with interventions for therapists to adapt to their own practice is used to introduce relational mindfulness interventions and promote relational wellbeing, couple resilience, cultural pride, and connection.

KEYWORDS

Latinx couples; mindfulness practices; couple therapy; relational mindfulness; context; Latinx culture

Introduction

Latinx are the largest ethnic-minority group in the United States (U.S), making up about 18% of the national population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017), and are likely to become the largest minority group to utilize mental health services in the near future (Falicov, 2009, 2013; Platt, 2012). Compared to their U.S.-born White counterparts, first-generation Latinx immigrants have higher rates of psychological distress, in part due to immigration-related stressors such as language barriers, familial separation, and financial strain (Cervantes, 2010; Falicov, 2013; García Coll et al., 1996; Mendoza, Dmitrieva, Perreira, Hurwich-Reiss, & Watamura, 2017). Many Latinx individuals and couples experience separation from their families

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and other support systems as they migrate to the U.S. Furthermore, U.S.-born Latinx and immigrants alike are at risk for experiencing discrimination and anti-immigrant sentiment (Ayón & Becerra, 2013; García Coll et al., 1996), which compounds the difficulties associated with adjusting to a new language and culture (Cervantes & Cordova, 2011). Finally, Latinx couples often experience financial strain, partially due to their disproportionate representation in service- and construction-related jobs as well as other forms of low-wage employment (Bermúdez & Mancini, 2013; Falicov, 2013; Linder, 2019). Consequently, it is not surprising that Latinx couples residing in the U.S. experience poor relational outcomes compared to their White-U.S. and Latin America-residing Latinx counterparts, such as higher divorce rates and increased rates of relationship dissolution during the child-rearing stage (Helms et al., 2014).

Mindfulness practice, which originated within Southeast Asian religious traditions, is one form of intervention that has received considerable attention in recent therapeutic literature, albeit with largely White, middle-class samples (Gehart, 2012). Given the burgeoning research documenting the potential for mindfulness to enhance well-being, emotion regulation, and relational functioning (Barnes, Brown, Krusemark, Campbell, & Rogge, 2007; Wachs & Cordova, 2007), this practice—if appropriately tailored—may greatly benefit Latinx couples. Limited research has demonstrated the usefulness of disseminating already existing models to Latinx populations (e.g., relationship education programs; Carlson, Rappleyea, Daire, Harris, & Liu, 2017; Daire et al., 2012; Gutierrez, Barden, & Tobey, 2014). This work may point to the many relationship factors that remain constant across populations. In spite of these similarities, there remain important cultural considerations and contextual stressors that cannot be ignored (Bermúdez & Stinson, 2011; Cervantes, 2010; Falicov, 2009, 2013; Flores, Tomany-Korman, & Olson, 2005; Gallardo & Curry, 2009). Existing models, such as mindfulness interventions, may have the potential to be transformative when addressing uniquely situated ecological contexts alongside common themes in relational wellbeing.

Although mindfulness has been accepted in Western science and found to be effective (Kabat-Zinn, 2012; McCollum, 2014; Ren, Zhang, & Jiang, 2018; Siegel, 2010), it has also been critiqued for its failure to attend to social inequity and power imbalances (Crowder, 2016). Its utility with marginalized groups (e.g., Latinx) is somewhat tempered by this limitation, and mindfulness practices may be appropriately applied to Latinx couples only when situated within a larger theoretical paradigm that accounts for the inhibiting contexts Latinx families may face, in addition to recognizing their unique cultural, familial, and individual strengths. Ecological models may serve to bring attention to these important aspects (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; García Coll et al., 1996; Linder, Platt, & Young, 2018; Rosa & Tudge,

2013), though little work has applied ecological models to the use of mindfulness with marginalized groups such as U.S. Latinx couples.

This paper articulates how clinicians can begin to incorporate mindfulness interventions into their work with Latinx couples. First, we review the relevant literature on the effectiveness of mindfulness practices and explore how these practices can be put to use relationally in couple therapy. Second, we discuss the utility of mindfulness with Latinx couples in particular, pointing to the similarities between mindful orientations and Latinx culture. Third, we articulate how ecological models can be used to ground mindfulness practices in the context of Latinx populations. Fourth and finally, we use a case example compiled from a collection of real practice experience to detail how family therapists can integrate relational mindfulness interventions (e.g., Gale, 2008; Gehart, 2012; Gehart & McCollum, 2007; Gillespie, Davey, & Flemke, 2015) into work that attends to Latinx couples' cultural and sociopolitical contexts (Badiee & Andrade, 2018).

Mindfulness: An Ancient Answer to Suffering

Simply defined, mindfulness is giving nonjudgmental attention to the present moment without reacting (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Nearly all major religions incorporate some version of mindfulness into their spiritual practices (Gehart, 2012), and mindfulness has been the foundation of Hinduism, Buddhism, and other Eastern-religious practices for over 2,500 years (Minas & Lewis, 2017). Despite its rich cultural history, empirical studies of mindfulness practices have emerged in the West only in recent decades (Barnes et al., 2007; Kozlowski, 2013). Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990) introduced mindfulness into mainstream medicine in the U.S. with his Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program in 1979. Today, mindfulness is one of the most-discussed and researched treatment approaches in the mental health field (Gale, 2008; Gehart, 2012; Kabat-Zinn, 2012; McCollum, 2014; Ren, Zhang, & Jiang, 2018; Siegel, 2010). Mindfulness is also commonly used as the basis for established empirical therapies such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, Acceptance-Commitment Therapy, and Dialectical-Behavioral Therapy with individuals (Gambrel & Keeling, 2010; Gehart, 2012).

Mindfulness Benefits to Individuals

In the U.S., mindfulness has reaped robust empirical support regarding its benefits for individuals. For example, studies have found that mindfulness increases self-regulation, compassion, empathy, acceptance, and overall mental health, as well as decreases anxiety and avoidance of difficult emotions (Atkinson, 2013; Block-Lerner, Adair, Plumb, Rhatigan, & Orsillo,

2007; Gambrel, Faas, Kaestle, & Savla, 2016; O'Kelly & Collard, 2012; Pruitt & McCollum, 2010; Ren, Zhang, & Jiang, 2018; Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Siegel, 2007, 2010; Wachs & Cordova, 2007). Many researchers have indicated that mindfulness interventions and practices promote a more flexible central nervous system, which contributes to more effective responses during stressful interpersonal situations (Atkinson, 2013; Siegel, 2007). Moreover, research has illustrated how mindfulness-induced changes in the brain can facilitate emotional and social intelligence (Atkinson, 2013; Siegel, 2007). Given that healthy individuals are more likely to create and maintain healthy relationships, scholars have posited that the positive effects of mindfulness are likely to be correspondingly identified among work with couples (Atkinson, 2013; Gale, 2008; Gehart, 2012). However, mindfulness literature to date has insufficiently focused on its application to couples (Gale, 2008; Gehart, 2012; Gillespie et al., 2015; Ting-Toomey, 2009), particularly among diverse populations such as Latinx.

Mindfulness and Couple Relationships

There is some evidence on the direct benefits of conjoint mindfulness practices for relationships. Mindfulness practice has been found to improve communication, emotion regulation, listening skills, and empathy, and to lower impulsivity and hostility among couples (Atkinson, 2013; Block-Lerner et al., 2007; Kozlowski, 2013; O'Kelly & Collard, 2012; Siegel, 2014; Wachs & Cordova, 2007). Additionally, some evidence has suggested that mindfulness leads to increased overall relationship satisfaction for couples and families (Gehart, 2012; Khoury, 2018; O'Kelly & Collard, 2012). This evidence has been replicated in randomized controlled trials, suggesting that mindfulness can indeed improve couple relationships (Carson et al., 2004; Beckerman & Sarracco, 2011). Generally, outcomes for mindfulness interventions with couples (as adapted by Gale, 2008) often include (a) increased self-regulation (via reducing emotional reactivity and defensiveness, particularly when it tends to override cognitive functioning), (b) increased sense of emotional intimacy (via listening attentively and making room for emotions that have not been adequately expressed previously), and (c) adoption of new ways of interacting that facilitate relational connectedness and promote individual, couple, and family wellbeing.

Though few studies have documented the benefits of mindfulness for couples and families (Gale, 2008; Gambrel & Keeling, 2010; Gehart, 2012; Gillespie et al., 2015; Khoury, 2018), the individual benefits of mindfulness practices can be understood within the context of couple functioning (Atkinson, 2013; Ting-Toomey, 2009). Mindfulness-related skills, including present-moment awareness, suspending judgment, and cultivating empathy and compassion, can facilitate more respectful and loving couple

interactions (Block-Lerner et al., 2007; Burpee & Langer, 2005; Kozlowski, 2013; Wachs & Cordova, 2007). Furthermore, mindfulness-related skills can minimize the emotional reactivity associated with relational distress (Beckerman & Sarracco, 2011) without compromising emotional engagement. Additionally, the increases in empathy resulting from mindfulness practice may be because of the decrease in personal stress (Gehart, 2012), and the opposite may also be true as individuals who are not doing well often fail to create healthy relationships. For instance, stonewalling and defensiveness, which are qualities lacking in mindfulness, have been identified as detrimental to relationships (Gottman, 1994). These qualities were also found to be strongly linked to the individual physiological arousal seen in hostile behaviors that are unconducive to attributes linked to relationship satisfaction such as humor, creativity, problem-solving, and listening (Gottman, 1999, 2011). Because individual wellbeing is closely linked to romantic relationship satisfaction (Kozlowski, 2013; Lenger, Gordon, & Nguyen, 2019), more work on mindfulness-related couples intervention is warranted (Isfahani, Bahrami, Etemadi, & Mohamadi, 2018), particularly with minority couples (e.g., Latinx; Carson et al., 2004).

Mindfulness and Latinx Culture

Despite its origins in Southeast Asian religious traditions (Gehart, 2012; Hanh, 2003, 2015; Minas & Lewis, 2017; O'Kelly & Collard, 2012), mindfulness has been shown to be applicable to groups with varying cultural and religious backgrounds, including Latinx populations (Roth & Calle-Mesa, 2006; Sanchez, 2016). Specifically, mindfulness practices find a natural connection with Latinx culture based on several similarities, including (a) cultural values regarding relationships, (b) self/relational orientation (i.e., collectivism), (c) spirituality, and (d) present-time orientation.

First, both mindfulness and Latinx cultural values are focused on developing and maintaining positive, caring relationships and relational harmony (Bermúdez & Mancini, 2013; Linder, 2019). Qualities common in Latinx culture are *simpatía* (sympathy or kindness and friendliness), *confianza* (trust), and *respeto* (respect), which privilege positive, caring interactions and interpersonal relationships (Cabassa, 2006; Falicov, 2009, 2013; Gallardo & Curry, 2009). Second, Latinx culture tends to be more collectivist (Cabassa, 2006), with *familismo* (familism) underscoring a strong commitment to the nuclear and extended family, including valuing relationship commitments, loyalty, and family unity (Falicov, 2009; Cabassa, 2006). For example, it is quite common in Latinx culture to greet others by asking "How are we doing?" (*¿Cómo estamos?*), instead of "How are you?" which is more typical in the U.S. Accordingly, relational mindfulness practices

Table 1. Ideas for integration of mindfulness with Latinx culture.

Theme	Idea for Practice
Cultural values	Treat clients consistent with cultural values such as the aforementioned *confianza, simpatía, respeto,* and/or *familismo* (Cabassa, 2006).
Self/relation- orientation	Consistently attend to "¿Cómo estamos?" ("How we are doing?"; Bernal & Gómez-Arroyo, 2017) before "¿Cómo estoy?" ("How I am doing?").
Spirituality	Make *Espiritualismo*, approximately translated to God or spirituality, a common theme in therapy with Latinx clients (Cabassa, 2006). However, for the purposes of this paper, mindfulness is used primarily for its interpersonal benefits and not to foster already existing spiritual beliefs.
Time-orientation	Increase positive interpersonal interaction in the here-and-now, which relates to the Latinx cultural tendency of present-time orientation (Bermúdez & Mancini, 2013; Linder, 2019).
Sociopolitical factors	Increase awareness of potentially oppressive structural sociopolitical factors that can negatively influence a couple of their sense of *cómo estamos* and intentionally cultivate a resilience that stems from ethnic pride and unity (Bermúdez & Mancini, 2013; Linder, 2019).

can foster feelings of connectedness (i.e., shifting from "me" and "you" to an "us"), which have great potential to mitigate interpersonal conflict by intentionally nurturing awareness of what bonds people together (Siegel, 2010). Third, Latinx couples and families are often deeply spiritual (Bermúdez & Mancini, 2013). In fact, statements about God are inherent to the Spanish vernacular and are often used culturally, whether persons are religious or not. Examples include, "*Que vaya con dios* ("Go with God;" used colloquially to mean "Take care"), or "*Si dos quiere* ("God willing"). As mentioned, mindfulness stems from spiritual and religious traditions that also presume there is a higher-order to the world. Finally, Latinx culture tends to be more present-focused with intentionality given to the here-and-now (Bermúdez & Mancini, 2013; Linder, 2019). This parallels a primary tenet of mindfulness which emphasizes the curative aspects of focusing on the present. Table 1 includes ideas for adapting mindfulness practices to be more attuned to Latinx cultural norms, values, and contexts. Despite the connections between mindfulness principles and aspects of Latinx culture, an additional conceptual framework is needed to attend to the limitations of mindfulness vis-a-vis structural inequality.

Mindfulness and the Need for Contextual Adaptations

As discussed previously, mindfulness has been critiqued as being unable to adequately address issues of structural inequality such as systemic poverty, racism, and other disparities (Crowder, 2016). For example, scholars have posited that mindfulness practices attempt to teach people to be at peace with their life, not recognizing that dominant groups are privileged at the expense of others (Crenshaw, 1988; hooks, 2000). To address this concern, we recommend employing mindfulness practices only after considering the unique sociopolitical contexts in which Latinx couples exist. In addition,

we offer considerations for acknowledging and attending these contexts through mindfulness.

Despite being a largely heterogeneous group with many differences—such as country-of-origin, language fluency, and documentation status—there are considerations unique to Latinx families that warrant attention. The above-named differences are crucial to understanding Latinx couple's ecological contexts in the U.S. For example, depending upon county-of-origin, immigrant couples may have very different reasons for migration. These reasons may include escaping poverty, gang-related violence, simply pursuing a better life for one's children, or a combination of these factors (Falicov, 2013). Once in the U.S., immigrant Latinx are likely to experience acculturation-related stress that may include language challenges and difficulty adjusting to a different culture (Berry, 1997; Cervantes & Cordova, 2011; Hurwich-Reiss & Gudiño, 2016). Furthermore, research has shown that documentation status may play a role in psychological wellbeing. Specifically, Latinx parents living with more precarious immigration statuses (i.e., Temporary Protected Status, undocumented) report increased fear and psychological distress (Roche, Vaquera, White, & Rivera, 2018). Whether immigrants or not, Latinx are likely to face ethnic-based discrimination and/or systemic poverty (García Coll et al., 1996; Mendoza et al., 2017), as well as live in impoverished neighborhoods (Ayón & Becerra, 2013; Cleaveland, 2013). Although not all Latinx couples who present for therapy services will struggle with the aforementioned factors, these power inequalities remain important considerations when applying mindfulness practices to Latinx couples.

Case Example

The following section presents a detailed case example to demonstrate the use of mindfulness interventions with Latinx couples. The interventions used by the therapist are described throughout, including their utility and applicability to Latinx couple based on the cultural values described above. Note that the tables include more information about the interventions and are written in present tense for therapists to use after adapting to their own practice contexts.

Considerations Prior to Treatment

Prior to mindfulness-related intervention with Latinx couples, several considerations should be taken into account. First, although couples may be distressed when seeking therapy, it is imperative that they demonstrate high levels of commitment and willingness to change prior to engaging in the following therapeutic activities. Second, these practices are not intended for couples dealing with domestic violence, addiction, as abuse or addiction

often inhibit the ability to engage in the critical self-reflection and accountability-taking necessary for mindfulness approaches. It is important to note, however, that research suggests clients navigating low-severity intimate partner violence (IPV) are appropriate for relational therapy (Braithwaite & Fincham, 2014; Carlson, Wheeler, & Adams 2018; Valladares Kahn, Epstein, & Kivlighan, 2015). Therefore, prior to engaging in mindfulness interventions, therapists may consider using available resources to assess safety and contract for nonviolence (e.g., Bograd & Mederos, 1999; Daire, Carlson, Barden, & Jacobson, 2014; Whiting, Bradford, Vail, Carlton, & Bathje, 2009). Finally, based on the ecological factors discussed previously, some couples may have immediate needs that require attention before proceeding with therapeutic interventions. These may include basic needs (e.g., food, shelter), legal needs (e.g., requiring an immigration or family lawyer), and/or emotional needs (e.g., severe psychological distress such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). The therapist should thus attend to these case management needs by connecting the couple to the necessary resources prior to proceeding with treatment.

Latinx populations are largely heterogeneous and exhibit a vast amount of cultural differences based on country-of-origin, region, documentation and immigration status, and socio-economic status among others (Falicov, 2013). Consequently, these ideas and practices may not work for all clients. Therapists using these interventions are highly encouraged to seek client feedback (Duncan et al., 2003), which is another important step toward encouraging culturally appropriate and useful services. In this way, therapists can monitor the therapeutic alliance and clients' experiences in therapy and further modify interventions. On the other hand, soliciting client feedback does not always work as intended. For example, direct confrontation may be considered rude in Mexican culture (Batalla, 1996) and for other Latinx clients. It, therefore, may be helpful to employ mechanisms to solicit feedback anonymously to improve accuracy.

Finally, it is important to note that mindfulness interventions are largely experiential, and the subjective experience of engaging in mindfulness varies significantly from how authors and practitioners explicate them textually or verbally (Kabat-Zinn, 2006). Likewise, mindfulness hinges on fostering a noncritical and non-striving attitude (O'Kelly & Collard, 2012), which by nature may not align with agendas of therapy and research such as creating and evaluating measurable and achievable therapeutic goals. Following an assessment of these pretreatment considerations, mindfulness may continue to be an appropriate intervention.

Couple Background

Juan (age 37) and Patricia (age 33) migrated from Morelia, Mexico, two years ago with their two children, Aldo (age 5) and Alejandra (age 3). They

came to the U.S. to escape poverty, corruption, and gang-related crime and violence. Unfortunately, Juan and Patricia's story of fleeing large-scale social injustice in Mexico—including rampant crime and blackmailing related to drug trafficking kingpins, political corruption, and significant inequality of economic resources—is a common migration history among Latinx immigrant families (Falicov, 2013). Despite their newfound safety in the U.S., the country's individualistic cultural norms were both shocking and unsettling for the couple. The language barrier added further difficulty, and both Juan and Patricia felt immense pressure to quickly learn English. Moreover, the couple reported living in constant fear for their safety and livelihood based on their precarious legal status and feelings of anti-immigrant sentiment. Patricia and Juan described themselves as feeling "constantly nervous" and stated that they "prefer to stay inside whenever possible." They unanimously recognized that their persistent fears for their future made it hard for them to enjoy each other's company in the same way they did before they immigrated.

An initial clinical assessment at a nonprofit community agency further revealed that the apartment complex where the couple resided houses numerous low-income families. Juan and Patricia reported that the neighborhood was characterized by high crime rates and tended to be loud and crowded, producing additional reasons to stay inside with their children. At times, the couple was unable to afford basic necessities such as food or toilet paper, and transportation was a constant issue given their fear of driving. Nevertheless, they both worked long hours, earning less than minimum wage and not receiving benefits. Juan worked in the mornings and afternoons as a janitor at the nearby hospital, as well as late into the evening as a busboy at a Mexican restaurant and often would stay until midnight if the restaurant was busy. Even though Juan worked two jobs, the couple still struggled to afford their daily expenses. Similarly to many Latinx women in the neighborhood who took care of children for neighbors and relatives during the day to support their family relatives or earn some extra money, Patricia worked as a nanny for a neighbor's family during the day and was able to get Aldo from school, which was within walking distance of their apartment. Fortunately, Juan's brother's family lived nearby, and his sister-in-law, Myra, was able to care for Alejandra when Juan and Patricia worked. Because both Juan and Patricia worked long hours, they had little time to dedicate to improving their couple relationship.

Early Stages of Treatment

Patricia insisted that the couple seek therapy because she has felt like they had "become roommates who do not communicate." During the

consultation phone call with the therapist, she reported that they had "grown apart" and "never enjoy time together as a couple" because of their constant arguing, busy schedules, the time demands of their kids, and migration-related difficulties. When Patricia communicated this to Juan, he felt inadequate and became defensive, like he was "not doing enough for the family." However, he agreed to try therapy when offered a session on his only day off.

Following Falicov's (2009, 2013) recommendations to allot more time than usual to build rapport with Latinx clients, the therapist gradually developed camaraderie, joined, and assessed the couple's presenting problem, strengths, background, protective factors, and treatment goals. Eventually, the therapist noticed the couple's high level of reactivity to each other's distress and limited ability to self-modulate, identify and express their feelings, listen attentively and deeply, or empathize with each other's emotional experience. Intentionally slowing the session down, the therapist introduced mindfulness as a tool that has the potential to rewire the brain. He proposed its potential utility in developing compassionate attention to their own and each other's experience by training their brains to "respond instead of react." They agreed to make this brief pause to intentionally consider a wise response—as opposed to automatically reacting (Gehart, 2012; Maex, 2011)—a preliminary treatment goal. Despite stating they each believed their partner needed to change more than they did, Patricia and Juan expressed interest, acceptance, and commitment to this treatment goal because they were highly motivated to improve their relationship. They also recognized the potential for a healthier couple relationship to help them be their best versions of themselves as parents.

The therapist continued to help the couple explore how mindfulness could not only increase their capacity for responding instead of reacting (referred to as *auto-control* in Spanish), but also boost their sense of emotional connection to each other (*su nivel de conexión mutúa* in Spanish). Specifically, the therapist postulated that mindfulness could help Juan and Patricia individually manage their own emotional experience more effectively so they could be more present and better attuned to each other in the midst of their chaotic, busy, and unpredictable lives. Because of the couple's interest in learning about mindfulness practices as well as their unwavering commitment to their relationship, the therapist proceeded with introducing mindfulness techniques.

Individual Mindfulness Techniques

When the couple was ready, the therapist introduced the following mindfulness practices. Instructions for each of these techniques are in Table 2.

Table 2. Mindfulness interventions.

Intervention	Instructions
*Present moment awareness: C*onciencia en el momento presente*	Take a few moments to sit in silence, using an anchor such as your breath, body, sensations, or sounds to link you to the present moment. *(Dese unos momentos para conectarse con el momento presente, usando una ancla de atención, como su aliento o las sensaciones en su cuerpo, o los sonidos a su alrededor)*. Bring your attention from thoughts of the past or future to the present moment, the only place where calm, peace, connection, and happiness can be felt. Focus on your chosen anchor for several minutes, gently bringing your mind back whenever it wanders, which it inevitably will. Respond to the interruptions with kindness, and gently redirect the mind. This exercise is often used briefly to preface and conclude other mindfulness interventions.
Loving-kindness: *La bondad amorosa*	Inhale and exhale while feeling the following phrases in the body and mind—without simply repeating them mechanically (*Al inhalar y exhalar, sienta las siguientes frases en la mente y el cuerpo – no los repita mecánicamente*): *May I be loving and happy (Que sea amoroso(a) y feliz); May I be calm and peaceful (Que sea calmado(a) y pacífico(a)); May God accompany me in my actions (Que Dios me acompañe en mis acciones)*.
Strengths: *Las fortalezas*	Gently ask yourself the following questions, and see if you can feel your way into their answers. What do I admire most about myself? (*Qué es lo que más admiro de mí mismo?*) What do others most admire about me? (*Qué es lo que más admiran los demás de mí?*) Notice if these strengths reside in any body parts as you breathe and stay attentive to the bodily sensations. Sit with the sensations for a time as you notice these qualities for a few minutes.
Accessing my spiritual self: *Contactando mi yo espiritual*	What are God's deepest wishes and desires for me? (*¿Qué es lo que más desea Dios para mí?*) How do I manifest them? How can I embody them even more? Once you have a clear idea of this, slowly mention them to yourself as you breathe mindfully and feel how they influence the body and mind.
Accepting what I do not like in myself: *Aceptando mis defectos*	List qualities or behaviors you have engaged in that have caused suffering to yourself and others you care about. Without attempting to change them, attempt to meet each quality or behavior with mindful awareness. Send/give each quality loving-kindness (*bondad amorosa*), cultivating a caring (*simpatía*) toward yourself, which may but does not need to include an intention to change deleterious behaviors in the future.
Emotional awareness: *La concienca emocial*	Spend time individually with strong emotions that arise, noticing when they start and end and appear in the body without judging our trying to change them. Notice how they arise and subside all on their own without effort.

*_Note:_ It is common to begin and end each of the above practices with present-moment awareness to amplify their positive effects by encouraging calm and mindful attention. In addition, each of these exercises can be adapted to have a relational-focus by translating the statements from first- to third-person and asking each partner to think about the other.

These exercises can and should also be expanded to the couple relationship. First, however, it is important that they initially focus on the individual because a certain degree of self-awareness and self-regulation are needed for relational mindfulness practices to be therapeutic (Gehart, 2012). With increased practice, individuals may be better prepared to translate these practices to the relational system.

Present Moment Awareness: Conciencia en el momento presente

Present moment awareness is a quintessential mindfulness practice. It involves taking a few moments to gather one's attention from thoughts of the past or future and enter into the present moment—the only place

where calm, peace, connection, and happiness can truly be felt. This often entails resting one's attention on an object of awareness, referred to as an *anchor* in mindfulness literature. Commonly used anchors are the breath, a sound, or body sensations. Focus should be brought to the chosen anchor for one to five minutes, so that one is mentally and emotionally present and attentive for the exercises that follow. Present moment awareness complements Latinx culture in its emphasis on present-time orientation.

Loving-Kindness: La bondad amorosa

Loving-kindness is a common mindfulness practice used to engender inner-peace, compassion, calmness, and collective well-being. It stems from the word *Metta* in Pali—the original language of the Buddha—meaning goodwill and cultivating good wishes for all, including oneself. Fostering compassion for oneself and for everyone else can positively transform how one sees and interacts with others. It consists of inviting and sustaining attention to feelings and thoughts of care and compassion for oneself, then spreading these feelings to one's partner, relationships, and eventually all people and beings. An example of loving-kindness is gently repeating the following phrases silently while focusing on their felt experience: "May I be calm; may I be peaceful; may I be happy; may I be safe; and may I be healthy." This practice complements collective penchants of Latinx culture in that group well-being is essential to and precedes each individual's well-being, with the emphasis on the family (*familismo*) and relationships.

Strengths: Las fortalezas

When one is preoccupied on stressors such as a busy work schedule, bills, the demands of childcare, etc., it can be tempting to blame one's partner. When partners get stuck in blaming or withdrawing patterns, both can feel inferior, like they are failing the relationship or family (Beckerman & Sarracco, 2011). Dedicating time and awareness to what one does well or what one appreciates about oneself can help partners feel worthy. When used relationally, it can help partners feel loved and appreciated and disarm conflict. Intentionally bringing attention to how one's partner positively contributes to the couple and family—including specific behaviors, qualities, or moments previously overlooked—can be transformative. This complements Latinx culture in its proclivity for strengths-based optimism.

Accessing My Spiritual Self: Contactando mi yo spiritual

Connecting to the religiosity of Latinx culture is an important cultural adaptation. As previously discussed, God is ubiquitous in Latinx colloquial vernacular and sayings (or *dichos*) such as, "*No hay mal, que por bien no*

venga" ("There is nothing so bad that something good cannot come of it," also known in English as "the silver lining.") These sayings denote the optimism often inherent in Latinx culture. There is tremendous therapeutic potential in the belief that one's struggles and pain will pass, has deep meaning or purpose, and can contribute to a greater good such as individual, familial, or communal growth, transcendence, and healing.

Emotional Awareness: La conciencia emocional

During conflict, the capacity for pro-dyadic self-regulation can easily diminish. One of the most threatening aspects of emotions is that they feel like they will last indefinitely. It is easy to forget that emotions, especially the powerful emotions that arise in stressful situations, are temporary by nature and can contain useful information. Cultivating emotional awareness means noticing emotions as they arise and allowing them to pass rather than automatically acting and *re*acting. It is the difference between yelling out of anger and simply noticing the anger arise while trusting that "this anger" contains a message and will ultimately pass. In mindfulness therapeutic practices, therapists can use emotion as a useful source of wisdom. For example, anger shows that one cares and is invested, an insight that can unite partners as opposed to continuing to serve as an emotion that has perpetuated stress and disconnection (Beckerman & Sarracco, 2011).

Mid-Treatment Follow up

It was important to continue to reserve session time for the couple to process their personal and shared experiences. Before the therapist introduced more variations of mindfulness practice, he checked in with the couple in-session to assess for cultural and clinical appropriateness. Specifically, before introducing new interventions, he reviewed with the couple what had improved so far and asked if these types of activities were working for them. The therapist checked in to gauge their internal experiences with the open-ended question, "How was that?" (*¿Cómo les fue?*) after a few minutes of practice and silence. The couple responded initially that it was challenging to slow their minds and focus on their inner experiences of the phrases, but that it became easier toward the end. Juan also shared that the exercises initially felt contrived (*forzado*), but reported that they became easier with practice. Both ultimately described the exercises as relaxing.

Because it is important not to teach mindfulness with too much seriousness or rigidity (Gehart, 2012), the therapist normalized their experience and then thanked them for their earnest effort and genuine responses. The therapist then shared the metaphor that mindfulness practice is like building a muscle; it is hard at the beginning because the mind is used to being

pulled in countless directions, but it gets progressively easier and more pleasant with time. The therapist assured the clients that each mindfulness exercise is inherently flexible and open to any desired modifications or preferences, and he encouraged the couple to modify these phrases for practice at home to better fit their situation, amount of available time, and personal or mutual preferences. For example, if the phrases feel too long for them, each can choose one word that captures their essence, rather than the entirety of the phrase. In addition, the therapist reminded the couple that these practices can be done at any time—while waiting in line, when walking from one place to another (Hanh, 2003, 2015), or at home after putting the children to sleep. To deepen their practice between sessions, the therapist also recommended the use of an application on their smartphones[1] or a daily journal to track their journeys.

Relational Mindfulness Practices

Given the couple's commitment to therapy and positive reception to the introductory mindfulness practices, the therapist offered variations on loving-kindness and the other exercises to make them more relational. For example, all of the phrases and exercises can be expanded to refer to each partner, the relationship, and the family as well as other elements of their context including work, school, and the community. However, it is important that these interventions first be applied to each individual because it is critical that each partner can initially focus on themselves individually because a certain degree of self-awareness and self-regulation are needed for relational mindfulness practices to be therapeutic. Adaptations specific to couples include the partner and the relationship as the focus instead of oneself. For example, the *loving-kindness* intervention can be changed to, "may my partner (or/and our relationship) be calm, peaceful, happy, safe, and healthy," rather than focusing on the self. Similarly, the *strengths* meditation can be altered to ask each partner to speak to and then focus on what they see as the other partner's (or the relationship's) most salient strengths. In addition to altering the interventions found in Table 2 to address the couple relationship, the therapist also offered the couple additional variations, such as drawing or mentally visualizing and then verbalizing the versions of themselves brought forth by the exercises.

In later sessions, the therapist facilitated mindfulness practices designed to use their increases in self-regulation to foster more togetherness and connectedness, which was the reason Patricia originally sought therapy. The therapist also helped Juan and Patricia notice that certain ecological stressors play a role in fueling their conflict. He then helped them direct their mindful intention to cultivate their own intentional couple dynamic

Table 3. Mindfulness interventions for mid-treatment stage.

Intervention	Instructions
Mindful reflections on immigration: *Unas refleciones de la imigración*	Give attention to how you have grown together from migration (*¿Cómo han crecido juntos a través de migrar?*). How has your migration journey changed you or your partner? In what ways have you experienced pain or loss? In what ways have you grown?
Caring: *La simpatía*	Pay attention to how you both have suffered from conflict, pain, disconnect, and changes in your ecology. Notice how you each have affected the other. Acknowledge these impacts and spend time feeling what the other has felt as you breathe together empathetically. Make eye contact if it feels natural. Eye contact can amplify the intensity of this exercise.
Respect: *El respeto*	Remembering the qualities or behaviors you have engaged in that have caused suffering to yourself and others you care about. Invite accountability for the impact of these actions on your partner. Carefully consider how these words and actions have shaped your partner's sense of self. Respectfully acknowledge these effects. If it feels natural, apologize as you make eye contact.
Sociopolitical awareness: *La conciencia de lo sociopolitico*	Give attention to the injustices and difficult life experiences that have contributed to your struggles establishing your life together in the U.S. This may include hurtful ways you have been treated or difficulties you have had with finding a job, supporting your family, language-barriers, and/or discrimination. After acknowledging and attending to the effects of these difficulties with care and compassion for your relationship, you might match these with awareness of your strengths in overcoming or coping with these experiences.

**Note:* It is common to begin and end each of the above practices with present-moment awareness to amplify their positive effects by encouraging calm and mindful attention.

through a mindful commitment to each other and their increasingly mindful knowledge of themselves. This included Patricia sharing her need for more contact and for Juan to respond sensitively with lower emotional reactivity, while Juan expressed his need for more appreciation of his hard work. The following mindfulness interventions, inspired by Hanh (2003, 2015), were used in the middle and concluding stages of therapy. Instructions for the interventions can be found in Table 3.

Mindful Reflections on Immigration: Unas refleciones de imigración

Major life transitions, such as migration, can change how partners relate to one another. It is vital that couples who have experienced migration have the opportunity to explore how this major change has influenced and changed them. This will likely include attending to shared struggles and successes. Therapists might preface this exercise by explaining how immigration can change relationships along with the importance of attending to those changes as an "us" rather than separately as a "you and me." This type of shift to the relationship is consistent with Latinx collective cultural values. Therapists can remind clients that although many of these changes cannot be altered or controlled, they do have control over how to honor and/or address them. Responding wisely to these inevitable influences entails couples noticing that, although they did not choose them and might

not be happy with them, they do have agency to share and discuss this as well as to search out and ask for resources that might help.

Caring: La simpatía

The mindful practice of caring includes careful attention to how one's partner has suffered from conflict, pain, and disconnect. This may include hurtful words and actions each partner has inflicted on the other as well as pain resulting from difficult life circumstances. Each partner is asked to call to mind and deeply feel the pain the other has experienced before sharing these reflections and responding with love and care. Placing high value on relationships and care complements elements of Latinx culture such as *simpatía* and *familismo*.

Respect: El respeto

After acknowledging the pain the other partner has experienced, *el respeto* asks that each partner take accountability for the ways they have brought about this pain, even inadvertently. This practice encourages partners to flip the pattern of mutual blaming they may have gotten stuck in (Beckerman & Sarracco, 2011). It is important to note, however, that it is crucial to attend to power imbalances in the relationship because not all actions carry the same weight when it comes to accountability (e.g., misuse of male privilege). This practice is contraindicated for any forms of abuse or problematic power relations. The goal of this exercise is to foster accountability and thus create space for forgiveness, which is also a way to nurture *el respeto*.

Sociopolitical Awareness: La conciencia de lo sociopolitico

Sociopolitical awareness is necessary to address structural inequity that previous mindfulness literature may have missed in its narrow focus on the individual or immediate relationships and family. Broader structural and societal factors such as economic inequality, political corruption, and/or anti-immigrant sentiment and ethnic-based discrimination can deeply shape clients' experiences and cannot be overlooked by the therapist. Rather than blame themselves through discriminatory narratives that may be internalized, clients need the opportunity to reflect on the injustices in their lives and determine how they would like to relate to and process these experiences.

Wrapping up Treatment: Reflections on the Case Study

As Juan and Patricia neared the end of treatment, the therapist helped them explore and review what they had gained from therapy, as well as to

sit with and feel these gains in their bodies and relationship. They remembered with laughter how awkward the mindfulness tasks felt at first and reviewed ways they had strengthened their relationship, honoring how far they had come as a couple. In particular, they reported increased nonreactivity and higher emotional engagement and receptivity to each other, especially during arguments, as well as increased ability to be present with each other, with their children, and when at work. Juan reported that the metaphor of mindfulness as a tool to train and rewire the brain to "respond instead of react" was a strong motivator to attend the weekly therapy sessions.

It is important to highlight that Juan and Patricia were particularly resilient and committed to each other, as evidenced by the vast gains made in therapy. Many couples experiencing issues related to social poverty (see Halpern-Meekin, 2019) are not likely to access traditional therapy, but may instead seek services from community-based providers. Likewise, low-income and multi-stressed Latinx couples will not always be able to schedule time for traditional couple therapy due to time and/or financial constraints. Throughout this case, the therapist had to learn to be more flexible in session, tailor treatment to client needs and feedback, and infuse humor periodically as needed. This required the therapist to do his own mindfulness work to be able to aptly respond to what was happening in the room with the couple. In effect, the therapist (at times) needed to drop the agenda of implementing specific interventions and mindfully monitor the clients' experience so treatment could move forward collaboratively.

In addition, mindfulness interventions for Latinx couples may include limitations when only offered in the confines of private couple therapy. Researchers, practitioners, and scholars have indicated that traditional Latinx families prefer a group-oriented approach than an individual one (Cabassa, 2006; Falicov, 2009, 2013; Gallardo & Curry, 2009; Sanchez, 2016). Renowned Buddhist monk, prolific author, and peace activist Hanh (2003, 2015) asserted that many erroneously believe that mindfulness is an individual practice when, in fact, it is ideally practiced relationally. The most successful mindfulness programs have group formats (Gehart, 2012), and this may serve to increase adherence to mindfulness practices because humans are innately relational and bonding mammals and group practices increase accountability and motivation. Although Juan and Patricia benefited from an adapted approach, mindfulness practice in a group setting in the community may have been more effective or efficient for this couple based on a lower fee for services and the potential for community-building dynamics (Gehart, 2012). In summary, couple therapy with Juan and Patricia (as with all couples) was a journey that required therapist flexibility, willingness to learn, and the therapist's own mindful reflections.

Additional Considerations for Treatment

In addition to potential contraindications previously discussed in this paper, several other considerations for treatment are worth mentioning. In the Buddhist tradition where mindfulness originated, mindfulness meditation was traditionally taught by a leader with a wealth of experience (Gale, 2008). Practitioners who use mindfulness interventions are thus highly encouraged to have their own regular mindfulness practice (Gehart, 2012; Kabat-Zinn, 2006; McCollum, 2014; Siegel, 2010). At the very least, practitioners attempting to use these interventions should seek additional education about the origins and intents of these practices before implementing them with clients. Even though mindfulness stems from the Buddhist and Southeast Asian religious traditions, much of the empirical research cited took place in the West. Consequently, part of the integrity of mindfulness practices may have inevitably been lost in its translation from the East to the West. Although mindfulness research has been promising thus far, it is still limited in evidence-based research to fully support its use with diverse groups.

Ultimately, cultural and ecological validity of any intervention will be situated in each couple's unique needs and preferences. This warrants checking in throughout the process to ensure interventions are meeting the couple's needs and wishes. As discussed, family therapists will be more effective when they consider clients' unique contexts before intervening; this includes assessing for social and family supports that will be essential throughout treatment (Fabinyi et al., 2014; Helms et al., 2014; Linder, 2019; Minas & Lewis, 2017; Rothery, 2001; Ungar, 2013). Again, practitioners should use mindfulness practices only when tailored accordingly to families' unique contextual realities (Darling, 2007; Rothery, 2001).

Conclusions and Future Directions

This paper outlines pragmatic, contextually adapted relational interventions for clinicians wishing to utilize mindfulness with Latinx couples. The paper uses a detailed case example, compiled from a collection of real practice experiences, and offers interventions for clinicians to adapt to their own practice contexts. Although more research is needed to refine the implementation of mindfulness practices with Latinx couples, the practices discussed in this paper are grounded in the couple's unique cultural contexts, current scientific literature, and experience garnered through mindfulness practice with real couples. Continued practice and scholarship on how to contextually and culturally adapt mindfulness practices to be effective with Latinx couples and communities are needed. Future research is needed to

confirm the effectiveness of the proposed approach as well as to assess the extent to which it achieves the desired therapeutic outcomes.

Note

1. In particular, the therapist in this case study recommended the application *Insight Timer*: a worldwide, mindfulness social network that provides meditations of varying lengths and topics, available in Spanish and free-of-charge. It also offers many couple meditation practices.

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