

Kansas State University Libraries

New Prairie Press

Adult Education Research Conference

1998 Conference Proceedings (San Antonio,
TX)

The Formation of Identity in High-Achieving, Mexican-American Professional Women

Esmeralda de los Santos
University of the Incarnet Word

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc>



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

de los Santos, Esmeralda (1998). "The Formation of Identity in High-Achieving, Mexican-American Professional Women," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/1998/papers/24>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

The Formation of Identity in High-Achieving, Mexican-American Professional Women

Esmeralda de los Santos

University of the Incarnate Word

Abstract: This study examines how ten, high-achieving, professional Mexican-American women negotiate the Mexican-American and Anglo cultures and identifies what impact this negotiation has on their sense of identity. The women's early socialization determines whether they acculturate to the dominant culture; irritate it; adapt to it; or reject it.

"Know thyself" the ancient oracle at Delphi counseled wisdom seekers. Valid today as it was centuries ago, the oracle's advice is essential to adult development as it cultivates a sense of self and offers an internal coherence enabling the individual to determine and pursue life choices. Women, however, face particular challenges in the identity formation process. As Josselson (1987) notes, "the most important developmental task facing women today is the formation of identity, for it is in the realm of identity that a woman bases her sense of herself as well as her vision of the structure of her life (p. 3)." By its very nature, society can impede this process. Society functions as a guide for behavior imposing socially constituted and accepted ways of thinking and being for its members.

Cultural identity can be another significant barrier to individual identity formation in women, and this is definitely the case for Hispanic women. Family traditions and socialization processes maintain attitudes and behavior that may restrain future growth and as a result, can be seen as impediments to the formation of identity and adult development. For these women, integration with the dominant culture within the workplace becomes problematic as respected family values are challenged. As Anzaldúa (1987) so aptly describes, "Like other having or living in more than one culture, we get multiple, often opposing messages. The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes *un choque*, a cultural collision" (p. 78). The Mexican-American woman entering the professions finds herself negotiating meaning between two cultures and in the process renegotiating her sense of self. As increasing numbers of Mexican-American women enter the professions, many find the intersection of two cultures problematic. The purpose of this study was to explore how high-achieving Mexican-American professional women negotiate the Mexican-American and Anglo cultures and to identify what impact this has on their sense of identity.

The nature of this study shaped the choice of methodology. The formation of identity examines the individual within the context of the phenomenological self, the "ideas, images, and thoughts" (Denzin, 1992, p. 31) constructed by an individual situated in a unique sociocultural context. A

qualitative research methodology was used to study the subjective constructions of the participants and to acknowledge the historical, cultural, and social contexts in which an individual is situated.

The primary research question posited by this study was to determine the process by which high-achieving Mexican-American women negotiate the passage between the subculture and the dominant culture and to ascertain its impact on identity. The interview was selected as the method of data collection that would best capture the formation of identity within the ten participants' life histories. The first interview contextualized the participant within the formative years of childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. Research questions in this session asked women to talk about childhood socialization experiences that included family, friends, key events, early educational experiences through graduate school, and career development. The second interview focused on cultural transitions and asked women to reflect on themselves as the product of family, education and career, and as professionals functioning in two cultures.

Data analysis focused on the process of categorizing excerpts from twenty interviews into general categories. The categories were then compared to each other and developed into themes. While part of this study draws from traditional qualitative methods that sort and code data into themes, the participant profile was also used as means of situating each participant within the social context of her life and culture (Seidman, 1991). A snapshot of the woman's life history, the profile sought to distill the essence of the woman's personality, to convey self-representations, and to support and add depth to the conceptualizations found within each category.

Findings from this study suggest that the nature of the childhood determines how the women will relate to the larger society in adulthood. I found four distinct patterns of adjustment or ways of relating to the dominant culture: they acculturate to it, irritate it, adapt to it, or reject the mainstream American culture.

Acculturators identify with the dominant society. They do not shift between cultures but stay in one place, seeing the experience as holistic. "It's a whole package..... I don't see that I'm shifting from one [culture] to the other," says one participant. Acculturators work well within the system, defined as the workplace; educational, political, and religious institutions; and the people who represent these institutions. The system has consistently validated, recognized, and confirmed their abilities and self-worth. Society's rules worked for these women. As a result, these women feel trusted and accepted; they experience a sense of belonging to the dominant culture. They attribute their career successes to expertise, knowledge, and hard work. For these women, identity is primarily defined by career. The childhood of an Acculturator influenced the way in which this woman engaged the dominant culture. Their childhoods are characterized by a stable, nurturing home life, economic stability, paternal modeling of learning habits, positive educational experiences, early exposure to the dominant culture, and no reported childhood and adolescent experiences of racism.

Irritants identify with Mexican-American values and see themselves in conflict with Anglo culture. They work from within the dominant culture to change unjust institutional structures. Highly sensitive to issues of social, political, and economic injustice, they are willing to take political action to redress the system. Recalls one participant: "So I spent a lot of time dealing

with that [civil rights] issue in terms of fighting for rights that I thought we deserved, that I knew we deserved." Serving as voices for the oppressed, they challenge the system in confrontational ways. These women have a clear sense of right and wrong and are often unwilling to compromise on issues of justice. They pay a high price for their political positions, experiencing rejection and marginalization. For this particular group of women, acutely aware of the theoretical dimensions of injustice, the experience of being marginalized, devalued, and ignored is not lost in a haze of confusion. Intellectuals and visionaries, Irritants have a conceptual understanding of their experience. They use their intellectual ability to theorize, abstract, project, and envision, making the connections between power and racism, sexism, and oppression. Ethnicity is a major factor shaping the philosophy and practice of these women. For Irritants, identity is lodged in ethnicity. Their childhoods are marked by poverty, unhealthy family situations, racism, and oppressive learning environments. As children, Irritant circumvented rules and nurtured rebellious and nonconformist attitudes.

Adapters move between both cultures seeing them as distinct and isolated from one another. Developing different selves enables them to move from one culture to the other without outward conflict. Highly perceptive and conscious of the roles they play within cultures, they are especially sensitive to the discord adaptation creates within themselves. As one participant stated, "At this point I'm still crossing the bridge fairly effortlessly. But the burden is that you always have to split yourself." Adapters are pragmatic individuals who strategically maneuver through the system. In the workplace right and wrong are not viewed as opposites; compromise is an acceptable solution. As idealistic as Irritants, Adapters are less likely to pay a price for their minority stance because they have learned to capitalize on positive and negative opportunities. Motivated by success, connection to work is what activates these women. As children, Adapters share some common socialization experiences with Acculturators. They were raised in families that valued, protected, and sheltered children. They often described themselves as children as "special," "perfect," and "protected." Stable and secure, families possessed some economic resources and utilized the extended family in a variety of ways to help make ends meet. Mothers were influential. Some possessed strong personalities and a work ethic, while others were more traditional, consistently supportive and encouraging. Adapters experienced fewer instances of discrimination as children; when they experienced discrimination as young adults, they responded with shock and disbelief. Their response to crises was to regroup, rethink, and revise personal strategies.

The Rejector is able to succeed within the dominant culture but rejects it in favor of traditional values. The system has not always worked for this person, but she persevered and achieved despite great difficulties. She resolves the internal conflict characteristic of the Adapter by leaving the dominant culture altogether. As a child, this person developed a strong work ethic and belief in the Catholic religion. Faith, education, and thrift were core values. The Rejector dichotomizes the Anglo culture and the Mexican-American culture. She states, "Now how you make these career choices is the Hispanic in me, the Catholic in me. That's the Mexican in me. The Mexican in me says we're here to serve and not be served. The Anglo says, "You've got to be an individual, be independent, make all the money you can make because you've got to serve yourself." Associating the dominant culture with the ethic of individualism and independence, she clearly prefers and is most comfortable in the warmth and spirituality of her own culture. For the Rejector, identity is located within the domain of ethnicity. The Rejector's early socialization

included strong family values and an ingrained work ethic. Sheltered within her family and small border-town community, this person had no access to the dominant culture. Socialized with a strong religious orientation in her life, religion continues to play a vital role in her life.

In conclusion, the common assumption is that all Mexican-American women shift between cultures and experience conflict as a result. Yet there is more to this supposition. The process of negotiating two cultures is seen in the dynamic patterns of adjustment determined by childhood socialization and moderated by adult experience. Conflict is not common to all participants and four factors act to moderate this cultural collision: the safe environment provided by family life, availability of economic resources, quality of educational experiences, and consistent exposure to the dominant culture. Social class mediates among the dominant culture, the minority culture, the family, and the individual. Social class, the family's social position within the larger society as determined by its access to income and education, influences how the individual will engage with the dominant culture as an adult. Social class then becomes a factor that shapes identity.

The theoretical implications that stem from this study center upon the constructivist proposition that our interpretation of reality and truth is rooted in the social environment in which we experience the world. For Mexican-American professional women, the subculture plays a key role in determining not only identity but also in forming a world view that is very different from that of the dominant society. This world view shapes unique patterns and strategies used to engage the learning, professional, and/or cultural environment.

In educational practice, this theory can help Mexican-American women understand themselves better so they are more comfortable with who they are and with what they do best in both cultural domains. In the workplace, mentoring programs can be better suited to meet women's needs when the patterns of adjustment to the dominant culture are taken into account.

References

- Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands: The new mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Denzin, N. K. (1989). *Interpretive biography*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Josselson, R. (1987). *Finding herself*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Seidman, I. E. (1991). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. New York: Teachers College Press.