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Latinas and Adult Development Theories

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Abstract: *This qualitative study examined the acculturation path of two groups of Latinas, highly educated professional Hispanic women and female migrant workers, in order to illuminate their human development process.*

The notion that life changes serve as a major trigger to adult learning has given adult development theories an important place in the adult education curriculum. Until very recently, traditional *phase of life cycle* and *developmental stage* theories dominated the discourse. A recent effort to look at the psychosocial development of women has opened the doors to other voices and has also created awareness of those missing. This study explored one of those missing: Latinas.

The traditional paradigm of developmental change describes human development as a process of maturational unfolding. It treats the individual as a self-contained entity failing to recognize the complexity and variability of the cultural environment. The new voices in adult development acknowledge socio-cultural knowledge and human intentionality as factors mediating development. It is my belief that, within adult education, critical perspectives better explain the interaction between socio-cultural environment and human intentionality. Critical theory focuses on the structured nature of power relations in society providing the tools to analyze appropriately the developmental patterns of marginalized groups.

I used qualitative methods of data collection and critical theory for analysis. My conversations with Latinas followed a semi-structured interview format. I kept my questions to a minimum allowing for the participants to share and make sense of their experiences from their own perspectives. By comparing two different groups of Latinas: highly educated professional Hispanic women and female migrant workers, my research aimed to illuminate similarities and differences in their acculturation process into the dominant culture.

The Study:

Questions of Culture and Belonging

Latinas, as the term is used in the United States, are women who share a historical tradition of Spanish colonization and communicate among themselves primarily in Spanish. Yet, most come from very distinctive cultural groups and had very different experiences upon arrival in the United States. As a distinct population, they have gained national minority group status. According to Robinson (1992), characterization as a national minority group combines the notion of an ethnic or racial group with that of a minority group. An ethnic or racial group is distinguishable from the dominant society because it shares common characteristics; a minority group plays a subordinate role in a class society as a result of race or ethnicity. Betances (1993) defined ethnicity as “the ability of people from a similar region of the world, who find themselves in a hostile environment, to see the urgency of harnessing their numbers under a common identity so as to operate as an interest group for the purpose of removing barriers to social progress” (p. 1).

Ethnicity, in this sense, is a human invention by people who share a common experience of rejection and who agree to define themselves as positive agents of social change. Until very recently, Latinas in the Southern states were geographically scattered and too small in numbers to exert any impact at the local level. This is changing very rapidly, yet their ethnic identification is still in formation.

I had purposely selected two very different groups of Latinas to be able to compare and contrast their experiences. Yet, while listening to their voices I found marked differences but also striking similarities. Whether their experiences were expressed in the sophisticated terms used by the professional women or in the rather simple and colloquial terms used by the female migrant workers, both groups told me of their daily quest to

clarify a self-image, improve interpersonal relations, and find a voice and a place in society.

Zavella (1994) suggested that researchers pay close attention to what she calls "social location" when trying to understand differences among various groups of Latinas. To Zavella, social location is the social space created by the intersection of class, race, gender, and culture. Another important consideration is generation. Whether Latinas are first generation (born in the United States), part of a subsequent generation born in the United States, or recent immigrants has implications for language used, cultural knowledge, and self-identification. A Latina's generation affects whether she feels a sense of identification and solidarity with other Latinas, whether she feels marginalized or whether she feels more "American" than Latina. While analyzing the data, I looked for social location and generational differences as guiding points.

The Findings: Ambivalent Acculturation

This study revealed that Latinas in the South, like Latinas everywhere in the nation, are at different locations in the process of acculturation and struggling to create a self-image yet at the same time preserve a healthy image of their culture of origin. Recently arrived migrant women's social location seems to be the most marginalized and therefore the most affected by issues of class, race, gender, and culture. Despite the stress produced by conflicting cultural traits for professional Latinas, the Hispanic culture provides them with a sense of identity that they value and that is constantly reinforced by regular contact with the Latino community. Latinas who were born in the United States have constructed an ethnic identity stemming from shared historical experiences. They are the most acculturated and least

ambivalent group and have been able to transcend most barriers.

Since ethnicity is a human strategy for survival by which people shape a collective identity, Latinas in the South are beginning to shape their identity based on cultural traits shared and as a response to experiences of isolation and rejection. But culture also places constraints on experiences and Latinas are working through those constraints. Many are engaged in fostering issues of diversity and improving interpersonal relations by building bridges between the Hispanic and local communities. They have found a voice and constructed a place for themselves in the South.

Human development researchers interested in learning more about this segment of the population should pay close attention to Latinas personal histories, to the path of their migration, to how their local communities were formed, and to the key and structurally based differences among them. It is also important to consider how each woman's generation, age, and level of acculturation affect her construction of a social identity.

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