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Luis Kong
San Francisco State University, USA

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Mujeres en Acción—Women in Action: Race, Gender and Economic Self-Sufficiency in a Worker-Owned Housecleaning Cooperative

Luis Kong
San Francisco State University, U.S.A.

Keywords: Cooperatives, Latina immigrants, feminist theory, popular education, community organizing, democratic social change

Abstract: This paper investigates the experiences of Spanish-speaking Latina immigrants within a worker-owned housecleaning cooperative. Their learning challenges with language, gender, race and class issues in the process of organizing and managing their cooperative business is discussed from a feminist, learning perspective, popular education and community development approaches within immigrant populations.

Introduction

“What I've learned, I'll never forget.” Luisa Rodriguez, a leader of Mujeres en Acción housecleaning cooperative, stated. This simple statement reflects her conviction to turn the challenges of starting a collectively run business into a successful cleaning service that will benefit her family and community for years to come.

The purpose of this study is to investigate and analyze the experiences of Spanish-speaking Latina immigrants within a worker-owned housecleaning cooperative. This study intends to provide a profile of the leader-workers and their learning experiences with language, gender, race and class issues in their challenging process of organizing a low-toxic housecleaning cooperative.

The development of cooperative enterprises serves as a foundation for social change among immigrant women. Their personal experiences and individual empowerment issues contribute to an important understanding of adult education in an informal and non-formal setting that is guided by a motivation to succeed economically. Through action, reflection and solving real problems, the cooperative members begin to gain a critical understanding of issues dealing with race, gender, language and socio-economic status as a consequence of their roles as housecleaners. The realities of people who are at the margins of the dominant culture such as people of color, women, immigrants, the poor are not seen nor heard. The cooperative enterprise provides the institutional means by which their voice is seen and heard. A women-owned cooperative offer its members an opportunity to create a Latina-centered learning environment and to exercise their leadership skills by learning about democratic control of their own workplace.

Conceptual Perspective

A 1992 survey prepared by the National Economic Development & Law Center (NEDLC) has found that cooperative ventures have improved the economic well-being of low income immigrant women with limited English language skills by providing part time work and a flexible schedule that fits their family needs. One of the most successful enterprises has been

developed in the areas of housecleaning. Housecleaning provides only part time employment to the majority of the women and little to no fringe benefits, but allowed for associations and collectives to function well by operating under the direction of independent contractors. The unincorporated association model offers a greater flexibility for their members and for the sponsoring organization even though the model is a short-term legal solution to developing a business enterprise (Conover, Molina & Morris, 1992).

The greatest difficulty illustrated in the NEDLC survey is the dual goal of developing profitable enterprises while increasing the leadership skills of the members (Conover et al, 1992). One of the major factors that made these cooperative ventures successful was the involvement of a skillful and committed business manager and/or organizer and the institution of clear internal policies that required the members to be accountable. Organizational development assistance, low overhead expenses especially at start-up, an upper-income market, a high quality service, an emphasis on training and evaluation of the cooperative members, and an emphasis on developing English proficiency among the members were identified as additional factors for business success.

The immigration laws, especially in California under Governor Wilson, have been increasingly tightened. These factors and a recession during the late 80's and early 90's contributed to an increase in the poverty level and unemployment among the immigrant communities in California. Currently, national immigration policies still criminalize immigrant workers without providing a clear pathway to legalization (National Immigration Forum, 2005). There have been some major changes in the demand for labor. The undocumented immigrant population is at the margins of the labor force and just as susceptible to demographic and market shifts that are already hurting more than 40 million people in the United States who live below the poverty line (Clark & Dawson, 1995). The unemployed and under-employed poor in urban and rural settings are increasingly women and their dependents. They are under-employed in low paying temporary jobs with very little chance for advancement. Even while workers are employed, they still remain below the poverty line (Surpin & Bettridge, 1986).

The Sonoma housecleaning cooperatives were launched by a community-based organization, the Sonoma County Faith-Based Community Organizing Project (SCFBOP) that later became the Sonoma-Napa Action Project (SNAP). In collaboration with the Catholic Church, one of SNAP's goals was to provide jobs to immigrant and refugee populations. These populations work for minimum wage, in menial jobs without any possibility of advancement. The development of a new cooperative business has created higher paying jobs, and educational incentive (health education, parenting skills, ESL classes), and mutual self-help. Clients pay the cooperative \$16-20 per hour of work. After paying each member \$12 per hour, the cooperative deposits the rest of the money into a central reserve that is used to purchase cleaning products and equipment, which previously had to come from each member's pocket. The reserve can be distributed at the end of the year as bonuses. A revolving loan fund was also established at a local bank to provide micro-loans for the cooperatives and its members.

The cooperative business has as its central goal to educate its members so that they have the tools and the vision to remain both competitive and cooperative at the same time. The empowerment of low-income workers by way of controlling their own workplace has been a core value of community-based cooperative development ventures.

From the perspective of critical and feminist pedagogy, the cooperative members are not just engaged in a business venture, but also in their own social transformation as responsible leaders and women involved in their own education. They become knowledgeable about the

external power relations that are evident in their role as residential housecleaners of Mexican and Central American descent working for White, middle to upper income clients. These women acknowledged the effect that racism has on their lives. They understood the role language played in their ability to make a living. For them, language was probably one of the biggest obstacles that they faced in organizing the housecleaning cooperative. Emancipatory learning comes about when a connection is made between a person's current situation and the social conflict between those who hold power and privilege and those who are oppressed by them (Tisdell, 1993). The women leaders in the housecleaning cooperatives have come to understand that to run their organization they must remember experiences of economic and social injustice because it brings them back to the reason their cooperative got started in the first place. Unity and discipline has become their motto.

The increase in their self-esteem and their ability to make their own choices is directly related to becoming more financially independent. By gaining new knowledge about their capacity to work independently, the women shifted the power relation between them and their husbands while at the same time balancing their role as a mother, wife, community leader and immigrant. The cooperative setting provided a context for leadership development that advocates a liberatory feminist pedagogy. Gallos (1991) states that personal transformation is not separated from professional development. The opportunity to decide what to do with their own money provides a context for gaining and using their own voices.

The feminist perspective rejects the objectivist view of reality as a fixed, unchangeable and stable view. The reality of minority women and other oppressed groups goes counter to a dominant agenda because they view reality not as factual and generalizable but related to cultural and historical influences that point to the causes of poverty and oppression. Our social upbringing and our relation to power in society construct our perception of the world. So even as I describe research dealing with women's ways of knowing, it is important to clarify that there is no one way among women that knowledge is acquired or processed. Sheard (1994) writes that there are many different ways that people express and reflect their worldview. The concept of polyrhythmic realities legitimizes a women's worldview and the view of other marginalized people who have fallen silent because of race, language or socio-economic status. There are multiple ways of knowing. Women are not unfamiliar with the importance of multiple roles. They are businesswomen, mothers, wives, daughters, leaders and so on.

The process of learning is a process of constant negotiation between the learner and society (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). In the case of the cooperatives, their business places the women in direct communication with their clients, and the women have to understand what they have to clean and how as dictated by the client's needs in order to compete in the marketplace. A learning-centered approach, as stated by Hutchinson and Waters, considers the learner at every stage of lesson development (1987). Course design becomes a negotiated process between teacher and learner and is changeable. The coop members' learning readiness is tied to their personal goals, their former critical events and knowledge as well as their intercultural experience. The space created by the cooperative process can create changes in values, self-confidence and perspective through deep reflection or planned action (Taylor, 1994).

Research Design

An ethnographic study was designed to document the experiences of cooperative leaders by asking open-ended questions. The participants' stories provide an opportunity to formulate a

broader picture of their lives. Data collection was accomplished through triangulation. Primarily, the data was collected through taped interviews with three cooperative leaders. In addition, the researcher recorded information through participant observation, field notes and the use of key informants including an additional 40 house-cleaning cooperative participants.

The following research questions provide a framework for this study: What experiences do Latinas have in the process of organizing their housecleaning cooperative? In what ways did language, race, socio-economic status and gender influence the abilities of Latinas involved in the organization of a housecleaning cooperative? In what ways did the cooperative change these women's views about themselves and their ability to organize a cooperative?

The participants chose the setting they felt most comfortable. At times, we met at McDonalds, and at other times, we met at their homes. These natural settings provided the background for the interviews. Since I was also the community organizer in charge of the cooperatives, I was sensitive to the influence I had as a male researcher and a coop insider.

Findings

The cooperative environment is a place where immigrant women can get validation for their life experience, where they can construct meaning by telling their stories and by building on a set of values and interests that guide their business. They can claim their own voices by putting into practice what they believe in and by helping other women and their families share the benefits of mutual support. The emerging stories of Luisa Rodriguez, Susana Olveda and Olivia Villas are organized into the following three major themes:

Life experience: Breaking Barriers of Status, Gender and Language.

Life experiences are an important asset in formulating a map of our values and interests as we engage in new endeavors that test our intelligence and tenacity to move forward and expand our horizons. By acknowledging the value of our life experience we set the stage for further learning and for building our motivation to improve ourselves in a public leadership role.

Luisa Rodriguez has a second grade education. She is one of the cooperative's strongest leaders. Luisa recounted her early experiences in organizing and said that during her childhood she had already begun to take risks and try new things. She recalls, "So, as a young girl, I took a lot of risks. Yes, I like that very much. I liked taking risks, and do things. I like selling things. So, as a young girl I would bring my younger brothers and sisters to sell things in the street. Yes, I used to bring them to do the work. I felt I had it inside of me, but I couldn't bring it out." She sees this early experience as the first sign that she is capable of bringing people together. As a young girl, she already had the ability to organize. She needed a place for those talents to take root and grow.

Learning to Tell Our Stories: Looking at Oneself in the Mirror

The second major theme that emerged from the data focused on self-improvement. By looking at one self in the mirror and being able to reflect on past experiences as significant and valuable, Luisa, Susana and Olivia are now speaking about learning to tell those stories and listening to the stories of others. Each one of them had reached a point in their lives in which their cumulative life experiences and the opportunities that presented themselves impelled them to a more challenging position and direction that both fit their self-interest and provided a chance for self-improvement.

Luisa Rodriguez points out that her self-improvement began when she learned to relate to people of different cultures through the training she received through the organizing project (SNAP). She said that in order to see herself from divergent angles she had to be able to listen to other people's stories with concern as well as learn from those stories. By listening to people's ideas and concerns, she knew that their comments could ultimately spark her own fire to move in an interesting direction.

Claiming Their Own Voices: Becoming Mentors and Role Models

The theme of claiming one's voice is the factor that brings the life histories and the motivation for self-improvement into context. Leadership emphasizes self-improvement. Self-improvement isn't something that the coop members decided to do all of the sudden. It is the result of clarifying one's self-interest and leading one's life from a broader perspective, a larger vision, if you may, about how life should be rather than what it is.

Immigrants contribute to the economy in almost every industry, but their efforts are seldom respected and their leadership unrecognized. The housecleaning cooperative workers refused to be treated as servants because they were Latina, dark skinned or because of limited English. As one of the leaders of the coop, Luisa Rodriguez expressed her feelings about standing up for herself. She said, "I grew as a leader in the cooperative. I have learned how to treat people who are working with us. That is also very important. You need to have character. You need to be somewhat strict because if one is weak those same people will take advantage of you. So then the business won't work. Above all, you have to be responsible." The cooperative enterprise is a real life university for the women where they learn by doing, and by making real decisions that directly affect their business and their lives.

Implications for adult education theory and practice

It is important to investigate the leadership opportunities among these women by framing current research with what is already known about women's development and ways of knowing within a socio-economic perspective including issues of language, race, gender and class, and by questioning the accepted educational canon.

The greatest challenge to an adult educator is to design and implement a training curriculum that is relevant and compelling to the adult learners and avoid creating a situation that reproduces the oppression immigrant women suffer in the workplace, at home and in classrooms.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations can be implemented:

1. Reserve time and space for individual meetings and reflection. Maintain a woman-centered environment by acknowledging and incorporating people's life experiences, personal stories that add meaning to participants' involvement, and include activities that enhances leadership and accountability.
2. Include the learner as an active participant in the planning, development and implementation of economic development projects. They must succeed by acting in a matter true to their values.
3. The cooperative model must have a governance structure that fits the learning processes of the participants while maintaining accountability and unity. The recruitment of women with leadership potential and who are entrepreneurial at heart should be a priority.
4. Make learning immediately transferable to the participants' work. Design lessons in short, but concise, modules with a high degree of participation and small group interaction.

Involve the participants in teaching all aspects of the curriculum and in running their own meetings.

5. English instruction must be related to their workplace such as communication between worker and client, being able to estimate cleaning jobs, responding to client requests for special cleaning, and basic writing and reading skills. The women know that by improving their English skills they can increase what they earn. Good communication with their clients means better service and more income. The participant's self-improvement in one area positively expands the opportunities in other areas of her life.

This study will add to the body of popular education literature and community development by providing a profile and an analysis of experiences and contributions of a group of women who although invisible within the dominant culture are improving their lives, and claiming their voices. These findings can be significant in providing ways to improve and avoid pitfalls in future cooperative ventures among this target population, and to reflect upon the relevance of critical pedagogy and feminist theory as it applies to real life situations.

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