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Ana Guisela Chupina  
*Iowa State University*

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## **A Qualitative Inquiry into Central American Immigrant Women's Perceptions of Adult learning**

Ana Guisela Chupina

Iowa State University

**Abstract:** Five Central American immigrant women living in a metropolitan area of the Midwestern United States were interviewed. Findings revealed that adult learning was perceived as empowering and experienced as continuous, informal, experiential, and relational.

With 28.4 million foreign-born residents in 2000 (Lollock, 2001), the United States was the largest recipient of international migrants in the world. In 2000, the foreign-born made up 10.4% of the total U.S. population. When examined by region of origin, more than one half were born in Latin America, one fourth were born in Asia, and fewer than one eighth were born in Europe. Among those born in Latin America, Central Americans are one of the most disadvantaged groups to have arrived in the United States over the last two decades (Rumbaut, 1996; Therrien & Ramirez, 2000). Triggered by economic decline, civil wars, and natural disasters, the immigration of Central Americans has more closely resembled a refugee pattern than a pattern of voluntary migration (Mahler, 1995). However, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) has provided relatively few Central Americans with political asylum or authorization to reside and work in the United States (Gonzalez, 2000). On the contrary, the INS's classification of Central Americans as economically motivated immigrants has seriously restricted their eligibility for legal U.S. immigration status. Consequently, Central Americans have joined Mexicans in comprising one third of the approximately 8 million undocumented immigrants residing in the United States (Porter, 2001). In addition to U.S. immigration policy, movement of the American economy from an industrial to an information economy has contributed to making the United States a challenging context for reception of Central American immigrants. In an American economy characterized by industrial restructuring and downsizing, employment opportunities for newcomers have been available in either highly-skilled professions or low-wage services (Bach, 1997). Difficulties obtaining legal status, low levels of formal education, and lack of proficiency in English have contributed to restricting the economic and social opportunities available to Central Americans in the United States. Gender-based patterns of labor recruitment have made particularly difficult the employment mobility of Central American immigrant women (Repak, 1995). Many of these immigrant women are locked into poorly-paid jobs as domestics, chambermaids, building cleaners, and sewing-machine operators.

Within adult education, the profile of Central American immigrants has contributed to classifying them as a language minority population with low levels of formal education, which in turn has limited their access to educational opportunities. For instance, inadequate funding (Wrigley, 1993) and inappropriate methods and materials (Graham & Cookson, 1990) have made mainstream Adult Basic Education (ABE), Adult Secondary Education (ASE), and English as a Second Language (ESL) education programs ineffective for meeting the needs and interests of non-English-speaking immigrants with low levels of literacy. A prevalent lack of understanding and respect for the language and culture of ethnic minorities has contributed to discouraging the participation of these adult learners (Sparks, 2002).

On the other hand, community-based education has offered a viable alternative to mainstream ABE, ASE, and ESL education programs. Popular education, in particular, has been considered ideal for working with Latin American immigrants because it bridges gaps between formal, non-formal, and

informal adult learning (Jeria, 1999). Yet the capacity of community-based programs for addressing specific community issues is often limited by a lack of precise knowledge of learners' perceptions on the part of educators and program leaders (Jeria, 1990). From this perspective, developing an understanding of Central American immigrants' experiences and perceptions of adult learning is necessary for enhancing the learning opportunities available to this population. Given the gender-specific employment situations of Central American immigrant women, gaining insight into their learning experiences seems imperative.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this inquiry was to develop an understanding of the phenomenon of adult learning among Central American immigrant women in the United States. Drawing on two qualitative research methodologies, life story and phenomenology, the inquiry specifically sought to examine the meanings that five Central American immigrant women made of their adult learning experiences in the Midwestern United States. In order to gain a deeper understanding, the participants' perceptions were examined within the context of the women's lives before and after immigrating to the United States. Considering the employment challenges faced by Central American immigrant women, the inquiry also explored how these women related their roles as adult learners to work expectations.

### **Methodology**

A qualitative research approach was appropriate for fulfilling the aims of the inquiry: to understand the meaning of *adult learning* as a human experience by eliciting first-person accounts and by focusing on the whole of the participants' experiences (Merriam, 1998). A qualitative research approach was also congruent with my views on the construction of knowledge and the influence of multiple dimensions of identity on learners' interpretations of their social worlds.

Five research questions guided the inquiry: 1) How do Central American immigrant women describe their experiences of learning in the Midwestern United States? 2) How do Central American immigrant women perceive their experiences of learning in the Midwestern United States? 3) What specific meanings do Central American immigrant women give to adult learning? 4) How do Central American immigrant women relate their roles as adult learners to work expectations? 5) To what extent do earlier experiences in the country of origin contribute to the women's understanding of adult learning and self-concepts? A purposeful sample of five Central American immigrant women living in a metropolitan area of the Midwestern United States was selected for the inquiry. A maximal variation sampling strategy was used to elicit a multiplicity of perspectives on adult learning from participants who differed in two or more characteristics identified in the literature as potentially influential: age, length of residency in the United States, marital status, motherhood, educational attainment, knowledge of English, employment, and immigration status. Data collection followed Seidman's (1998) model for in-depth phenomenological interviewing, which combined two types of interviews informed by assumptions underlying the methodologies of life story and phenomenology. A series of three 90-minute interviews was conducted with each participant. With one exception, all interviews were conducted and inductively analyzed in Spanish. Upon completion of each series of interviews, the data were reduced and crafted into a first-person narrative that captured each participant's story of learning. Subsequently, each interview series was inductively analyzed through a process that included coding for topics, developing categories, and identifying themes. Once the preliminary analysis of all interview series was accomplished, data analysis led to identifying common themes among the participants' perceptions. Findings were represented in

two ways: 1) Five life stories of learning in the form of first-person narratives in Spanish with full English translations, and 2) Themes supported by quotations in Spanish with corresponding English translations.

### **Findings**

The life stories of learning conveyed the voices of five Central American immigrant women: Evelyn, Ana, Dulce, Domi, and Azucena. While the stories reconstructed the women's learning experiences from childhood to adulthood, they also illustrated a shift between two major contexts: country of origin and U.S. context of reception. Key concepts in Elder's (1995) life course paradigm proved useful for interpreting similarities and differences among the participants' life stories. Six patterns revealed interacting factors that contributed to shaping the participants' self-concepts as learners and perceptions of learning: 1) historical change and timing; 2) socioeconomic status, rural or urban setting, and family composition; 3) gender socialization; 4) linked lives; 5) context of reception; and 6) human agency.

The themes, which are summarized in this paper, uncovered three domains in the participants' experiences and understanding of the phenomenon of adult learning in the U.S. context of reception: Concept, Process, and Outcome.

#### **Concept: How did the participants think about adult learning?**

The participants shared empirical conceptualizations of learning that were rooted in their experiences as lifelong learners, adults, immigrants, and women.

*Lifelong learning.* The participants perceived learning as an ongoing, albeit fluid, human experience. The five women associated learning with change and perceived it as a process that assisted them in fulfilling social roles, approaching new situations, and moving forward in life. Overall, learning was perceived as a recurring and cumulative lifelong phenomenon capable of producing positive changes in how a person approaches her life's circumstances.

*Adult learning.* The participants' perceptions of adult learning included advantages, obstacles, and successful attitudes for engaging in formal and non-formal types of learning. Whereas all participants considered purpose and accountability as advantages, some also recognized the need to overcome negative feelings of insecurity and preconceived notions about aging and learning. All five participants underscored the importance of approaching adult learning with initiative and determination.

*Immigrant learning.* From their perspectives as immigrants, the participants perceived learning as integral to their lives in the United States. While learning permeated various areas of their lives, many of their learning experiences centered on work and cultural issues. Being in low-wage and short-term jobs triggered continuous learning at work. Living in a Midwestern city with a relatively small immigrant population and insufficient institutional support made their cultural adaptation and learning processes especially challenging. One participant emphasized the impact of local perceptions, which included attitudes of ethnocentrism and racism, on the experiences of Spanish-speaking, dark-skinned immigrants.

*Women's learning.* The participants associated immigrant women's learning with changes in gender role expectations and gender relations. In their view, the U.S. context of reception had provided them with learning opportunities that contributed to transcending traditional female gender roles. At the same time, they believed that, among Central American immigrants, a woman's attitude towards learning was not only influenced by her own beliefs about what was fitting for a woman to learn, but also by the gender relations within her family. However, the degree to which participants thought the attitudes of male partners were responsible for hindering or facilitating immigrant women's learning varied. One participant emphasized immigrant

women's agency, pointing out that women responded to similar marital conditions in ways that were far too varied and complex to simplify.

**Process: How did the participants experience adult learning?**

The participants' experiences in the United States revealed adult learning processes that were continuous, informal and incidental, experiential, and relational.

*Learning is continuous.* Pursuing adult learning in a continuous manner was intimately bound to the participants' immigrant experiences. On the one hand, living and working in the United States exposed the women to social, cultural, economic, and political conditions that were new to them and different from those they might have expected to experience in their countries of origin. On the other hand, immigrant employment conditions made the participants move through different kinds of jobs within relatively short periods of time, which in turn required them to continuously meet new learning demands.

*Learning is informal and incidental.* The participants' adult learning experiences were primarily informal and incidental. Informal learning occurred as the participants made deliberate efforts to resolve situations that required knowledge, skills, or attitudes that were new to them. In particular, the women described situations that required: 1) interacting with the material conditions of the new environment, 2) pursuing English proficiency, 3) understanding American values and behaviors, and 4) developing competence at work. Incidental learning occurred as a byproduct of the participants' interactions in various social settings and centered on cultural issues such as English language acquisition and intercultural understanding.

*Learning is experiential.* Experience was integral to the participants' learning processes in four distinct ways; experience was a basis, strategy, resource, and medium for learning. First, experience was a basis for learning when the participants gained insights and developed attitudes as a result of making meaning of whole experiences. Second, experience was a strategy for learning when the participants purposefully relied on doing or experiencing something as a means for learning. Third, experience was a resource for learning when the participants used the experience of others as a source of knowledge. Fourth, experience was a medium for learning when the participants learned while acting upon and responding to situations in the new environment.

*Learning is relational.* The participants' learning was relational in manner and purpose. In manner, much of the participants' learning occurred within social situations. The participants learned through their interpersonal interactions with relatives, fellow immigrants, schoolteachers, health-care providers, co-workers and supervisors, church leaders, and social service volunteers. In this sense, the participants' Latina cultural dispositions for promoting smooth and pleasant social relationships were an asset for building relationships that contributed to enhancing the women's learning opportunities. In purpose, the women were motivated to learn by their desire to benefit others, for example, their own children, extended families, fellow nationals, other foreign-born persons, local communities, and the American society at large.

*Outcome: What were the consequences of the participants' learning?*

Engaging in adult learning processes that were continuous, informal, experiential, and relational had an empowering effect on the participants' personal development. In the process of learning, the participants experienced a wide range of feelings. When engaging in challenging or unfamiliar learning situations, the participants experienced unpleasant feelings of insecurity, anxiety, frustration, and sadness. However, upon succeeding in learning situations, the participants enjoyed pleasant feelings of security, excitement, happiness, satisfaction, and pride. As the women recurrently moved from negative to positive feelings, their preparedness for acting

upon new situations, as well as their learning aspirations, evolved over time. Developing knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for interacting successfully in diverse social settings increased the women's self-reliance, strengthened their self-confidence, and gave way to new personal aspirations. Therefore, learning as adults in the United States changed not only how the participants interacted with the material and sociocultural conditions within the U.S. context of reception, but it also changed how they viewed and projected themselves. One aspect that remained constant in the women's aspirations, however, was their interest in bettering themselves as a means to benefit others.

### **Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice**

The findings revealed that adult learning was intimately bound to the participants' immigrant experiences. While the participants' early learning experiences prior to immigrating influenced their self-concepts as learners and their initial dispositions for learning as adults in the United States, the U.S. context of reception was central to the women's experiences. Material and sociocultural conditions contributed to shaping adult learning processes that were continuous, informal and incidental, experiential, and relational. Overall, engaging in these forms of adult learning increased the participants' preparedness for acting upon unfamiliar situations and gave way to new learning aspirations. However, as one participant pointed out,

It takes a long time and we live in a time when we're feeding our population with immigrants. And my position now is like, what can we do so that people don't have to go through anything that I went through to learn how to live here?—Azucena.

Given the inquiry findings, two theoretical lenses—situated cognition (Hansman, 2001; Wilson, 1993) and sociocultural theory (Alfred, 2002)—could be particularly helpful for considering adult educational interventions to assist these learners.

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