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The Rise of Latina Culture and the Political Economy of English in Kansas: Perceptions of Adult Learners

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Abstract: This research is drawn from two focus groups—one with Latina college students and the other with Latinas attending a Kansas City, KS, adult-learning center.

The economic future of Kansas is dependent upon the continuous arrival of new immigrants to fuel the expected growth in employment in both rural and urban communities. In many communities non-English speaking ethnic groups are now the majority or are becoming the majority. In the fiscal year 2007, 41% of adult learners in Kansas were Hispanic, 37% white, 11% African-American, 8%, and 3% Native American. In Kansas City, KS, over 55% of the adult learners are Hispanic. In southwest Kansas, 78% of Garden City adult learners are Hispanic, in Liberal 90% are Hispanic, and in Dodge City 91% are Hispanic. While new Latino immigrants in Kansas have little trouble finding jobs, buying groceries, or owning a house, they are excluded from decision-making cliques and vulnerable to exploitation in the workplace and their communities.

This empirical research situates the perceptions of adult learners within the global economy that brought them to Kansas. Our data is drawn from two focus groups—one with Kansas State University Latinas (3/8/07) who started in an adult learning center or whose parents took classes at an adult learning center, and the other with Latinas attending a Kansas City, Kansas (3/22/07), adult learning center. Focus group participants signed an interview consent form in either Spanish or English, which included an option to withdraw at any time during their focus group without consequences. A confidentiality clause was added to safeguard their identities. The focus groups were conducted entirely in Spanish except for periodic discussions that mingled both English and Spanish. Each focus group member was paid a modest fee (\$50) for the two-hour session, and lunch or dinner was provided. This research was supported by a grant from KSU Tilford Incentive Grant to expand multicultural research and scholarly activities. The research presented in this paper is part of a larger project that includes case studies of five adult learning centers and eight additional focus groups of adult learners across Kansas.

Emerging Themes and Categories

Exigency—evidence of a situation characterized by necessity, demand, emergency, pressure, or requirements. An example of a participant statement coded exigency is, “I am here working hard, to be an example to my kids [so they learn]...that you have to study because it is the only way to get ahead. There isn’t any other way.” Another example is, “I have worked and

studied English but of course, like always, you find a job and stop studying English...and then you start working...and then you return to studying...and that's the way it goes".

Powerlessness—evidence that someone other than the individual control them, such as the advisor, teacher, administrator. An example of powerlessness is, "I had many teachers that said that I need documentation to prove that I need extra time [in a test]. Or maybe they would say that I did not qualify to study here [at a four year university] if I didn't know the language. They would say: 'well, if you don't know what I'm talking about, perhaps you shouldn't even be here.' And if I asked for extra time on a paper, they would say that they need the documentation to prove that I counted as a disabled student. And I would get mad and say that this is not a learning disability, this is a second-language barrier."

Self-Worth—evidence of a person's sense of worth, confidence, and self-esteem as a result of their participation or accomplishments. Examples of responses coded self-worth are, "I am alone here [college] with three kids, but when I got here I said, 'Even if it takes me 10 years to get a degree, I'm going to go for it and get it,'" and "I am very happy to be in the U.S., and I don't want to be a burden for anyone, so I work and take English as a second language classes."

Energy—evidence of a power that influences a person's behavior. The concept of "energy" is meant to convey a positive force. An example of energy is, "I'm proud of myself. My kids are very proud of me too, because I have the strength to keep going, and going. I'm proud of myself!"

Mentor—evidence of an adviser, counselor, or "critical friend"(distinguished from a confidant who is a best friend) who provides guidance and opens doors of opportunity for the participant; encourages and enables participant to take a positive path. An example is, "My sister said, 'When you go to college, look for places where you can find tutors, and go and do your homework at these places, like go to this lab.' Other friends also helped me apply for things at school, and I wouldn't be anywhere today if it weren't because of them."

Empowerment/Agency—evidence that the participant feels in control of his/her destiny. An example is, "I used to ask my daughters to help me [with English], like when I had to study for math or things like that, so they would help me. And now it is backwards, I'm helping them! Not only in English, but also in math, now they come and they ask me for help."

Barriers—evidence of participant-identified constraints, difficulties, obstacles, stumbling blocks, and/or impediments that have prevented them from pursuing and completing their educational goals. Examples of coded barriers are: "I stopped attending school when I was just starting the ninth grade, and I came to this country and worked for three years, and went back to finish school," and "when I was in Mexico I got married at a very young age, I was 15 years old. I always wanted to go to school, but sometimes traditions get in the way, like if you got married you had to stay at home...the father of my girls didn't let me go back to school."

Personal Behavior—evidence that the participant has a new understanding that sacrificing, prioritizing, and negotiating their current reality necessary to progress. An example of a personal behavior is, "One of the things I told her [daughter] was that this [college] wasn't going to be like high school, and that the teachers were not going to be behind her and looking out for her asking her whether or not she did her homework.' So whenever she goes to the lectures, she better have all of her attention focused on whoever is talking, and take notes. If you have a math class and you don't understand, go look for the teacher after class and ask about help sessions, so I told her about help sessions."

Highlights: Undergraduate Latinas on Campus Focus Group

To find out about Latinas' college experiences, a 2 hour-long focus group was conducted with six Latina undergraduate seniors at Kansas State University. The students were self-selected from a larger group of Latinas that were pursuing their undergraduate degree in either elementary or secondary education with an emphasis in English as a second language (ESL). Their ages ranged from 20 to 37 years. Three students entered the country without proper documentation when they were children, and only one was born in the United States—English was her first language. All students spoke Spanish fluently, but three of them were unable to write or read Spanish well enough to be considered fully proficient in it. Three students learned English in adult learning centers and earned their General Educational Development (GED) diploma in Southwest Kansas. Two had worked between 3 and 5 years in meat packing plants. Five students had at least a part-time job. One student was married, two were divorced and three were single. Three students were traditional students while the rest were older and had children to support. Two were heads of the households. All Latinas received an academic scholarship to help defray the cost of tuition.

The purpose of the focus group was to learn about the realities of Latinas on campus, their personal educational experiences, their future dreams, and their advice to other Latinas on campus. The students knew each other and felt comfortable enough to share their personal and educational experiences.

The analysis of this focus group identified six main themes for college Latinas:

1. Families and Upbringing

All students came from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Family members played an essential role in the students' perseverance toward life their goals. Parents and older siblings gave these Latinas "*consejos*" (pieces of advice) that allowed the students to minimally navigate unknown social and educational settings. Many times the advice was "don't be like me," or "you don't want to have a life as hard as mine." These students had a sound sense of community, and maintained a strong network of support. Even though parents were unable to provide Latinas with specific advice about how to succeed in college, these students had other key people (friends, older siblings, other family members, community members, and professors) who provided essential information needed for success.

2. Parents' and Education

None of the Latinas' parents had gone to school beyond sixth grade, and all did their schooling in their country of origin. One student said "my dad made it to third grade and that's it. When he was thirteen he came to work in the fields." Latinas in this study had to draw academic information and guidance from sources other than their parents. Yet, their parents managed to provide them with a clear message: Education is the main road out of oppression and poverty—an essential tool needed to advance. One student said, "My parents were open about me going to school because obviously they wanted me to get a better education, and the reason I really wanted to go is because my parents would come home after work and sometimes would hurt just from working so hard ... but they wanted me to go to a JUCO [community college] just so I could stay close to home ... so they could keep me close." For this person leaving her family to attend college out of town provoked feelings of abandonment, anger, resentment, and consequently withdrawal of their support. Common to all the Latinas was the rigor of academic life that clashed many times with the familial expectations (such as coming back home every weekend, working to help support the family financially, taking care of siblings, etc.) resulting in stress and negative feelings about belonging in college.

3. *Reasons for Pursuing a College Degree*

Latinas mentioned several complex reasons for pursuing a college degree:

- To advance (“I decided to come to school because I like school. Before, I worked at a meat packing plant. It was hard, and even the simplest job was very hard. So, I just thought ‘do I want this for the rest of my life or do I want to continue my education?’”);
- To provide a role model for children and siblings (“my brother is proud of me for being in college, and that’s what keeps me going”);
- To give back to their parents for the sacrifices they made so their children could have a better life (“That’s why I came here because they [my parents] sacrificed for us, so I’m going to school!”);
- To prove to their parents that they were right in supporting education (“I wanted to show my mother that she was right.”); and
- To achieve the goals they set for themselves (“I finished my bachelor’s degree and now I’m going for my masters degree”).

4. *Self-Determination*

These six Latinas decided that they wanted to graduate from a 4-year university and they were resolved to overcome any barriers that would prevent them from reaching this goal. The Latinas maximized every ounce of available support to their advantage and repaid this help by passing their knowledge and contacts onto new students. The key element to their academic achievement was the construction, wise use, and extension of a strong support system. Alluding to such support, a student said, “it is not my parents anymore, it is the whole community!”

5. *Oppression*

Students openly spoke about the oppression they experienced daily in and out of the classroom. Most emphasized having to go against common institutional stereotypes about Latinas, and spoke of their relentless fight against being identified with deficit labels (Latinas are not college material, they never graduate, bilingualism is always a minus for an individual, and Latinas do not have clear goals). One Latina said, “I was taking a summer Kansas history class, and there was a bunch of students in my class and we were talking about immigrants coming into Kansas. In Southwest Kansas, where I grew up, we are mostly immigrants. So I hear my class talking about them, and not in a good way, I’m just standing there listening and the teacher is doing nothing about it.”

6. *Overall College Experience*

These students spoke about how important it was for them to have a support network to navigate the college years. They were outspoken about having to confront labels of cultural and gender deficit, and how that made them feel alienated, undervalued, rejected, and powerless. It was clear that these six Latinas maximized every bit of support and used it to their advantage in clever ways. At the same time, they made sure that their gains translated into benefits to others, thereby establishing a powerful sense of community and purpose to their being in college. A student gave this advice after talking about how culturally sensitive teachers make a difference, “I think that teachers must never give up, they need to motivate their students, get to know them, so they can give them the help about where and what they can do.”

Highlights: Kansas City Adult Learners Focus Group

During the Kansas City adult learners’ focus groups we asked questions that were designed to understand the participants’ family composition, their reason for coming to the U.S., their level of education, and obstacles they encountered coming to the U.S. The six participants

were asked about their experience in ESL or GED classes, future goals, and suggestions to improve their program. During the two-hour meeting, participants recreated the complex path that each one forged before and after immigrating into the U.S., touching upon matters that were important such as immigration, the importance of education, personal expectations, helping their families in their country of origin, and becoming fully functional members of the U.S.

The participants' ages ranged from 25 to 60 years. All but one of the participants came from Mexico. The other student was from Honduras. One participant immigrated to the U.S. less than 1 year ago, while the rest have been in this country four or more years. Half of the participants were single parents and had an average of two children who were mostly school age (elementary to college). Half of the participants had extended family members living in the U.S. from whom they received some kind of support. The other half was single or moved to the U.S. with their children after a divorce or separation. A few of them left their children or other family members in their home countries. All of the participants in this focus group were fully invested in learning and solidifying their English as the main avenue to advance socially and economically. Over 90% of the participants were fully employed, though underpaid, and had relatively concrete goals. Most participants had one or two blue-collar jobs, with irregular working hours, low pay and lack of job stability. They worked in housekeeping, cooking, and labor.

The primary reason for the participants to come to the U.S. was to provide their families with a better future, a future that they could not have had in their home countries. All of them were eager to learn English, and cited varied motivations to take ESL classes. One participant said, "I am not wasting my time ... my dream is to learn English because I want to work in a nursing home or in a hospital. It doesn't matter if it's cleaning or not, but that's my dream because I want to work with the elderly."

Our study suggests that ESL teachers regularly encounter students in their classrooms with varied levels of previous education. Three of participants did not complete high school in their home countries, and were learning English to get a better job or further their education. Common reasons to learn English cited by participants were to:

- Pass their citizenship test;
- Be able to communicate better with people around them;
- Be able to help their children with schoolwork and communicate with school personnel;
- Be able to fully participate in the community in which they live;
- Gain independence from translators; and
- Express themselves in English as effectively as they do in their mother tongue.

Taking ESL classes regularly was difficult for these participants. They talked about the daily obstacles they had to overcome in order to attend class. They were for the most part older students, full time workers, parents, caregivers, and foreign-born. They all relied upon trusted family members and friends when making important decisions. The obstacles for regularly attending classes were:

- Unstable working hours and long work days;
- Embarrassment for not speaking English;
- Lack of child care;
- Lack of reliable transportation;
- Inconsistency in ESL teachers and lack of bilingual teachers;
- Teachers spending more time assigning paperwork than instructing; and
- High teacher turn over.

However, participants stated that they prioritized learning so that they could “always manage” to attend class. These learners seemed to be highly motivated, well-organized, have clear goals, and took full advantage of resources around them needed to reach their goals. What the participants appreciated most about their programs were:

- Teachers’ adaptability to different levels of English proficiency;
- Teachers’ investment in students and classes;
- Being able to take classes free of charge; and
- Tireless encouragement from teachers.

All participants took their classes very seriously, and considered it be an important opportunity to be in this country. Participants spoke about creating spontaneous peer mentoring opportunities and a “buddy” system to ensure class attendance. Further, these classrooms were places where the students created friendships and helped each other in and outside of class.

The Power of Education

The political economy of new immigrants reflects a docile workforce that is easily trained, follows rules, has low expectations, does not complain, and is productive. When coming to Kansas they ask for little except the opportunity to work, raise their family, and with time earn citizenship. One of the similarities between the participants in these two focus groups is how education is seen as a pathway to opportunity and greater freedom. A first step in this educational pathway is becoming proficient in English, followed by earning a GED diploma. A select few attend community college, and even fewer go on to earn a bachelors degree. Education increases *self-worth*, *energy*, and *empowerment*, and reduces *exigency*, *powerlessness*, and *barriers*. While participants from both focus groups spoke of exploitation, powerlessness, and barriers, the college Latinas appeared more animated and angry than the Latinas in the adult learning center. Being able to succeed at the university in spite of not always feeling welcomed strengthen these women in their resolve to stand up for their rights and the rights of other Latina student. Hence, with more education and academic success the Latinas in this study became more emboldened and self-confident. Educated Latinas experience a new political economy as they slowly become enfranchised and empowered as citizens who have increased social, economic and political capital, enabling them to stand up for their rights and demand access to societal benefits which they were originally denied.

Another similarity between both focus groups was the organic formation of support networks, regardless of the educational setting. While additional research is needed to better understand the correlation between academic success and network strength, it appears that a support network is an essential ingredient to educational success. Their support network begins with family and friends, and expands to others who share common experiences, including language, country of origin, or other life experiences. Suggested strategies to reduce dropout rates and educational failure might be for educational institutions to nurture and invest in the formation of these necessary support structures. Yet, if these informal, organic networks evolve to become formally sponsored and supported by educational bureaucracies do they risk becoming co-opted whereby students lose control and therefore the benefits expressed by Latinas in this study?

Finally, adult education in this study—whether it be at the university or an adult learning center—exemplifies the Progressive Period’s adult education values of democratization and empowerment. Moreover, this study suggests that adult education is a collective process that creates polities of power out of disenfranchised individuals.