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Mexican American Adults in Higher Education: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: This study explored the experiences of Mexican Americans who completed a bachelor degree as adult learners. With the primary focus on Mexican Americans' bicultural experiences, the study's findings point to the significance of the process in becoming bicultural and how that process influences college degree attainment.

Introduction, Literature Review and Methodology

This paper provides an overview of a qualitative narrative research study exploring the perceptions, background and experiences of Mexican Americans who completed their bachelor's degree as adult learners. The study focused, in particular, on their experiences of learning how to become bicultural. Because this is a narrative research study, I thought it appropriate to begin with a narrative of how I became interested in the study. This paper then goes on to provide a background to the problem and brief overview of the literature on Mexican Americans in higher and adult education, and the purpose and research questions of the study. The paper closes with a consideration of how Mexican American adult learners succeed in higher education along with my own narrative of how I succeeded as an adult learner.

Forging a Research Topic: A Narrative

The kitchen clock read 3:00 AM. I was sitting at the table eating a bowl of Rice Crispies thinking about next steps for my family. My husband, an Assembly of God pastor, was in employment transition. He had served fifteen years as an assistant pastor and was now sending resumes as far away as New York and Virginia. My concerns were for our children, ages 15, 16 and 19. The words of Jeremiah 29:11, "*For I know the plans I have for you...plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future...*" were going through my mind. As a woman of faith, I asked myself, "What plans does God have for us as a family, to prosper us, not to harm us, to give us hope and a future?"

During those wee hours of the morning, I felt prompted to look at a Pennsylvania map and to make note of the Assembly of God churches near our home. Highlighting nearby towns, I created an almost perfect circle of locations where churches were already situated. With a pencil, I connected the locations into what looked like a wagon wheel in central PA. In a spiritual way, it appeared to me that the hub of the wheel was the location where a church could be established.

The next morning, I showed my husband the map and asked skeptically if he wanted to see the potential of starting a church in that vicinity. To my surprise he said yes. We rode about 15 miles south finding ourselves surrounded by orchards. The landscape was overwhelmingly agricultural. We wondered how we would start a church if the only life in the area were trees! We visited local post offices to learn the approximate number of residents living in the surrounding villages. At the end of our excursion, the number of residents totaled about 7,000 in population. With that figure in mind, we began the church planting process. Our first Sunday morning, Easter of 2001, the service was held in a local public school gymnasium with about 90 people.

About this same time that I was accepted into the Adult Education doctoral program at Penn State University in Harrisburg. Early on in the program, I decided to connect my church experiences with my doctoral studies focusing my research on Mexican Americans in higher education. Our church community was largely comprised of Mexican American migrant families. While taking night classes at Penn State Capital Campus, I spent my days becoming acquainted with this rural community in Adams County. I saw firsthand migrant families lacking basic necessities such as toiletries, blankets, food, clothing and housing and that Mexican Americans were underrepresented professionally. I wondered why existing research readily showed that across the US there was a significant underrepresentation of Mexican Americans in higher education, but a scarcity of studies pertaining to Mexican American higher educational achievement. Thus, I set out on a quest to explore the Mexican American experience in higher education, more specifically the adult Mexican American experience.

Purpose and Research Questions

In the United States, the low educational ranking of Latinos is a critical dilemma. The representation of Latinos in higher education is disproportionate to the number of other ethnic and mainstream White enrollment. Such under-representation may be attributed to a high rate of Latinos dropping out of high school. Additionally, those that do graduate often express that they were inadequately prepared for the rigors of continued study. Furthermore, there is an under-enrollment of qualified Latinos in four-year institutions for personal, environmental and socio-cultural reasons. Thus, under-representation of Latinos with acquired undergraduate degrees is a potentially critical situation that could penalize the US economy and obstruct the wellbeing of the social infrastructure of the nation at large (Gandara, 1993).

Moreover, there is a lack of literature on Mexican Americans in adult education. Given this lack of research the primary purpose of this narrative research study was to explore the perceptions, background and experiences of Mexican Americans who completed their bachelor's degree as adult learners at the age of 23 or older. The study focused in particular on their experiences of learning to be bicultural. The research questions that guided the study include the following:

1. What are the lived experiences of Mexican American college students as told by Mexican American college graduates?
2. What are the participants' perceptions of how their biculturalism shaped their university experience?
3. What aspects of the college environment are significant to Mexican Americans in degree attainment?

Contextualizing the Problem

As research indicates, Mexican Americans dream of a better life than what their communities offer economically. They aspire to complete a college education (Benmayor, 2002; California Policy Seminar, 1993; Mina, Cabrales, Juarez, & Rodriguez-Vasquez, 2004; Sanchez, Reyes, & Singh, 2005). Dreaming of role modeling and paving the way for younger siblings, they desire a professional career. The desire often shapes their goals, ideals and future as Mexican Americans are profoundly interested in improving life for their families and communities (Benmayor, 2002).

Yet, in spite of Mexican American academic goals, the reality is "the estimated proportion of the U.S Latino population age twenty-five years and older with at least a bachelor's degree in 2001 ranged from 25 percent for Cubans to 7 percent for Mexicans" (Smokowski &

Bacallao, 2011). What is concerning is that 67 percent of the US Latino population is Mexican American. Thus, a small percentage of the Latino population is prepared for employment in professional fields. The 2010 Census reveals that 16 percent of the US population is of Latino origin and that three quarters of those Latinos are Mexican American. In 2000, the Mexican American population was 20.6 million people. Today, the figure has risen to 33 million people self-identifying as being of Mexican origin (Pew Research Center, 2014).

Cultural Disjuncture

A segment of the empirical studies discuss themes pertaining to Mexican American under-representation in university degree attainment. The themes are often related to the cultural disjuncture between Mexican American values and higher education (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Gandara, 1993; Niemann, Romero, & Arbona, 2000). The recurring themes take on the nature of four broad categories, namely personal, environmental, involvement and socio-cultural (Hernandez and Lopez, 2004). Categorized within each of these themes are sub-themes where patterns of commonality emerge leading to a better understanding of the lived experiences of Mexican Americans in higher education.

The topics are worthy of succinct attention as they formulate a basis of concern for under-representation in Mexican degree attainment. For example, Niemann, Romero, and Arbona's (2000) questionnaire survey, taken by 546 students of Mexican descent, disclosed that ethnic social orientation and degree attainment are at a cultural disjuncture because higher education is viewed as a threat to family and gender cultural values. The threat is based in the notion that a college environment encourages marriage outside of one's ethnicity. A disjuncture also occurs because some Mexican American participants feel they might have to delay marriage and childbearing in order to attend college. Also, Mexican Americans often do not want to engage in the competitiveness often necessary for college success. The survey further indicated that often times Mexican Americans fear that going to college will create a sense of alienation from their families.

Understanding Background Cultural Context

In analyzing participant background, certain factors became evident in understanding Mexican Americans as adult learners, namely the influence of agricultural work, educational persistence in spite of hardship; the role of family support and responsibility, and the importance of ancestry in keeping the family legacy alive. These four factors are significant to degree attainment as they impacted participant achievement in higher education.

The influence of agricultural work. It became evident that although no extensive generalizations can be drawn to all Mexican Americans, agriculture was a relevant subject discussed in six of the 10 interviews, given that all six of them had worked in the agricultural industry. Further, of these six, only Albert discussed agricultural labor in primarily a positive way. He indicated that migrant work was an exclusive entry for his family to legally leave Mexico and come to work in the US. The other five participants talked about the more problematic side of the agricultural labor market, while recognizing what it offered them. They told stories about demanding work conditions, long hours of physically exhausting labor, feelings of isolationism and poor housing conditions. Three of these five participants specified that they lived like indentured laborers toiling in the harvest fields from sun up to sun down. Mayo described his experience saying, "*Nothing is hard compared to agriculture. When I was working in agriculture I would work 10, 15, 20 hours a day in the heat.*"

C.A.M.P: making a difference. The counselor began to tell Mayo about an educational scholarship program entitled C.A.M.P. that could assist Mayo financially in his studies at a university. The particular university that was offering the scholarship was situated about five hours away in a neighboring state. Mayo explained to me that he could not believe what he was hearing, and recounted his conversation with his counselor:

Mayo asked, "How would you want me to go to college?" And he said "Mayo, when you came here you couldn't read or write in Spanish, but now you have made so much progress!"

...You know, sometimes we are naive of our potential or the talents that we have, but this guy was able to see the potential!

Mayo expressed gratitude toward this counselor who saw potential in him. At this point in our interview, the tone in Mayo's voice indicated that he continues to be amazed that someone believed in him enough to encourage him in taking a giant step toward higher education. The enthusiasm I heard was as if this all occurred yesterday. Yet, in reality, it was many years ago. Another participant graduated at Penn State Harrisburg as a C.A.M.P. recipient. He says he could not have succeeded without the support of this incredibly supportive program.

Managing Life as an Adult Learner

As adult learners, the participants did not discuss a particular person who solely informed their degree attainment. Each narrative focused on a number of guiding factors. Success came through a synergy of people, programs, networks, clubs and organizations working together empowering the participant to succeed. Synergy speaks to the notion that adult learners attain academic and professional goals relative to the emotional, social or financial support afforded to them. Since life's obstacles can often be unbearably discouraging leading to academic failure, support was crucial to degree attainment for the adult learners in this study.

Juggling: more than a circus act. A prominent factor in critiquing Mexican American adult learning is that of juggling time, namely the time involved in a career, completing college assignments, caring for a home, satisfying spouse expectations and meeting children's needs. This balancing act was not described by the participants as circus fun. Juggling demanded focus, organization and perseverance superseding that of a three ring show. Practice makes perfect, or almost perfect, as participants tossed balls of expectations, dropping some and catching others.

Six of the 10 participants worked full time while going to college. As Pablo said, "I could never give 100% of myself to school." Pablo was not married at that time, but he was working two jobs while attending college. Mía, on the other hand, went to college, worked full time in an emergency room and was a wife and mother of two young boys. Marta also worked full time while going to college. She has a husband and three daughters. Marta explained that as a 29 year old adult student her perspectives on degree completion were one of seriousness and commitment. She indicated there was a level of maturity in her character that was not present when she was younger in community college.

Gender in adulthood. The discourse was different in the interviews for men and women with regard to degree attainment in higher education. The women discussed wearing multiple hats as far as studying, parenting, working full or part time, shopping and doing housework while the men primarily discussed two responsibilities, namely studying and their career employment. This is not to say that the men were not involved in parenting or helping with household chores; however, they simply did not discuss those responsibilities in the interviews. Women were also more emotional in voice tone and with facial expressions than the men when discussing racial

experiences in the classroom. Men came across as though they were expecting inequalities in higher education. For example, both Pablo and Susana talked about professors being rude to them. Susana was very emotional during that phase of the interview while Pablo sounded very matter-of-fact about his ordeal. Not that the injustices didn't bother him, because he looked disappointed as he shared his scenario. However, men in general did not come across as emotional impacted as women. For both the males and the females overall, being adult learners in higher education was challenging. Each participant overcame barriers and difficulties by being persistent and immersing themselves in dominant cultural activities with a sense of expectancy, enthusiasm and confidence.

Personal narrative as an adult learner: With all that I have learned over a period of 12 years about Mexican Americans and degree attainment, I have learned much more about myself as an adult learner. I experienced the invisibility that Johnson-Bailey (2001) discusses in talking about adult learners of color. I took Statistics with a class full of very young Public Administration majors. At 56 years old, I wanted desperately to make a friend who could re-explain to me what the professor already explained. This course work was difficult. I wanted to be accepted as a peer among my classmates. I had a sense of cultural disjuncture that I referenced Mexican American adult learners experiencing. I plodded on finally making a friend, Abby. I will forever be grateful to her because she made me feel visible. While this doesn't exactly compare to being a Mexican American adult learner in higher education in terms of cultural disjuncture, the sense of isolation and marginalization that I experienced in the land of statistics as an older learner helped me empathize with the way my participants felt invisible and marginalized.

As an adult learner I also learned to juggle the responsibilities of being mother, grandmother, daughter, sister, teacher, pastor's wife and student. Like my participants, the journey has been long (ten years long), the road has been lonely (no one quite understood my passion to learn), the rest stops were few (one course after another), but the destination doable. I struggled with guilt along the way. Johnson-Bailey (2001) says this goes with the territory for adult learners. She contends that adult women learners can sometimes have a sense of responsibility to everyone; so, when studies are put before family guilt can follow suit. Sometimes the guilt made it difficult for me to accomplish academic tasks or meet deadlines on time. Yet, a sense of determination, also characteristic of adult learners, over-rode feelings of guilt and assignments were done, papers turned in and grades maintained.

I am grateful I had the opportunity to study through Penn State University's Adult Education program. Taking what I have learned about Mexican American degree attainment and about myself, I continue to listen to stories of not only Mexican Americans, but adult learners in general, piecing together the cultural squares of their experiences that make each quilted life so unique. My research efforts have taught me to appreciate diversity rather than ignore it. And if, for some reason, a time comes when my historical face is paralyzed, my political face is threatened or my personal face discouraged, my sacred face will seek grace in the loving arms of the God of my youth spurring me on in all my ways. For I have learned from the participants in this study that there is good in hardship, hope in a persistence and immense beauty in biculturalism.