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Learning Her Way In: The Life History of a Latina Adult Educator

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Abstract: This paper explores the various learning experiences of a bilingual and bicultural woman of Mexican heritage. The data collection and data analysis were performed with the intent of creating a life history and allowing recurrent themes to emerge. These three recurrent themes were identified as interplay among learning, survival, and spirituality; health, health care, and parish nursing; and multiple and competing contexts. The essential structure that connected all of the recurrent themes was the participant's learning and the impacts that it had on her lived experiences. In this way, Monica and her life history are the story of a Latina who has learned her own way into a second culture.

Introduction

The individual whose persona is developed in this study, Monica, is impacting the Latino community in which she works through multiple roles. She is a bilingual and bicultural individual who fell into the role of parish nurse because of her education as a nurse and her understanding of two different yet similar cultures and languages. In order to perform her job effectively, Monica has become an informally trained adult educator. In addition to this professional role, Monica is also a daughter, sister, wife, mother, and graduate student. In essence, this individual can represent the many individuals who find themselves unintentionally in such a variety of roles and learning situations.

The research questions that directed this study were:

1. Who is Monica and how does she serve as an adult educator?
2. What are the recurrent themes in Monica's life, the lives of those she encounters as a parish nurse, and her day-to-day work-related tasks?
3. What can adult educators learn from Monica and her life story in order to improve adult education practices?

Methodology

As I performed this research, I began to refer to the resulting project as a collaborative life history. The collaborative component arose because I was interested with how the primary participant lived her daily life as well as how others who knew her such as her spouse, coworkers, and family members also identified important and critical components of her lived experiences. By means of producing a *collaborative life history*, I aspired to produce a rich, deep, thick, textured, insightful, and illuminative portrait of a Latina impacting education and learning and the way we view them. Still, it is important to mention some of the sources that helped me to understand this source of research.

Life History Research

Denzin and Lincoln (1998) write, “There is no clear window into the inner life of an individual” (p. 24). They explain, “We must remember that each individual has his or her own social history and an individual perspective on the world” (p. 73). These authors also remind us, “To learn about people we must remember to treat them as people, and they will uncover their lives to us” (p. 73). Life history embraces these important considerations.

According to Bogdan and Biklen (1998), “When the intent is to capture one person’s interpretation of his or her life, the study is called a life history” (p.3). Rubin and Rubin (1995) expand this idea by explaining,

Life histories focus more on the experiences of an individual and what he or she felt as he or she passed through the different stages of life. Life histories can tell us about life’s passages; they can also provide a window on social change. (p. 27)

Armstrong (1987) explains, “The life history method had its early development in Chicago at approximately the same time that interactionism was being given its initial impetus, and this is no accident” (p. 54). “The life history method assigns significance and value to the person’s ‘own story,’ or to interpretations that people place on their own experiences as an explanation for their own behavior” (p. 8). These are key issues with regards to reliability and validity.

Primary Research Participant

The primary research subject in this study, Monica, is a parish nurse. This role means that Monica is a trained nurse who is paid to perform outreach services at an area church. Monica serves a predominantly Hispanic congregation. Monica has described her job as a combination of listening, referring, and helping a group of individuals who frequently are fearful of the medical care system in what is often a new country for them. It appears, though, that very few people realize all that Monica does in her role as a parish nurse, how she feels she can best fill her parish nursing role by serving as an adult educator, or how her roles have encouraged her to learn in ways she never anticipated.

Data Collection Procedures

The data were obtained in a variety of ways in order to provide validity and to provide the richest, thickest, and fullest life history possible. The three primary methods of data collected were open-ended, in-depth interviewing; participant observation; and field notes and documentation.

Interviewing. The first data for this research were gathered by conducting open-ended, in-depth interviews with the individual profiled in the study. The questions were general in nature since Rubin and Rubin (1995) explain, “People gain confidence to talk when they realize much of what will be asked is about their own life” (p. 131). Each interview was tape-recorded and a written transcript was created. Upon transcribing the interviews, I decided that I liked the flow of the content that occurred when my actual interview questions were omitted. Also, I chose to leave out breaks and pauses that interrupted the continuity of the subject’s life history. This was the completed document that I brought back to my interviewee. As she and I read through this completed section of the research together, we discussed changes to best clarify Monica’s thoughts and how she wanted to represent them verbally.

After these few changes, I took the product we were creating together home with me. Upon rereading the interview transcript, I coded those areas that I wished to explore more fully. I went through the transcript three separate times and each time I used different colored ink to identify my developing and changing foci. Monica graciously conducted additional interviews with me until I felt that all of my questions had been answered and that her life had been represented as accurately as possible. Sometimes these interviews were arranged at her home, and other times she answered a question for me via the telephone or when we were exchanging our children.

As we were beginning to incorporate the final details into Monica's life history, we had outgrown the need for a tape player. These times together were very informal and would sometimes last for hours, not in the roles of a researcher and a research participant, but rather in the role of good friends who appreciated, valued, and understood each other. Frequently, our last interview sessions were held at her home with our children playing together.

In order to describe this subject in another way, I also conducted open-ended, tape-recorded interviews with other individuals who knew her. Other individuals that consented to participate in interviews included: the Catholic priest of the church where she works, a coworker, Monica's spouse, the director of the parish nursing program in which Monica works, and Monica's older sister. These people were selected because they are the people with whom she has the most contact and who seem to best understand all that is entailed in her role as a parish nurse and how she constructs meaning based on the experiences she has serving in this role.

Participant observation. In addition to interviews, I learned about Monica by means of acting as a participant observer. I attended the Roman Catholic Church where she works as a parish nurse and that her family attends on Sunday mornings. I worked with her by attending and participating in the two support groups that she has organized. I also shadowed her as she completed the various activities involved in her daily work schedule. This means that I volunteered at the annual health fair that Monica organizes and I was invited to other church as well as family functions including birthday, anniversary, and holiday celebrations.

Field notes and documents. As I began this study, I began to complete extensive field notes and did so for the duration of the study. This means that I accumulated and collected many different documents that would help me to remember the data in the fullest way possible. At times I also brought a camera because I wanted to also have visual representations of the people and events of this study. The two rolls of pictures that I took at the health fair provide a good example of how a field notes, documents, and photographs allowed me to remember my experiences in the fullest way possible.

Developing a continuous, working relationship. One of the ways in which I learned the most about Monica was by means of our daily interactions. When time permitted, there were days where we spent an hour or more together just reflecting on how we are living our lives, what is involved in them, and how we are constructing meaning from our experiences. These pieces of information were invaluable and I kept a written record of them because they are valuable and interlocking pieces that create the whole puzzle of Monica's life. Given the fact that a personal relationship had already been established with Monica and her family, I was granted access to their home, their lives, and their experiences.

Analysis of the Data

With time, the interview transcripts, participant observation notes, field notes, and photographs allowed recurrent themes to begin to emerge. I wanted to include as much of these

data as possible into a body that flowed well and read easily. This was not an easy task in that I grouped and regrouped the data many times before I had three themes that incorporated much of the data and fit together well.

During the data analysis, there were times when I struggled with the most accurate recurrent themes to use. To best understand the data and to select the most appropriate meaning or meanings of Monica's life history, at times I would put the data aside and read a book related to the recurrent themes that I believed were slowly beginning to emerge. This reading allowed me to decide on three different but closely linked recurrent themes. These themes are: Interplay Among Learning, Survival, and Spirituality; Health, Health Care, and Parish Nursing; and Multiple and Competing Contexts: Work, Family, Church, The United States, and Mexico. The essential structure that unifies these themes is Monica's learning.

Conclusions

Monica and the work that she performs in her many roles, especially that of a parish nurse, are very intricately linked to adult education. Many adult education principles have been adapted by Monica and tied to the various roles and contexts in which she participates in order to help her succeed. Much can be learned from Monica, her life history and the various ways in which she has learned. Expanding our appreciation for and understanding of all of the learning opportunities and learning that takes place in Monica's life can help us to appreciate and understand the learning opportunities in our daily lives as well.

Monica has demonstrated an ability to learn from a variety of experiences and opportunities. At times she has persevered although learning and growing were difficult actions to take. In order to learn from her, we must be willing to do the same. Expanding and incorporating the life history research methodology can provide inspiration when the journey to learning seems too heavily paved with difficulties, lack of motivation or setbacks. Monica's learning, her voice and her life history are important components for a truthful account of learning, especially the learning of adults.

Monica's life history exemplifies that she and the others who learn with her and from her are life-long learners who have overcome barriers in an effort to create the lived experiences they hope to have. Monica, as well as her coworkers and the parishioners that seek her assistance, are forced to deal with a health care system that can be very intimidating, and which, at times fails miserably. Nonetheless, Monica attempts to best serve patients' needs and to teach them to best help themselves in order to survive. In this way, other barriers such as child-care, transportation, money and even some of the more basic needs such as food and housing are less overwhelming when faced from a standpoint from which they know where their health care needs can be brought and from whom they can learn.

To best complete those things that she must do, Monica demonstrates a flexibility and perseverance that have fortified those things that she feels compelled to do. Much of the existing adult education literature already confirms that adult learners as well as adult educators must be flexible and persistent to best meet the needs of those individuals seeking to pursue their educational ventures. Monica and her life history provide another example.

Often times Monica's learning was self-directed and she made sacrifices to learn how best to serve in her roles. Monica is the first parish nurse that St. Peters has ever had. Someone saw a health care need and asked Monica to fill that need. Monica has had to make a conscious effort to persevere because there are so many problems that the parishioners face, besides just

health care needs. Working with so many different adults with such a variety of needs, Monica, then, has embraced the challenges that face her and her clients and in doing so has taught herself to become an adult educator.

Many of these previously mentioned factors, such as learning environments, respecting differences, flexibility, perseverance, self-directed learning, sacrifice, dialogue, life-long learning and barriers are addressed in the adult education literature that currently exists, but Monica and her roles serve as a further illustration of them. In a sense, creating Monica's life history helped to develop an actual example of the importance of these adult education principles. Monica's life history supplies an realistic portrait of a self-trained Latina adult educator who faces many other competing contexts in her life but who has, nonetheless, learned what she needs to survive and try to improve the quality of the lives of the individuals she attempts to help.

In a way, these adult education principles have served as components that have allowed Monica to learn her way into a new culture. The various essences of Monica's life history and the three main recurrent themes they develop offer a starting point for understanding why Monica has succeeded where others have not. Learning is the essential structure of Monica's life, her life history, her meaning making and her existence. Through learning, Monica has been able to have very different life experiences than many other individuals who share her ethnic identity. There are many other lessons that we, as adult educators, can learn from understanding the essential structure of Monica's life and this specific example of life history research.

During the interviews, Monica created two beautiful analogies of herself. In class, Monica is "the mouse that got away" and professionally she is "a bridge between cultures." These analogies have helped Monica and can aid others in understanding the multi-layered matrix of Monica's own learning. At times, Monica has felt insignificant or unimportant. Because she believes in herself, though, she continues to try to positively embrace the opportunities she has worked hard to earn. As Monica begins to understand her learning and how it has helped her to succeed, others also gain a better understanding of the learning necessary for successful life journeys.

At times, having experienced and understanding two very different worlds allows Monica to best help others to learn. Monica's learning, her survival, spirituality, parish nursing, religious convictions and her formal education are additional examples of contexts where she has served as a bridge for herself as well as others. These essences have helped her to develop and establish an essential structure, learning, in an effort to succeed by means of having the life, roles and opportunities that she desired.

Although she has not been formally trained as such, her role of a parish nurse to an almost exclusive Latino community has granted her the opportunity to serve as an adult educator. In each of the health care situations that Monica faces as a parish nurse, she must first educate those seeking her assistance so that the largest benefit can be cultivated from her efforts. Monica strives to help those she serves in her role as a parish nurse to lead healthy and productive lives in a newly adopted country where the English language is often a huge barrier to their success. Learning and teaching, in a sense, is the best ways to promote an improvement in the health care situations that Monica addresses as a parish nurse.

Monica's life story has repeatedly demonstrated that at times individuals become adult educators merely due to the demands of their jobs. And so, this research indicates that individuals must remain flexible regardless of any field they choose to study because learning is and will continue to be part of all that we do as we interact with others on a daily basis.

Refereed Paper: Hatcher

This life history allowed Monica to tell her story. In it she discusses and reflects on her experiences and the learning that has resulted from them. After she read the final draft, she had a much deeper appreciation for herself as an adult learner who has grown because of her life experiences. Monica has an appreciation for all of the learning that she has done and will continue to do in her many roles. She finally believes that she has an important story to share.

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