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Undergraduate

Living in Two Worlds: Torn Identities and Gender Expectations of Latinas in the United States

By Stephanie Miller

Introduction

Latino immigrants in the United States are currently living in a bicultural sphere that pulls them in two different directions. Their success in this affluent country is challenged by the dual expectations of Latino culture on one hand and Western culture on the other. These expectations create a tear in the identities of newer generation immigrant Latinos, as they must wrestle between their culture of origin and acculturation to life in the United States. These burdens are further exacerbated by weaknesses in the educational pipelines resulting in poor employment opportunities. Latinas have additional burdens and expectations placed on them as women. They must adhere to the “female role” by caring for the household while also supplementing the low wages of their male counterparts, usually with jobs outside of the household. Thus Latinas have additional strains placed on their already torn identities as a result of being women in both the Latino and Western world. The following is a discussion of the torn identities of newer generation Latinos in the United States, and the additional burdens placed on Latinas.

This discussion cannot begin without first addressing some of the factors that led to the emerging Latino populations in the United States. An important factor has been the deregulation of trade agreements. As a result, U.S. companies placed their factories (referred to as Maquila factories) in countries like Mexico. These factories place their employees in detrimental working conditions with no benefits and no way of finding alternative livelihoods. The low wages they are paid do not provide them with medical care, education for their children, or sufficient food to put on the table. Many of these companies hire women rather than men, because of their perceived docility. In her book, *Genders in Production*, Salzinger discusses the gendered environments of Maquila factories. She states that: “The feminine image of the ideal worker framed maquila industry development from the outset, leading to young women’s widespread recruitment by management (2003:11).” This gendered hiring forces Latino men to seek work outside of their country of origin. The only country available to them, which promises opportunity, equality, and liberty, is their northern neighbor, the United States, ironically the country which caused the destabilization of their livelihoods.

Identity Between Two Worlds

It is common for men from community-based cultures to develop roots and raise families when they migrate to a new region to find work. For many of these immigrant Latino parents, life in the U.S. is an opportunity to provide their children a chance at healthy and successful lives. In a study by Goldenberg et. al., “immigrant generation parents...referred to the United States as the land of opportunity (2001:576).” With the strong familial bonds that are associated with Latino cultures, younger generations can experience a particular pressure to pursue this ideal of success for the sake of those who came before them.

Families in Latino cultures have “higher levels of family cohesion” than families from Euro-cultures (Halgunseth, Ispa, and Rudy 2006:1285). The term *familisimo* is used to describe this expectation for cohesion in the Latino culture, which “includes the desire to maintain strong family ties, the expectation that the family will be the primary source of instrumental and emotional support, the feeling of loyalty to the family, and the commitment to the family over individual needs and desires (Halgunseth, Ispa, and Rudy 2006:1285).” The significance of this familial bond and cohesion is evident in the level of adherence to traditional values by immigrant Latino families. The culture and traditions of one’s origins are extremely valuable to most first generation immigrants. This value is seen in their preference for integration of a host country’s practices as opposed to assimilating. For instance, Latino Americans tend to accept a host language while keeping the religion of their origin culture (Valentine and Mosley 2000:106). Their preference for integration rather than assimilation shows how important the origin culture is to most first generation Latino immigrants. However, as successive generations become exposed to Western culture this trend changes course.

Each successive generation of Latinos born in the United States has improved access to opportunities such as education, jobs, and social services. Along with this increase in opportunities comes a pressure to acculturate to Western norms and ideologies. Acculturation can be defined as “the absorption of the cultural practices, norms, and values of the host society (Barkan 1995:48).” This acculturation separates Latinos, at each generational level, from the culture of their family’s origin, placing them in a world of contradiction, which can cause difficulties and frustration, especially for Latinas.

In Halgunseth, Ispa, and Rudy’s discussion of various elements relating to parental control in Latino families, they mention the importance of *respecto*, which denotes a respect and understanding for the roles that each family member possesses and the responsibility that goes

with it (2006). This *respecto* requires certain behaviors to demonstrate this respect and understanding. For Latino children, this would involve listening to elders and the elders having final say on important matters. However, studies have shown “that successive generations of [Latino] adolescents were increasingly likely to believe that disagreeing with parents is acceptable and that behavioral autonomy is desirable (Halgunseth, Ispa, and Rudy 2006:1286).” This is classic Western behavior of adolescent children. As newer generation Latino children become more acculturated to Western values and behaviors, they act in ways that are seen, in traditional Latino culture, as disrespectful to the roles of their parents, but considered normal in Western culture.

Since these newer generations of Latinos are born and raised in the United States, they consider themselves to be Americans. In his study of undocumented students trying to pursue the American dream, William Perez states that, “[Latino students] proclaim an American identity, and they live an American lifestyle (2009:xviii).” From the day they are born they are permeated with Western culture through media, the Internet, friends, other family members, and especially school. However, expectations for strong familial ties and *respecto* also bind them to Latino traditions, which are often in conflict with Western values. These newer generations face issues with loyalty, identity, and belonging, all while trying to fulfill their family’s aspirations for their success. With the emphasis on traditional values in Latino cultures and the necessity of acculturation to Western norms, young Latinos are experiencing increasing identity strains.

Gender

Latinas must not only balance between two radically different cultures, they also must struggle with the dual gender expectations placed upon them. These expectations hinder them from being successful in both worlds. Differing achievement styles is an important contributing

factor. Gomez and Fassinger discuss the achievement styles of Latinas and how it relates to their level of acculturation to Western society. Western society values a more “competitive, power-centered, and direct approach” when vying for a better position in the work world, or presenting leadership ability (1994:213). Latino cultures, on the other hand, are embedded in values that expect alternate forms of achievement styles, preferring women to be caretakers and giving to others in order to demonstrate worthiness (Gomez and Fassinger 1994:213). The Latino idea of success is not valued in Western culture and vice versa.

If Latinas want to be successful in Western society they must, at least in the professional world, displace their own traditional achievement styles with Western ones. As double minorities, Latinas demonstrate a need to fulfill multiple achievement styles so as to “prove themselves and contribute to the overall achievement of the two groups to which they belong:” Latina and women (Gomez and Fassinger 1994:213). The identity tear is exacerbated in that they must be one person in the work world and then someone else at home with family and friends, especially because of restrictive *respecto* expectations placed on women’s roles in Latino cultures (i.e. caretaker).

The frustrations experienced by Latinas as they try to live a successful Western lifestyle while also adhering to traditional expectations have been discussed in multiple studies. In Marcela Parra’s dissertation on the factors that contribute to the academic success of Hispanic females, she reports stories of females who “overwhelmingly...felt torn between two cultures...looking for a way to bridge that difference (2007:159).” Even though some females actually like the dual identity because it provides them with “more advantages,” Parra also notes that many girls must keep their Western behaviors, ideas, and dreams hidden from their family (2007:145, 162). Particularly for first generation immigrant parents, pursuing Western careers and lifestyles, outside of getting a primary education, would prevent their daughters from

fulfilling their *respecto* roles as successful housewives, in the traditional sense. Studies have shown that in Mexican-American cultures the value of a woman has not been measured by her presence in the workforce. Being outside of the household prevents Latinas from fulfilling the gender expectation to care for the needs of their husbands and children.

The house-maker expectation is countered by the lack of job opportunities available to their male counterparts. Even though it has not been culturally acceptable for women to enter the workforce, decreases in household incomes have resulted in more Latinas entering the workforce out of necessity, just as women did in the United States during WWII (Parrenas 2005). The daughters of these women are also burdened by this displacement of their mothers from the household. In many cases, the expectations of their mothers are transferred onto them. As sons are only expected to provide financial support if the mother and father are unable to make ends meet, the daughters are expected to provide this support along with assuming the role of household caregiver, both of which require a significant amount of time and energy (Parrenas 2005). They are forced to make up for their male counterparts lack of income as well as work a second shift as caregiver. These expectations display the impact that being a female has on Latinas, demonstrating how their gender has a significant role to play in their life.

Education

In many societies, being a successful person is associated with having an education. The Western culture especially believes that education is not only a right it is an expectation. Embedded in the Western culture is the idea that achieving a diploma and degree is directly correlated with gaining employment and achieving a successful life. Even the most entry-level positions expect to see a high school diploma on an application before being considered for employment.

Many Latino parents also have this expectation of providing their children with the opportunity to get at least a primary education. As Proctor says in *Racial Pressures on Urban Institutions*, “Education is the corridor through which America’s minorities move from rejection, deprivation, and isolation to acceptance, economic efficiency and inclusion (1970:43).” However, it is important to note that as Latino parents wish for their children to gain an education, they are also hesitant to sacrifice their values and relationship with their children in the process. Given that most Latino immigrants were unable to afford the costs of obtaining an education in their homeland they are unaware of the cultural complexities that come with being educated.

Halgunseth, Ispa, and Rudy’s discussion also notes a decline in fulfilling family obligations and self-sacrificing as a result of acculturation (2006). Education is a key factor in the process of transmitting values and norms, which increases the acculturation rate. As an individual moves onto higher education in the U.S., particularly in the graduate levels, he or she must become more acculturated to Western values and norms in order to have a successful academic career. The restrictions of higher education take time from tending to family obligations and provides less opportunity for self-sacrificing. The norm to sacrifice is reversed in that the family must sacrifice ties to their child. It is also important to note that this is not as prevalent in primary education. Given that higher education and acculturation results in this clash between child and parent behavior requirements, most early generation immigrant parents will resist continual education, thinking that primary education and maybe undergraduate education is enough. This is also coupled by the parents’ lack of understanding when it comes to the process of applying to universities and academic financial assistance.

Even if a Latino/a student wishes to pursue a higher education with or without the blessing of her or his parent the broken educational pathway that awaits them in the U.S blocks

them. Not every child who grows up in the U.S. is able to pursue higher forms of education, especially those who do not fit into the mold of the American dream. In fact, it is quite rare for a Latino/a to reach graduate school. For every one hundred Latino/a children who enter the U.S. education system less than 1 will reach graduate school (Huber et. al. 2006). It may be possible for Latino youth to work their way through elementary, middle, and high school without thoughts or concerns for their documented status. However, as Perez demonstrates in his book, *We Are Americans*, once undocumented students reach senior status they are crushed by the hindering fact that they may never go to college (2009). The false hopes established by Western society create a pipedream that will eventually burst, crippling their chances of achieving socially acceptable forms of success. Furthermore, there are policies in place to captivate undocumented Latino families into placing their children on the educational tract such as the Dream Act and Assembly Bill 540, which allow undocumented students access to a secondary education. Yet there is no system in place for high achievers as they graduate high school and seek financial assistance for college. The institutionalization of policies such as these prepares immigrant children for minimum wage positions and little more.

This pipedream is especially an issue for Latinas, because education is their escape from the confines of traditional female gender roles and access to self-esteem in the modern world. Nathaniel Branden discusses the impact that the modern world has on one's self-esteem. Success in the modern world of global connection and expansion now relies on "mind work" rather than "physical labor (1994:22)." This requires young people to develop new skills and means of dealing with the world around them, such as developing confidence in unfamiliar aspects of one's life. This would also require them to leave the old world behind them along with the traditions that come with it. Branden also states that this new world "creates demand for higher levels of education and training than were required of previous generations (1994:22)."

Latina women must find new roles to play than that of a housewife in order to achieve sustainability and self-esteem in the U.S. One of these roles comes in the form of an educated, career driven woman.

Though Latinas are not traditionally expected to enter the workforce, they do highly outnumber their male counterparts in the college arena. Even though they have found a place for themselves in undergraduate education they still deal with greater burdens than their male counterparts because of the limitations and expectations that are associated with their gender. Latino parents see the achievement of an undergraduate education by their daughters as acceptable only as long as she adheres to certain gender expectations, such as finding a husband and having children after graduation. As stated earlier, the pursuit of a secondary education takes away time from devoting care to others. This expectation for *familisimo* coupled with a lack of understanding for the process of applying to higher education could be a reason why there are so few Latinas who continue onto graduate school.

Adherence to the expectations of their parents is especially difficult for newer generations of Latinas born in the United States who are saturated by Western cultural norms and values through media, communities, and institutions such as the education system. An example of this Western cultural influence is seen through college graduate Latinas from William Perez's study. One student likens her first experience in an all-English elementary school to a classroom in a Charlie Brown cartoon (2009:85). Young Latina college students also talk about how they were influenced to become a lawyer because of characters from TV, which were played by "mostly White women (2007:145)." In other words, newer generations of Latinas are being culturally influenced by Western society. Even though they still carry with them the cultural identity of their family's origin, they also carry with them Western expectations. In Parra's dissertation, a young Latina girl named Mayra mirrors the Western ideology that, "a woman has less to offer

when she was not educated (2007:143).” Even though some students prefer traditional paths, such as marriage and childbearing, there are girls like Mayra who cling to the Western ideals of becoming an educated single woman (Parra 2007:142).

Many Latinas who adhere to the ideal of becoming an educated woman must, at some level, replace their traditional values, goals, and achievement styles with ones favored in a Western world. In education, the higher a student progresses the more she or he is expected to leave the responsibilities of the world behind to focus on obtaining their degree. This is a very individualistic pursuit and would be considered rude and uncharacteristic of a well-raised Latina. In her study on the characteristics that lead to a successful college career for Latinas, Lango states, “without family support, the Mexican American woman will find it extremely difficult to take on nontraditional behaviors, manners, and attitudes that are looked on by her culture as disrespectful (1995:46).” Latinas must hide any Western values and goals that they adhere to during their educational pursuits from traditional family members. On the other hand, Western education expects them to hide their traditional values. This places an incredible strain on their identity.

Conclusion

As we can see, Latinas have greater burdens placed on them as a result of being women. Not only do they live in a bicultural sphere that presents opposing expectations, they must also make up for the insufficient incomes of their male counterparts while maintaining their role as housekeeper. In an affluent Western society like the United States, success is dependent upon acculturation to Western achieving styles and expectations to obtain higher levels of education. The struggle to achieve these ideals are exacerbated by weaknesses in the educational pipeline that result in poor employment opportunities, which severs their connection to self-esteem in the

modern world and prevents them from leaving the confines of their housekeeper role. As they must wrestle between their culture of origin and acculturation to life in the United States the identities of newer generation Latinos, and especially Latinas, become increasingly torn.

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