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An analysis of the Effects of Cultural Expectations and Family Obligations on Latina Women

Attending College

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Abstract

This paper explores the existing research involving the cultural roles, expectations and family obligations that may be affecting Latina college students. Latina higher education attainment rates are significantly lower compared to their female counterparts and this paper seeks to explore how strong collectivist orientations may be contributing to this achievement disparity. *Familismo* is a cultural value that emphasizes loyalty, reciprocity and solidarity, involves strong identification and attachment to the family, and requires members to prioritize family. Latinas may be prioritizing family obligations or fulfilling cultural expectations over school responsibilities, which could lead to the decision to stop pursuing a higher education. Due to the lack of research on this subject, this paper offers recommendations for future research, implications for higher education institutions and the field of leadership, and how the use of adaptive leadership may serve these women.

Introduction

Latinos represent the largest ethnic minority group in the United States making up 17.8 percent (57.5 million) of the nation's total population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2017). However, they continue to be underrepresented in higher education institutions (Krogstad, 2016). College graduation rates for Latinas were at 31.3 percent in 2008, which is significantly lower than the 45.8 percent for white women (Jackson, 2013). Though college enrollment, retention, and 4-year degree completion rates for Latinas have increased over the past few years, Latinas still remain underrepresented compared to their female counterparts. What factors are causing this underrepresentation?

Familismo is defined as “A cultural value that involves individuals’ strong identification with and attachment to their nuclear and extended families, and strong feelings of loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity among members of the same family” (Marin, Sabogal, Marin and Stable, 1987). Marin, Sabogal, Marin and Stable (1987) found that Latinos scored significantly higher than Anglos on an acculturation scale measuring the importance of family obligation and familial support issues. For many Latinas, the importance of starting a family and taking care of the home is emphasized from a very young age. Although this belief is true for many young women, the concepts of familismo and marianismo can help explain why the pressures for a Latina to pursue this lifestyle are heavier compared to their female counterparts. The most propagated terms used to discuss Latina/o gender identity are machismo and marianismo. Understanding gender roles and expectations for Latina college students, and Latinas in general, begins with defining and understanding marianismo. Marianismo is an aspect of the female gender role in the machismo of Hispanic American folk culture. It is the supposed ideal of true femininity that women are supposed to live up to—i.e. being modest, virtuous,

and sexually abstinent until marriage—and then being faithful and subordinate to their husbands. Political scientist Evelyn Stevens first used the term in her 1973 essay, “Marianismo: The Other Face of Machismo” (Stevens, 1973). The ideal woman is emotional, kind, docile, compliant, vulnerable, and takes care of the home and children while the husband works. Could Latinas’ culture and family pressures be affecting their motivation and commitment to completing their baccalaureate degree? This paper seeks to explore existing research on why four-year college completion rates are so low and how cultural obligations may be affecting their ability and willingness to finish college.

My personal experience was very different than that of most women from the Mexican culture. I was heavily influenced by my mother, who worked from a young age and pursued an education, all while raising her small children. My father was supportive of her having a job and continuing her education. Both of my parents always emphasized the importance of going to college to me and my sister. I have never felt that familial responsibilities, familial commitments, or cultural pressures to start a family and serve my family career or academic goals. Many Hispanic women that I know have not shared similar experiences. I know several Latinas who decided to drop out of college and start a family instead of working toward both goals simultaneously. Is starting a family and leaving the idea of pursuing a higher education behind an expectation of Latin women?

Question and Purpose

The purpose of this research paper is to analyze the existing literature that examines Latinas’ cultural roles, expectations, and familial obligations and how these commitments affect their academic achievement, specifically in relation to Latinas already enrolled in four-year universities. What factors could be influencing Latina college students in four-year universities

from completing their education and obtaining a baccalaureate degree? What are the cultural and familial expectations that could be affecting a Latina college student's decision to stop their academic goals during their undergraduate education? Additionally, could certain on-campus factors be attributing to Latina college students' university experience? For many people, college is a new experience and a place that can seem intimidating if there is a lack of resources and/or support. This paper does not seek to or intend to offer a solution to the problem Latina college students are facing, instead it will assess the existing current literature, critique and highlight relevant gaps within the available literature, and make recommendations on how to improve upon current research.

Analysis of Existing Literature

There is plenty of existing research on the roles, responsibilities and expectations Latinas face, however, there is a limited amount of research on whether these roles and expectations affect Latina college students' decisions to not complete their college education. The research shows that cultural roles and expectations do exist for the Latina population and that these responsibilities are a top priority. The research also suggests that these women may feel pressured to fulfill the familial responsibilities, which could put any other responsibilities or goals at risk. If Latinas who identify with having a strong sense of *familismo* or *marianismo* struggle with balancing school and family obligations, there is a chance they will prioritize family and meet cultural expectations and consequently decide to hold off on their educational goals.

Cultural Roles and Expectations

According to an Editorial Projects in Education analysis of 2008-2010 Census survey data, Latinas have significantly lower higher education engagement rates compared to Asian,

White and Black women in their same age bracket (EPE Research Center, 2012) (See Figure 1). Research collected a year later shows that the trends and disparities between Latinas and their female counterparts in reference to higher education attainment have not changed. A Pew Hispanic Center Analysis of 2011 Census survey data found that about 17 percent of Hispanic females ages 25 to 29 have at least a bachelor's degree compared with 43 percent of white females, and 23 percent of black females in that age span (Passel & Cohn, 2011).

POSTSECONDARY ENGAGEMENT LAGS FOR LATINAS

Latinas ages 18 to 24 have lower postsecondary-engagement rates than Asian, white, and black women of the same age bracket. Asian women are twice as likely as Latinas to be either enrolled in higher education or to have a postsecondary credential.

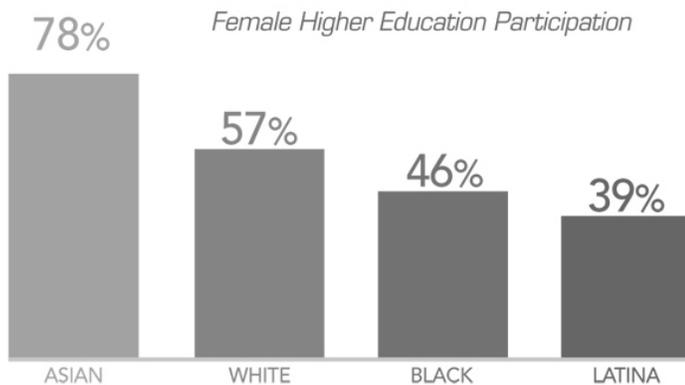


Figure 1. Higher education participation rates for Latinas, Asian, white, and black women ages 18 to 24. It shows the disparities between Latinas and women of other races. (EPE Research Center, 2012. Analysis of data from the American Community Survey (2008-2010), U.S. Census Bureau).

Latino culture traditional responsibilities, roles and expectations may be affecting the Latina college students' college experiences. A study conducted by Susan R. Sy and Jessica Romero sought to examine the different types of family responsibilities Latina women face and

how this impacts their college experiences (Sy & Romero, 2008). The study found that the participants, 20 Latina college students or college graduates, emphasized the importance of developing self-sufficiency to support their family, the voluntary nature of their financial contributions, and the role they play as a surrogate parent for younger family members (Sy & Romero, 2008). When referring to self-sufficiency, one may relate self-sufficiency with personal needs, however, in this case the women felt it was necessary to be self-sufficient in order to help the family. This included not asking for money, asking for clothes, etc. (Sy & Romero, 2008). In these instances, the self-sufficiency is not a means of contributing to one's own satisfaction or personal goals, instead it is a way to respect the family and help them. This dichotomy is seen in the mixed messages Latinas receive at home, where family will motivate them to be self-reliant, but at the same time put family, and becoming "mujeres de hogar" or "women of the home," above everything else (Cammarota, 2004).

The study also found that a few participants voluntarily contribute financially to the family, feeling it is something that is necessary, but never an obligation (Sy & Romero, 2008).

One of the participants mentioned:

"Okay, I think it's not like an obligation. Because my mom, my mom raised us as a single parent, right? She recently married, like 2 years ago. So, now she can have like a support system, but before it . . . wasn't really like an obligation it was just like you knew you had to . . . contribute to the family . . . it's never been obligated, like either you do it or you leave" (Sy & Romero, 2008).

This clearly suggests that some participants may have had a difficult time grappling with the word 'obligation'. Even though these young women were not necessarily receiving actual

demands from their parents, the cultural background and their upbringing makes them feel pressured to maintain a job in college and help support the family financially.

Due to the religious and traditional nature of the Latino culture, the roles and expectations of women are important to consider when analyzing their impact on academic achievement. A study conducted by Marysol Asencio found that adolescent respondents believed that women who “got pregnant and gave birth, they were more inclined to be nurturing, monogamous, less sexually motivated, less violent, and in need of male protection” (Asencio, 1999). Many young Latina women repeatedly hear this message from female family members. There is often an explicit or implicit pressure on a young Latina to start a family and in order to not bring shame on herself, or her family, and “stay out of trouble”. The issue is not only what if these attributes – nurturing, monogamous, less sexually motivated – are not attributes every young Latina wishes to possess, but also what if this idea of starting a family conflicts with academic goals? According to Josmell J. Perez (2012), “young Latinas in high school are greatly influenced by the dichotomy of female roles as they learn to define themselves socially. Parents often socialize their daughters along the traditional gender lines of ‘good women’ and ‘bad women’. Good girls place their families above all else, which means that their own aspirations and goals can take a back seat. Being too career and academically ambitious can be cast in a negative light, as being ‘unfeminine’ or ‘selfish,’ ”(Perez, 2012). The “good woman” pressures can follow Latin women into their college years, and the traditional rules of their families could influence their decision to halt their college education. This is what Roberta Espinoza refers to as the “good daughter dilemma,” the balance between family relationships and the demands of school in order to maintain their status as a “good daughter” that Latinas who are pursuing a higher education may experience (2010). Espinoza’s study interviewed fifteen Latina doctoral

graduate students on their family relationships and responsibilities growing up and their family relationships and responsibilities during graduate school (Espinoza, 2010). The study found that 9 women – who were referred to as the *integrators* – managed their family expectations and obligations by communicating with their family about their school demands and responsibilities, while the other 6 women – who were referred to as the *separators* – purposely kept family life and school separate in order to minimize tension and conflict (Espinoza, 2010). One participant described feeling that graduate school and the American individualistic idea of doing whatever you can to move yourself forward in school clashes with family obligations that she deems important. She mentions:

“I feel like grad school fits into that right, you’re kind of seen as an individual and you’re not supposed to have too many outside forces pulling at you, but then I’ve also got this family obligation and I don’t feel it’s a bad thing to say it’s obligation, I mean it’s a good thing right, because we support each other, but I feel kind of like this pull between doing what most Americans do and just kind of doing what I need to do to get ahead, and then also at the same time dealing with something that’s been instilled in me always, you know your family comes first and they’re very important” (Espinoza, 2010).

Several participants shared similar sentiments and reported that they did not hesitate to interrupt their school work to make themselves available for their family. Participants described putting school work on hold to attend to family responsibilities such as helping a younger brother with his homework or visiting their father in the hospital. The study shows that Latinas with a strong sense of *familismo* will prioritize family obligations which sometimes leads to putting school “on the back burner”. School should not overwhelm your life in every aspect, but it should definitely be a top priority if you plan to achieve good grades and graduate. Latinas may

be struggling with balancing family life and school life and ultimately may be choosing family obligations over school responsibilities.

A Latina's idea of what she can achieve and the person she has the potential to become can be hugely shaped by the expectations and commitments thrown on her imposed from her cultural traditions. Her hopes, goals, and her image of her "ideal self" will be subjected to family loyalties and commitments much more compared to her female counterparts. Dr. Angela Ginorio and researcher Michelle Huston, who used national data to study the experiences of Hispanic women in the U.S. educational system, explained it best when they mentioned:

"Latinas may find that family, community, school, and peer expectations are more discordant for them than for girls of Anglo, middle-class culture. Family expectations that children, especially daughters, stay relatively close to home during and after high school conflict somewhat with a prevailing trend in middle-class culture for successful students to go away to college for four years. Similarly, the expectation that women postpone motherhood or marriage while completing an education may conflict with family or cultural norms of earlier marriage or more extensive family loyalties and commitments than is typical in Anglo, middle-class culture" (Ginorio & Huston, 2001).

Although Latinas who have chosen the college route may receive support and encouragement from their family, the pressures of helping at home or settling down young may be dominating. Speaking as a Latina who has been part of the Mexican culture my entire life, the obligations and responsibilities are emphasized so much that a young woman from the Latino culture may think she has no other option but to give precedence to these "obligations". The ability to juggle both or even attempt to becomes so far reaching and strenuous, that college and overall education then become compromised.

Critiques and Gaps

While there is much research proving that rates of four-year college degree or higher education attainment for Latinas are significantly low compared to females from other races, and much research on the evident cultural expectations and responsibilities of Latinas, there is no research on the direct effects of Marianismo beliefs or cultural expectations on Latinas' decisions to not complete college. More research and quantitative studies should be done on the direct correlation between Latinas' cultural obligations and their reasoning behind dropping out of universities. The research proving a cause and effect relationship could then be provided to high school and college counselors in order to address issues on the pathway to college and focus on retention of the young women already in college.

Additionally, the existing literature on experiences of Latinas in relation to cultural expectations and obligations could be more descriptive and provide concrete examples of everyday responsibilities and the stressors of performing these responsibilities. The questions asked during the studies could be framed in ways that would elicit more narratives and descriptive responses. I feel it would help the research if the experiences could be illustrated more and the stress, worries, burdens or other emotions could be expressed, in order for one to imagine the actual "obligation" or "duty" component behind it.

Lack of Educational Resources

There are several factors that are contributing to the low rates of baccalaureate degree attainment by Latina women. University programs and services tend to be helpful in many instances, however, this may not always be the case for Latinas. According to Sólorzano, Villalplando, and Oseguera, many students feel that university-based retention programs aren't properly serving its intended purposes, therefore, student-initiated retention programs are then

created (2005). This article describes how these programs are run by students themselves, which adds more work, responsibility, and stress to their current load. Additionally, there is no guarantee that these programs will remain in place and the roles will be filled after the current students running the program graduate (Sòlorzano, Villalplando, & Oseguera, 2005). Another influence that could benefit students, or serve as a disadvantage, is financial aid for Latino students. According to the study, aid is a positive predictor of degree completion and it frees the student from having to work, which allows them more time to focus on school work and study (2005). Campus racial climate is also a significant factor when speaking of Latina college attainment rates. Numerous studies have revealed that an institution's racial climate affects the lives of those on campus. The article states that a rough racial climate has a direct negative effect on the retention and recruitment of minority students, which includes Latina women (2005). This could be influencing Latinas' willingness and motivation to complete their degree comfortably. The article recommends that thoughtful reflection by campus leaders, improvement of the current recruitment and retention of people of color on campus, attending to perception and attitudes among groups, and enhancement of inter- and intra-group relations among college groups would improve the climate and assist with diversity and inclusivity (2005).

Educational barriers could be negatively impacting Latina college students and contributing to the decision to withdraw from college. A study by Gloria, Castellanos, and Orozco sought to find the perceived educational barriers, cultural fit, coping responses and psychological well-being of Latina undergraduates (2005). The study consisted of a survey containing 18 demographic questions; a 24 item perception of barriers scale measuring students' perceptions of their encounters with educational barriers with questions such as, "If I were to

withdraw from college, it would be because of...”; a 14 item university environment scale measuring students’ perceptions of the university environment with statements like, “University staff has been warm and friendly.”; a 13 item cultural congruency scale measuring students’ perceptions of cultural fit between the university’s values and their personal values with statements such as, “I feel that I have to change myself to fit in at school.”; a list of coping resources measuring coping responses for Mexican American students; and an 18 item psychological well-being scale short scale measuring self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth (Gloria et al., 2005). The analysis was conducted on 98 Latina women’s responses and the study found that Latinas who held more positive perceptions about the university environment tended to perceive fewer educational barriers that would result in them withdrawing from college and reported increase cultural congruity (Gloria et al., 2005). The study also found that the students who utilized the coping response of actively seeking out more about the situation and carrying out some positive, planned action were more likely to talk about their problem, seek professional advice, or seek help from their cultural group (Gloria et al., 2005). This could suggest that the women who do not hold positive perceptions of the university and do not feel culturally congruent may feel that educational barriers are significantly present which could result in them withdrawing from college.

Critiques and Gaps

There is not much research on the outcomes or benefits of educational resources, such as programs, for Latina college students. The available research does not describe what programs are working, what tools and methods are being used, and how they are effectively aiding in retention rates among Latina college students. There is a lack of empirical examples pertaining

to higher education institution programs for Latinas. Similarly, studies suggest that campus racial climate, financial aid availability and college environment perceptions could be factors that affect Latinas' college experiences, however, more research is necessary to establish that these influences directly cause some Latinas to withdraw from college.

Adaptive Leadership and Connections to Personal Leadership Philosophy

Adaptive leadership is essentially a practice rather than a theory. Ron Heifetz defines adaptive leadership as the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive (Heifetz, et al., 2009). Understanding adaptive leadership requires that you understand the difference between a technical challenge and an adaptive challenge, and the ways in which each of these problems are tackled. Technical problems can be solved by applying current know-how solutions and the person with the right authority tends to fix the problem, however, with adaptive challenges, common know-how solutions cannot be applied (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002, p. 14). Heifetz and Linsky (2002) state that adaptive challenges require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places in the organization or community, along with changing attitudes, values and behaviors, in order to thrive in the new environment. In the process of adaptive change, people tend to avoid painful adjustments for fear of experiencing loss (loss of old ways, thoughts, behaviors) thus causing them to avoid change, place the blame or burden on someone else, or look to be rescued. Adaptive leadership requires risk and courage in order to adopt new ways of thinking for a positive change. Latinas in college who struggle with balancing family obligations and school may feel like they are disappointing their family or possibly face some time of consequences if they do not prioritize family obligations. The adaptive leadership practice can possibly help Latinas who feel a strong sense of *familismo*

understand that both family life and school life are equally important, but that school should not be jeopardized at the cost of family responsibilities.

The research suggests that Latinas feel obligated to such family responsibilities and cultural expectations, so I strongly feel that adaptive leadership would help them reframe their thoughts and beliefs about their cultural expectations in a way that would promote self-confidence and allow them to feel more supported, encouraged and motivated to complete their higher education. Due to the fact that the cultural expectations may be so deeply ingrained, a challenge of beliefs and attitudes, along with a loss of past doubts, may be necessary for these women to let go of the cultural obstructions that are holding them back.

Throughout my graduate program, I have learned so many things that I have implemented into my life, however, the most life changing and impacting aspect was learning about adaptive leadership and adopting the practice in my life. I am genuinely happy to say that applying adaptive leadership practices in my personal and professional life have helped me grow in so many facets of my life. My self-confidence has grown, I learned the beautiful practice of questioning and challenging my mental models and beliefs to continue learning and growing, I have become more humble, empathetic, curious and motivated, and I have learned the art of looking within in order to understand myself and others around me better. Change results in growth, and successful leaders need to grow frequently and encourage change and growth in those around them. Great leaders help themselves so that they can help others. Throughout my time in this program, I've witnessed and experienced great leadership from people all around me, and have found that the most transforming aspect of leadership is the ability to take all the fear, failures, embarrassment and voices of judgment and learn from them instead of resorting to learned defense mechanisms. Exploring the pain and the fear that we experience is a tough thing

to do, but the outcome can be so beneficial. Sitting with what is uncomfortable to us is an aspect of adaptive leadership that I have found to be the most crucial for real change to happen.

Analyzing why you feel uncomfortable and how this can be changed by adopting new attitudes, beliefs and thoughts is truly the most enlightening experience I've had in this program and I recognize the impact this can have on Latinas who are juggling strong collectivist cultural expectations and individualist goals.

Implications for Leadership Field and Future Study Recommendations

According to the statistics, there are clearly huge disparities between Latina college completion rates and college completion rates of females from other races in the United States. In addition, future research is needed to determine if cultural expectations and family obligations affect Latina college students' experiences and college withdrawal decision making. It is recommended that future researchers study the ways in which Latinas' possible strong collectivist familismo orientations affect their college experiences, demands, and decisions to drop out.

The findings from the existing literature have implications for higher education institutions to support Latinas with further resources. Further studies may help support and create support programs and mentorship programs that will fit the unique educational needs of Latinas and focus on the retention and care of Latina students. There are several programs that serve as retention tools for minority groups, Latino students, students that are migrant workers, etc.; however, these programs should focus on addressing cultural pressures and expectations for Latino students. Latina higher education attainment rates may increase if institutions introduced ways to educate faculty, administrators, and counselors on the strong collectivist *familismo* culture and the dilemmas that may arise for their Latina students. Higher education leaders

should improve their efforts to help support this already marginalized population that is clearly falling behind in academic success.

Furthermore, the findings from this review have implications for the field of leadership. Women in leadership, women of color in leadership, and leaders who advocate for minority groups should seek to support the educational pursuits of Latinas. More Latinas with higher education degrees means more representation, more Latinas in the work field, in higher education institutions, and in leadership roles. As a Latina, and someone who aspires to be a leader in the organizational field, I understand the need for advocacy of this population in organizations and corporations. Diversity is crucial for the success of any organization and institution, and Latina academic success will help foster representation and diversity in workplaces. With these findings, I will advocate for and support Latinas in whatever capacities I can.

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