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Advancing Women In Leadership

Hispanic Women Leaders and Their Perceptions of Affirmative Action

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PEERY & GRADY, WINTER, 1999

Professionals in positions to hire or promote Hispanic women need to be educated on the effects of "tokenism" and Hispanic women need support to help them deal with its effects.

Affirmative action is an intensely controversial concept (Kaplin & Lee, 1995) and one that is receiving a great deal of attention from scholars, news reporters and judges. Affirmative action is the result of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Title VII of this act prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, race, color, religion, or national origin. Title VII allows for the use of affirmative action to redress the effects of past discrimination, but affirmative action plans are mandatory only for federal agencies and contractors. According to Kaplin and Lee, the dual aims of the federal government's anti-discrimination initiatives are: 1) "to bar like discrimination in the future" 2) "to eliminate the discriminatory effects of the past" (p. 254). Public outcry occurs when employer policies respond to a statistical "under representation" that gives preference to women and minorities, thus resulting in "reverse discrimination" (p. 255).

Most recently, three significant events brought public scrutiny and/or criticism to the implementation of affirmative action policies. In 1995 the first Republican Congress in over 40 years took control of the legislative branch of government. Members of this congress articulated strong disapproval of government set-aside or preferential affirmative action programs. In 1996, the fifth circuit court district ruled that race could not be used as a factor in admissions decisions for the University of Texas Law School, and consequently, for any institution under that court's jurisdiction (*Hopwood v State of Texas*). Then, in 1996, California voters passed Proposition 209 which banned the use of racial and gender preferences in admissions decisions for higher educational institutions in California.

Scholars (Marshall, 1993; Szockyj & Fox 1996; Miller, 1986) recognize that affirmative action is most

influential in helping women and minorities enter occupations in which:

- 1) men are not threatened and/or organized
- 2) the job has become less attractive to men
- 3) cost is a dominant factor (lower salaries)
- 4) the positions are low-level and dead-end

According to Marshall (1993) affirmative action has little or no enforcement power. She stated that, "district policymakers and gatekeepers in the career are not concerned with special issues faced by minorities and women" (p. 173).

The purpose for conducting this qualitative multicase study was to understand four Hispanic women leaders' perceptions of affirmative action policies on their careers. All four of the women interviewed identified affirmative action as having an effect on their lives and careers.

PROCEDURES

To conduct this study, we utilized the multicase study design. Case study design is flexible and adaptable to a wide range of contexts and people and provides some of the most useful educational research methods. Voiced processes or themes by persons in a particular situation provide detailed descriptions and analysis (McMillian & Schumacher, 1993). Using the multicase study design, we describe the participant's career progressions and their perceptions of the impact of affirmative action policies. We used multicase study to explore common themes that occurred within the leadership experiences of women in diverse professional fields. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1992), multicase studies of two or more subjects in a setting will address generalizability.

In qualitative research, the researcher interacts directly with participants and becomes the primary instrument for data analysis and collection. The researcher must state the role she will be assuming for data collection and build trust by making it clear that she will not use information gained to harm or demean people (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The researcher role in this study was primarily that of interviewer and observer. Because "the primary instrument in qualitative case study research is human, all observations and analysis are filtered through ones' world view, ones' values, ones' perspective" (Merriam, 1998 pg. 39).

Difficulty may arise for non-members of an ethnic group to study that culture. This difference might cause bias by influencing the research to ask different questions than might be asked by a member of that ethnic group. In addition, participants may offer different answers to members outside their ethnic group (Zinn, 1979). One way of addressing this is by "boundary spanning." Goetz and LeCompte (1984) describe boundary spanning as the ability to communicate within and across cultural groups as a result of familiarity with the beliefs, goals, and behaviors of the particular group.

Personal lifetime experiences influenced our interest and perceptions of the Hispanic culture. One researcher lived and worked among the Hispanic population for the past forty years.

The researchers experiences as white females in leadership positions created some bias in that we saw racism, discrimination, prejudice, and sexism against both Anglo and Hispanic women. We approach with study with a belief in the basic principles of feminism. These experiences and beliefs heightened our awareness of the personal and professional challenges and frustrations confronted by women daily. It is our belief that these challenges become exacerbated when facing them as an Hispanic woman. As the

study progressed, we made every effort to recognize and control these biases.

The technique used to select the four participants included purposeful sampling, including the technique of "snowballing." Participants included Hispanic females with at least five years of administrative or leadership experience. Selected women held leadership positions in education, politics, and business. We chose one participant on the basis of personal knowledge of her present position as one of only two female Hispanic public school superintendents in the southwestern state where this study took place. We used the technique of snowballing to select two additional participants. As described by Berg (1993), this technique is "using people whom the original guide(s) introduces to the ethnographer as persons who can also vouch for the legitimacy and safety of the research" (p. 95). In this case, the original guide was a high ranking political figure who participated in a pilot study conducted in the fall of 1996. The two women selected served in positions as a judge and as the State Corporation Commissioner. The researchers selected the remaining participant from the corporate world. We spoke with the Human Resources Director of several of the largest public held businesses in the state and asked for recommendations.

The primary means of data collection consisted of interviews. We developed open-ended questions, and used interviews to collect data that provided insight into the women's perceptions of the impact of affirmative action on their careers. This interviewing process, or "conversation with a purpose" is one of the oldest and most respected tools of inquiry (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Guba and Lincoln further contend that interviewing, "particularly the unstructured interview--is the backbone of field and naturalistic research and evaluation" (p. 154). Interviews were audio recorded and the tapes were transcribed verbatim. Other means of collecting data included a thorough examination of magazine and newspaper articles, speech transcripts, meeting minutes, court hearings (in the case of the judge), and memoranda. Data analysis occurred simultaneously with data collection. Following is a description of the women leaders and their perceptions of the impact of affirmative action policies on their career progressions.

Participants

Sandra Martinez - Sandra is of Puerto Rican, Cuban and New Mexican Hispanic decent. She was the first woman elected to the position of State Corporation Commissioner. Sandra was running for governor, but recently withdrew from the race when she accepted a presidential appointment to Washington, D.C.

Martha Moreno - Martha is the daughter of Mexican migrant farm workers. She is the first female judge appointed to her position in the history of the state.

Lucille Sanchez - Lucille taught high school Spanish for twenty-two years before appointment to her current position as a public school superintendent. She also served as a state representative.

Rosa Astorga - Rosa is in upper level management at a southwest utility company. She is the daughter of Mexican migrant farm workers.

Perceptions

The four women described their opinions, as well as negative and positive experiences as a result of affirmative action policies. Personally and politically, Sandra spoke of discrimination and affirmative action as her "burning passion." She said:

I care very, very much about discrimination, and about giving minorities opportunities to do better. I care so passionately about this that I'm probably not politically correct in my thinking, because I still believe very strongly in affirmative action. And I'm not afraid to speak out about it. Now, people could say, "Well, it's not so brave, because in this state, you'll find a lot of people that agree with you." And I say, "Sure, it's

not so brave, but I don't see everybody speaking out about it!"

Sandra talked about affirmative action as a way of making reparation, "because we've treated Hispanics so badly."

Lucille, a public school superintendent and ex-state representative, talked about how affirmative action policies helped her get elected. She said:

Probably being elected into office (was an opportunity because of my ethnicity). There was a community group that filed suit against the legislature back in '80 because the legislative districts had been gerrymandered to elect whites. We won the suit and because that suit was won, a new legislative district was cut specifically to elect an Hispanic person. It was because of that that I was fortunate to get into office.

Personally, I believe you shouldn't look at a person because of their ethnic background, but because of what they can do. You know, it doesn't matter if that person is Black or Chinese, or whatever. If that person can do the job, then that's the person that's best for that position. There have been times when I was given specific work assignments because I am Hispanic. I found that to be very offensive.

Martha believed that she received her judicial appointment because of her gender and ethnicity. She said:

I think, quite clearly when this position came open, I think people, the public, was talking a lot about wanting an Hispanic and wanting an Hispanic woman. I think that's the kind of thing that makes all our leaders; our senators, our president, our congressmen say, "Yeah, you know, that's right. We don't have one, maybe we should consider one. Maybe we should look to see who is available, who is out there." And I know, certainly, that that was done around the time that this position became open.

Martha addresses discrimination and affirmative action when she speaks to young people. The advice she gave to Hispanic high school students in one of her speeches included the following:

You can do one of two things. When you are in a situation where people assume you're stupid, assume you're lazy, assume you can do nothing, assume that you've been given special benefits because you're Hispanic and not because you are anything, you can give up and say, "Screw 'em." Or you can prove them wrong. You know, it's just completely up to you. You can say, "I am not stupid, I am very capable." You can do it, or you can just let them win.

Rosa is a chemical engineer with a Masters degree in Business Administration. She presently holds an upper management position in a very large southwest utility company. Rosa discovered the negative effects of affirmative action when she received a promotion several years ago. Rosa told this story:

I applied for manager of transportation, which was a very high level manager's position. I got the job. It turned out to be a curse, a horrible experience, because coincidentally, just within a few days, there was a (discrimination) lawsuit filed against the company. The people involved in the lawsuit, employees, belonged to an Hispanic Employee Association and one of them was the president. I had close ties with him because I was a personal friend and I was also a member of the Association. So when I got the job, there was an immediate link made by employees that I got it because I was an Hispanic female and there was a quota, and it was affirmative action. I was devastated that people would say that. I was angry, I was hurt, and I cried. I went into my office and I sobbed.

The negative effects of this "token" appointment lasted several years. Rosa explained:

She (one of the people working for me) put out the word that I got the job because I was an Hispanic

female. It kind of became 'common knowledge' that that was why I had the job. So, it was communicated to the other members of the department that I was to take over. I couldn't gain the authority that I needed. I couldn't ask people to do things without there being this other inner play; this idea of being at their mercy. You know, I don't know the business, so I don't have the right to question their work or change their work or to do anything like that, which is expected of a manager.

Rosa did not make any changes for the first year. When she began to feel secure in her position, and did try to make changes, her staff turned against her, using her gender and ethnicity against her. Rosa said:

What happened is, these people went to their network and anybody who had ever had any small tiff or irritation suddenly was asked to come forward and to say that I had no leadership skills, no personal skills, and plus, I didn't deserve to have that job because I was an Hispanic female, that was the only reason. There were all those games being played all the time, just resist the manager, don't take direction, throw up obstacles. That sort of passive-aggressive thing. I've been dealing with that from the very beginning. I was crippled as a manager. I never got management support.

Rosa talked about her need to prove everyone wrong, and how this resulted in long working hours. She also talked about the effect this had on her family and health. She said:

I felt that I was guilty until proven innocent. I had worked eighty hours a week, constantly for month, and months, and months. If I put in a sixty-hour week, I was cruising; I was on vacation that week. None of that mattered. It carried no weight. It meant absolutely nothing. Still, I was guilty until proven innocent. I felt that maybe, in a way, I had worked myself into that position because I had given away too much. I self-sacrificed. I gave away a tremendous amount of power, because I wanted to prove that I could do the job, that I was as good as anybody, and that it didn't matter what challenge you threw my way, I could handle it.

Rosa also spoke about the inappropriate instances when the issues of her gender and ethnicity came up in management meetings. In one instance, Rosa held a meeting with a non-performing employee and her supervisor. Rosa described the meeting this way:

We were in this meeting and my boss says, "Well, you know, I don't know what it's like to be an Hispanic female. I'm sure that there must be a lot you have to deal with. But, OK, let's talk about the problem." And I thought, "First you reduced this performance problem that I'm bringing to you; to the fact that I'm a woman. The other problem is that I'm Hispanic. Not that we have a performance problem."

Although Rosa suffered through some difficult situations as a result of this appointment, she said she would not change anything. She also talked about the positive appointments she received as the first Hispanic and first woman to chair a very important company committee, and as a special trainee to the company's president.

CONCLUSIONS

All four of the women interviewed identified affirmative action as having an effect on their careers. Three of the four respondents attribute at least one of their successes to affirmative action. Anti-discrimination laws are an important means of "leveling the playing field" (Szockyj and Fox, 1996). Of the four women effected by affirmative action, Rosa spoke of the "hellish" time she experienced after receiving a promotion as a result of affirmative action. Rosa's story is common among women and minority persons when they are one-of-a-kind. According to Szockyj and Fox (1996), "tokenism is both cruel and unproductive when integration is the long-term goal" (p. 154). Rosa's story supports this statement. Although she had a difficult time with peers and with her own personal need to "prove" she could do the

job, her appointment did serve to promote her career.

Affirmative action policy aided Lucille to become an elected state official after the state established a new legislative district to insure an Hispanic representative. Rosa applied for a managerial position at the same time another division of the company faced an affirmative action lawsuit. Martha received appointment to her position during a time of public concern regarding no female or Hispanic representation in the judiciary.

Anti-discrimination laws are important because, according to Szockyj and Fox, "once inequality has become established, it is difficult for the system to right itself" (p. 143). These authors state that, following the passage of the Civil Rights Act and its amendments, the rapid movement of women into predominately male professions indicated that artificial barriers, rather than choice or aptitude, kept women and minorities out of the labor market. Although a great deal of debate exists regarding the positive or negative effects of affirmative action in this country, clearly, it did serve to help three of the four women in this study in their career progressions.

Implications

Hispanic women continue to face discrimination and unequal treatment in their career progressions. Women and minorities need the opportunities affirmative action policies provide in order to prove their capabilities. The negative effects of "tokenism" need to be addressed. Professionals in positions to hire or promote Hispanic women need to be educated on the effects of "tokenism" and Hispanic women need support to help them deal with its effects. Additional research must be conducted to determine the effects of affirmative action on Hispanic females, especially in light of the move to eliminate affirmative action policies.

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[AWL Journal Volume 2, Number 1, Winter 1999](#)

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