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Mexican Women Confront Mainstream Policy: Voices from the Colonias Address Family Self-sufficiency

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The practice of allowing "family self-sufficiency" to become tantamount to the family's adoption of legislated middle class values might limit access to these social services to women who are willing to compromise their own culture.

"*Colonias*" are unincorporated settlements in the outskirts of the U.S. cities along the Mexican border. They are typified by high unemployment, low access to potable water, chronic disease, a high birthrate and residents who have a lack of knowledge about, or access to, medical care (Salinas, 1998). In addition to the daily challenges which *Colonias* women face, they are often judged by standards established by American middle class culture. These judgment criteria include such items as the: (a) acquisition of written language and literacy skills; (b) reliance on the individual (self) over reliance on the group (community); and (c) acceptance of a priority on activities that will produce a higher socio-economic status. Based on these standards, the *Colonias* women appear to fall short, or to be somehow more deficient than other women in poverty. Often they speak little or no English and may have limited reading or writing skills in their native language(s). They often value commitment to family and neighbors more than commitment to "economic independence". In fact, this commitment may supersede their desire for personal growth through education and job training programs (Salinas, 1998; Vaccaro, 1998).

It is the contention of the authors that the difference in values between women living in the Colonias and typical middle class values might be problematic when middle class values are used as the basis for social legislation. For example, the recent welfare reform law (The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 - PRWORA) seems to include such a mismatch. The comprehensive welfare reform program, called Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), focuses on moving recipients into work and to time-limit assistance. Under this statute, program funding

and assistance come with predefined expectations and responsibilities for welfare recipients. Adults receiving assistance are expected to engage in work activities and develop the capability to support themselves before their time-limited assistance runs out (PRWORA, 1996). In other words, adults receiving assistance are mandated to become "self-sufficient" based on a middle class definition of the concept. This definition of self-sufficiency includes a synthesis of competencies, which, when achieved, should allow the family to meet their physical needs and to problem solve in the areas of personal finance, health and medical care, transportation, education, job seeking and work, child care, communications and personal development (Baird, 1991, Zieghan, 1992).

The authors feel that female residents of the *Colonias* could easily be caught between legislated values, such as those inherent in welfare reform, and the values rewarded by their own culture, i.e. self-sacrifice, conformity and deference to male authority (Anzaldúa, 1987, Cisneros, 1991). The practice of allowing "family self-sufficiency" to become tantamount to the family's adoption of legislated middle class values might limit access to these social services to women who are willing to compromise their own culture.

METHODOLOGY

The supposition that the perspectives held by Mexican women regarding independence and self sufficiency was substantively different than the values included in legislated welfare reform and job training programs, and would thus limit access to these programs by these women, led the researchers in two different directions. First, it was necessary to learn the values of the *Colonias* women directly. To that end, the first author conducted interviews with several of these women. The women were selected through kinship and friendship associations. As the author met one individual, she was subsequently introduced to neighbors and friends. Some of the women were students in a job skills training program, one worked in a restaurant and one young woman worked full time in a machine shop.

The second author focused on the perspectives held by staff employed in federally funded programs. She interviewed program staff at four pilot training project sites. The purpose of these interviews was to ascertain: (1) the extent to which the staff perceived that legislation was driving program implementation and (2) the extent to which they perceived that the values included in the legislation might be contrary to values of program recipients.

As in most qualitative studies, data collection and data analysis were simultaneous activities. However, the analysis of the data became more intense once all the data was acquired (Merriam, 1988). Analysis of the data involved a systematic process of working with it, organizing it, dividing it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns and discovering what was important to be learned and reported (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982).

Each of the women who were interviewed was asked to talk about her life. The responses were free-ranging and the conversation was self-sustaining. The conversation was carefully framed to avoid potentially damaging queries, such as immigration status. However, many of the respondents volunteered this information. All conversations were tape recorded with the participants' knowledge and permission. Later the tapes were transcribed and the data were broken into units, coded and organized according to emerging themes. Pseudonyms were used to protect the anonymity of these women.

Because welfare reform legislation had not yet been fully implemented, it was not possible to interview TANF program staff. Therefore, staff from other programs based on legislated mandates were chosen for interviewing. The assumption was that the beliefs of this set of program staff would be consistent with beliefs held by individuals charged with implementing new welfare programs.

Eight individuals were interviewed using a semi-structured process and basic interview guide. The

interviews were audio-taped and the transcript of each interview was returned to the interviewee for verification and correction. Information from the modified transcripts was used to determine conceptual categories. To preserve the confidential nature of the staff members' comments, they will not be identified.

Voices of the Women From the Colonias

All of the women who participated in this study worked. Two were employed full time, one was intermittently employed, and all worked at home. As the women shared their stories, they described the importance of working together and of maintaining a family atmosphere.

Sol participated in a pilot study which addressed workplace learning. A single parent, she was of medium height with wavy brown hair which she wore in a clip. She preferred wearing jeans and boots rather than wearing dresses and heels. Sol was bi-lingual, and on the day of the interview she sat in an office behind a desk. Estela also participated in a pilot study of workplace learning. Her job site, and the site of the interview, was a restaurant. She smiled frequently and glanced often at her co-workers during the interview. She spoke no English at the time of the visit. Lupita, Ines and Mathilda invited the author to Mathilda's home, where they participated in an open ended discussion.

The women who participated in this study did not hold a conception of self-sufficiency that differed greatly from that of policy makers. They did, however, see self-sufficiency from a different perspective. From their perspective, it was necessary to be responsible and to take care of one's family and finances. Their views differed from the legislated values in one significant way - the women did not feel it was necessary to become "self-sufficient" by oneself. In fact, it is arguable that none of these women would be found to be self-sufficient. Few of the women interviewed could obtain medical care or get their children off to school alone. But, if assessed within the values held by their culture, interconnectedness and interdependency on their friends and neighbors, they functioned very well. As a culture and as a community they were "self-sufficient".

Two of the respondents emphasized their personal satisfaction from working together, revealing their pride and preference for familial contexts at work.

The most important thing about working with others is respect. How one is treated. Just like one of your own people - like a family member. (Estela) [tr.]

... this is what we need, this is what we gotta do ... and once I've helped her I'm like - I feel good about myself. I feel like I've done something good (Sol).

Sol, the young woman who worked in a machine shop, took pride in the fact that her family worked together. She emphasized that she knows her role in her family and that this role had extended to the workplace.

I want to be able to help my dad ... to help my dad with his business ... and I want to be able to help him and I'm not gonna let him down (Sol).

In addition to family support, these women also received support from their neighbors. Mathilda, the mother of several small children, talked about relying upon her friends to get her children to school and back each day.

It's difficult for me since I have a little girl and I have another one in pre-kindergarten. Some leave in the morning and my son and daughter at noon. I send the morning one to Lupita so she can get her on the bus for me. And in the afternoon I go and pick them all up (Mathilda) [tr.]

All of life in the *Colonias* and in the city involved struggle, but these women were intent on not giving up. Struggle was viewed as a benefit when the group struggled together.

I've been through too many, and, there's a time when you just want to give up but you really can't ... I think that I never want to end up giving up because of my daughter. I see what my dad has given to me and what he has and I want to be able to give her that (Sol).

Ines had lived in a *Colonia* for a number of years. Her husband worked as a warehouseman in a large border city. An activist, Ines attended training in community leadership and made public speeches regarding her views of the lives of Mexican women along the border. She also has participated in marches for residents' rights. Ines and her family moved into an abandoned house. She described her first night there when new neighbors came to help them, not only to move, but to put a floor down so that they could sleep.

So, we went to bed [in the new house] without windows, without a floor, only three walls, and it did not have a roof, and we slept in a way that you should have to see ... but good and tired ... [neighbors came to help out]. We put the floor in, everybody, grab something here, grab something there, even the little one in pre-kinder filled the jugs with water. Everybody worked to our capacity (Ines). [tr.]

Each woman described the injustices she encountered as she attempted to adjust to the predominant American middle class culture. Several expressed rage and frustration, but they also expressed pride. Sol, who is bilingual in English and Spanish, chose to express these emotions in Spanish. She took particular pride in telling visitors to the machine shop that each person on the job floor was Hispanic and that she was aware that the work group established standards for the work and produced work to those standards together.

It's so hard that sometimes you're looked at by the color of your skin and not for what you would like or what you have in yourself ... just because I go in speaking Spanish to somewhere that we'll be treated different than if we go in speaking English, that we don't know much, but it's not that way ... because I know and I let everybody know that comes here, if you point out to me a single white person ... that is out there running that shop, I said, No! That's why I feel so proud of being Hispanic ... we're the ones who get the work out! (Sol) [tr.]

The *Colonias* residents had scant access to medical care. In an emergency, solving a problem could require special effort and ingenuity. Ines talked about trying to take an injured child to the doctor on the bus, but was barred from getting on because she had not purchased a ticket in advance. Her injured child, also, was prevented from boarding. In her rage, she described her feelings of powerlessness. However, she also took her problem to the residents' organization and publicized the name of the bus driver at the meeting.

My son fell and broke his elbow. I didn't have a ticket in my hand and they didn't let me get on. They told me I didn't have a ticket. I told [the driver] "don't be an ingrate. I'm out in the country. Where am I going to get a ticket?" Can you imagine? I cried, out of anger, desperation and impotence ... "Look", I said, "I'm not refusing to buy a ticket." "You can't lady" the driver said. "Those are the rules". "No" I told him. "What an ingrate you are." I took his name and I wrote it down [to report at the next residents' meeting ...] (Ines) [tr.]

Interestingly, these women found good in their harsh circumstances. Rather than viewing themselves as subsisting, they felt privileged to lead the lives they led. They exhibited pride in their austere living conditions and pride in teaching their children to persevere. They believed that they would get ahead through hard work.

[W]e don't worry so much about that which we don't have, but what we do have. Really, it's a lot if we look at how much we have by comparison to what we don't. Some day we're going to have it, and we're not here for the sake of conformity. If it were for conformity we wouldn't be there, in that house without a floor ... we're training our kids that they're going to struggle (Ines) [tr.]

We are proud and we have the advantage of living here on the border, and we can get a lot of things in Mexico, right? ... We have that advantage that other people who live further north don't have. ... We're aware of it, and we're happy and proud to live one step from Mexico (Lupita) [tr.]

Voices From Staff Members

The staff members of training projects that were based on federal legislation had varying perceptions of how the legislated mandates impacted the implementation of their projects. However, all of these staff believed that the implementation of their programs were based on the stated (legislated) goals for the program.

Well, the goal is always at the back of my mind as the main purpose for what I'm doing.

What needs to be done to get to the goal. Okay, let's break the goal down and see what kind of tasks need to be done to get there.

I spend a lot of time preparing. The first thing I do is read what is available, like the laws - if there are new ones.

These staff members did not express much concern about pressures, rules and/or restrictions imposed by project guidelines.

... we are given the parameters to work in with the project ... So you sort of plan around that. I don't find [the oversight agency] unreasonable in what they ask.

I really don't have a problem with any of the rules. I understand [the oversight agency] has to document and they have to validate their expenditures and all that.

The basic assumption of the staff members was that the funding source (in this case, the federal legislation) had the right to dictate specific expectations and outcomes. Their perception was that the funder was their "customer". In fact, this role was so taken for granted that none of the staff members mentioned the possibility of a different type of relationship, such as "partner" or "benefactor". The staff members understood that their institutions were responsible for compliance with bureaucratic rules and that these rules could impact the implementation of their projects. In other words, the legislation and subsequent regulations established the "house rules" and anyone who wanted to "live in the house" had to abide by these rules.

These staff members also believed that the interests stated in the legislation were the same as the interests of potential participants in the program. They did not perceive that participants' interests or values might be different. This lack of perception conforms precisely to Knoke's definition of "authoritative power" (1993). A transaction of authoritative power means that both domination and influence occur simultaneously. This type of transaction carries strong expectations by both the issuer (i.e. the federal government) and the recipient (i.e. the staff members) that compliance will be uncontested. Staff members in this type of situation will believe that the program guidelines are appropriate and acceptable. They will follow the guidelines because they believe it is the right thing to do (Lessem, 1997).

Cultural relevance is necessary when conducting any assessment of students' assets and needs, but the

assessment methods which are currently used in traditional academic settings are frequently inappropriate for other groups. The dominant culture assesses persons in the subordinate cultures, in this case Mexican American women. However, if this culture assesses them individually, but their culture provides for group problem solving; if tests and measures are the predominant ways of achieving this assessment but many of those persons assessed have never been to school, chances are good that the results will find the participants to be wanting and dependent. If this culture holds that intelligence can be measured, but the culture of the *colonias* believes that intelligence is something demonstrated by interest rather than by cleverness (Vaccaro, 1998) then there is a disconnect, and that which is measured is not reflective of that which was intended. If the Mexican American women spread their assets around to their friends and family members, then many of the measures which exist to determine self-sufficiency may find these individuals to be less than sufficient, when the community may quite successfully, if erratically, care for its members.

In another recent study, of immigrant Mexicans' work place learning strategies, it was learned that personal and group identities of many immigrants from Mexico are interwoven, especially in the workplace and in their communities (Vaccaro, 1998). In addition, assessment of these workers was found to be most appropriate when conducted over time in order to ascertain life experiences. The types of assessments found in classroom settings were inappropriate to the participants, in light of the fact that intelligence and expertise took the form of interest and diligence. Learning, for these specific immigrant Mexicans, took place in an atmosphere which was an extension of the home and family dynamics which were suited to their culture. This learning took place in an environment which was the direct result of deliberate and meaningful social, not necessarily individual, action (Vaccaro, 1998).

CONCLUSION

The responses of program staff confirmed the authors' contention that the values inherent in legislation often become the institutionalized values within subsequent programs. In the instance of welfare reform, these values include: (1) independence, (2) self-motivation, and (3) competition (PRWORA, 1996). In contrast, the values of the women living in the *Colonias* stressed: (1) connectedness, (2) group-directedness, and (3) collaboration. It is, therefore, possible that attempting to impose a middle class cultural construct of self-sufficiency on *Colonias* women will inadvertently force radical change in their cultural values. Rather than bettering their lot in life, this practice could result in community and family disintegration (Francis, 1995; Martin, 1990; Ogbu, 1992; Podeschi, 1990; Vaccaro, 1998.)

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