Resisting the Dominant Narrative: The Role of Stories in Latina Educational Success

María Oropeza Fujimoto
California State University, Fullerton

Abstract

This study focuses on how stories influence Latinas' motivation and resiliency toward academic success and how Latina parents support their daughters in resisting racial discrimination. In the spirit of Critical Race Theory, it concludes with a counterstory of hope and possibility about how higher education can create a space for all students to achieve.

Introduction

I am named for my grandmother María Mojica Oropeza. She had worked in the fields as a migrant prior to getting married and completed only three years of formal schooling. Still, she had the foresight to save for her children to attend college. My aunt Luisa and my father became college graduates.

My grandparents were pragmatists. They had seen disabled veterans unable to provide for their families and the financial hardships that resulted. A college degree was perceived as providing greater economic and social opportunities for their children. My grandmother, in particular, wanted to protect her daughter from financial uncertainty; she saved money and persuaded my grandfather to consider the benefit of having an educated daughter.

I never met my grandmother. She died before I was born. However, because of the stories about her, from my father and my aunt, there was little doubt that I would attend college. The stories I heard growing up set particular expectations for me and countered the stereotypical images of Latina teen pregnancy, poverty, and limited English proficiency. These negative images were typically validated by statistics about risk factors and popular media headlines[4]. Yet I am not alone in having my life transformed by stories that were counter to the dominant narrative[5] of who I was supposed to be as a Latina in the U.S. I hope to convey such stories to my daughter some day. This paper presents a snapshot of how stories influenced Latinas' motivation and resiliency as well as how parents supported their daughters to resist discrimination.

Literature Review

Statistics, Risk Factors and Latinas: An Incomplete Picture

Latina/o students are often viewed as poor, with limited or no English, who act in ways that lead to their own under-achievement (e.g. teen pregnancy, gang membership, etc.). However, when the data are examined critically the picture is not so clear. One frequently identified "risk factor" is poverty, yet 66% of Hispanic children live above the poverty line (Aud et al., 2012). Speaking a language other than English at home is considered another "risk factor". While 76% of Hispanics over 5 years-old spoke a language other than English at home, the majority of these Spanish speakers spoke English "very well" (Hispanic Americans: Census Facts, 2007). Moreover the research on bilingual education clearly shows that speaking more than one language has cognitive benefits (Bhattacharjee, 2012).

With regard to teen pregnancy, these mothers are often highly motivated to obtain a college degree,

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4. "53% of young Latinas get pregnant in their teens, twice the national average" (The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2009).
"Hispanic kids the largest group of children living in poverty" (Morello & Mellnik, 2011).
5. Dominant narratives are stories of or by the majority culture that perpetuate myths and stereotypes of people of color, women and the poor; (adapted from Delgado & Stefancic, 2001)

although many are academically under-prepared (Haleman, 2004). It is difficult to generalize about women who had children at a young age because most colleges and universities do not collect data on the motherhood status of their students.

This is not to imply that relative income status, teen pregnancy, and English language learner issues are irrelevant to Latina student success. Rather it is to say that Latina students and the reasons for their academic success or failure cannot be understood simply through apparent "risk factors" and aggregate statistics. These "risk factors" and the mainstream media stories that typically follow them convey only part of the reality of Latina achievement. In general, these narrow portrayals of complex people and situations focus on deficits and conversely ignore the assets and exacerbate the general sense that this population cannot achieve. They create a norm that oversimplifies an entire population, limiting what is known to racial stereotypes. The "risk factors", statistics, and stories can become deterministic, self-fulfilling prophecies of underachievement, often creating barriers to what can be achieved by Latina/o students. Simultaneously, these negative images make invisible the actual academic achievement of Latinas and the growing numbers of Latinas graduating from high school and college.

Adichie (2009) describes "the danger of the single story," the story that is told over and over again about a people or a place we do not know first-hand. The result is stereotypes and half-truths, not the multiple truths that reflect the complexity of lived experiences. The danger is that the "single story" becomes the definitive story about a people or place. This study reveals some of the "multiple truths" about the Latina student experience; truths that remain largely concealed and hidden from view. But it is not only the popular media and culture that perpetuates these deficit explanations of underachievement. Higher education itself suffers from this malady as well. This study attempts to complicate the picture of who Latinas are. Disproportionately low income and underachieving, while at the same time graduating in higher numbers than has previously been known; the lives of Latinas are far more complex than typically portrayed.

Latina Academic Success

Recently, a *Chronicle of Higher Education* commentary critiqued elite colleges for seeing a broad range of students (first-generation, non-native English speakers, immigrants, and students of color) in terms of their deficits (Alves, 2007). The author urged that these students' assets, including their strong desire to succeed, enthusiasm about learning, and life experiences, not be overlooked. There is a growing interest in understanding how and why successful Latina/os advance academically (Conchas, 2001; Delgado-Bernal, 2001; López, 2002; Morales, 2008). In addition to focusing on Latina/o academic success (as opposed to failure), they include contextual factors and many illustrate the institutional barriers that Latina/o students must negotiate in order to succeed. With few exceptions, most institutions are not structured for Latina/o student success. Given that educational institutions have struggled to effectively educate Latina students, families and communities can play a strong part in their achievement.

Theoretical Framework

In moving away from individualized, deficit notions of Latina student achievement, critical race-based methodologies are particularly useful in recognizing patterns and practices that maintain racial inequities in higher education. Critical Race Theory (CRT) and LatCrit both have their origins in critical legal studies and are theoretically similar. LatCrit extends CRT by addressing issues specific to Latinos such as language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, and identity (Villalpando, 2004). Four elements of CRT and LatCrit contribute to a more holistic understanding of the dominant narrative.

1. Racism as normal
CRT views racism not only as individual, unusual actions (Bell, 2008), but as a deeply embedded, pervasive aspect of U.S. society. Racism is both a historical and contemporary part of practices, policies, and institutions, including higher education, which perpetuates racial and social inequities (Harper & Patton, 2007).
2. Experiential knowledge

CRT focuses on the lived experiences of students, their families, and communities of color to learn from their racialized lives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Such experiences are not only racialized but gendered as well. For example, the experiential knowledge of Latinas is distinctly different than Latinos.

3. Dominant claims of meritocracy

Meritocracy reinforces the notion that the primary reason students do not succeed in college is due to personal, familial, or cultural deficiency, with little attention to institutional or societal factors that impact opportunities. (Academic deficiency claims can also reinforce false notions of meritocracy, although that is not a factor in this study of graduates).

4. Narrative

CRT theorists identify stories that illustrate how America sees race and inequality. In identifying the limitations of such stories, which have framed society's racial reality, counterstories of those who have been marginalized emerge. The emergence of stories that have historically been submerged allow racial minorities to "name their reality," to use their own words to describe how they were wronged or injured (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). They give voice to and reveal experiences that are common among minorities. Together CRT and LatCrit provide an analytic framework to examine the motivation and resiliency of Latinas, illustrate how parents teach their daughters about racial discrimination and resiliency, and bring to the forefront Latinas' academic achievements.

Research questions

The aim of this study is to illustrate how Latinas are influenced by family stories and expectations to counter these "single stories" or dominant narratives through stories of resiliency, motivation, lessons about discrimination, and ultimately, hope. To understand how Latinas use stories to counter, respond to, and resist stereotypical representations, this study asks:

1. How do stories influence Latinas' motivation and resiliency toward academic success?
2. How do Latina parents support their daughters in resisting racial discrimination?

Methodology

I am Latina conducting research about Latinas. Some may think that there was a particular story I wanted to tell in this research. This is true, to the extent that I believe risk factors do not capture the multitude of experiences and backgrounds about Latinas. Statistics about Latinas suggests that under-achievement will persist until Latinas stop being poor, become citizens, speak "standard" English, and not act in ways that ensure their underachievement. My concern is that research has accumulated statistics (and descriptions) about Latinas as under-achievers without examining how the pervasiveness of a dominant, deficit narrative presents a limited view of who can achieve academic success.

To broaden our understanding of Latinas' academic success, I draw upon their stories. Stories can address some of the limitations of risk factors by extending boundaries of what is examined. Some might argue that stories are ideological, that they exaggerate the power of context or social identities. I argue that stories provide a framework and conceptual tools that recognize the racialized and gendered experience of Latinas. Contextualizing Latinas academic achievement provides a more holistic and accurate view of Latinas.

All participants from this study graduated from St. Cecilia College.[6] A snowball sample yielded eight Latinas who participated in the pilot study. Graduates were asked questions regarding culture, family, academic preparation, and college experience. Afterwards, seven of those Latinas participated in a collective interpretation process in which they were presented with initial themes and asked for their feedback (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Through this process, questions were refined and interviews with twenty-seven Latinas who graduated from St. Cecilia followed. All data were audio-taped and transcribed. A careful reading of the pilot study, interviews, collective interpretation transcripts, and analytic memos was completed; open coding was then used to analyze

6. The names of places and people are pseudonyms.

all the data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

Results

The findings in this study present some of the ways that Latinas counter the dominant narrative to create new spaces in which they can be academically successful. These data help us to move beyond stereotypical representations of Latinas that utilize statistics to underscore their deficits, when in fact, the percentage of Latinas who have graduated from college has grown significantly. The 27 Latinas who participated reveal: 1) Latinas' motivation came in part through parental expectations and knowledge of their sacrifices; 2) Modeling about resiliency and direct teaching discrimination also impacted Latina's motivation.

In an effort to not perpetuate a different single story of Latina's academic success, I present multiple stories, including how the dominant narrative of Latina under-achievement seeps into parent's expectations. The stories illustrate the difficulty and complexity of countering, responding to, and resisting the dominant narrative of underachievement.

Parental expectations and sacrifices

Parents conveyed their expectations about college to their daughters. They saw college as a way for their daughters to have a life better than theirs. Through stories, parents shared personal sacrifices that they were making for their daughter's success. Isabela, like many in this study, is aware of her parent's sacrifices.

They did everything they could to put me in good schools whether that was working three jobs, or whatever. It was important for them that I have a good education.

Christina, a child of immigrants, grew up hearing stories about how there were so many opportunities in the United States compared to Mexico. These perceived opportunities informed her parent's expectations for her and her siblings.

They expected us to get a college degree. They sacrificed themselves for us. They worked hard so that we could accomplish ourselves as good citizens, and have good jobs, [and] make it big.

The knowledge of the personal sacrifices that their parents made for Latinas serves as a motivation for them to do well academically.

While many Latinas reported differences in gender expectations around dating and other social activities, they also shared that the *academic* expectations for them and their brothers were the same. Cecilia, the oldest of four siblings shared there was an additional expectation placed on her as the oldest. The story of Cecilia's academic success would be the story that her parents relayed to her siblings.

They [both] expected me to succeed. There wasn't even a question. There was no doubt that I would go to college, I would set the example for everybody else.

Difficult financial and social situations also contributed to parental expectations for academic success. Lola grew up in a community of poverty, gangs, and drugs in Texas. After her parents divorced, Lola, her mother, and sister, moved to the Midwest. Her mother did not have a steady job for a year; they were extremely poor. Despite the difficult circumstances, her mother not only maintained high expectations for Lola academically, but also modeled resiliency.

My mother didn't work for a year and during that time she did a lot of temp jobs and went to school, [and we were] on welfare. She just kept telling me, 'you are going to college… you are going to college.' Working hard was part of the expectations behind the stories shared by parents.

Although the parents of most of the Latinas in this study expected their daughters to be academically successful, the dominant narrative of Latina/o academic failure is so pervasive; it makes it difficult for parents to maintain those expectations. For example, both of Faye's parents are lawyers. As the youngest of four, her parents' expectations were lowered after her older siblings did not achieve academically. She shares:

> My sister was a National Merit Scholar. She dropped out her first year. By the time [it came down to me], they said, "Well, she…barely got out of high school. She's not going to do anything.

It was also very difficult to blindly maintain their high expectations when going to college was so far removed from their present reality and the dominant narrative of Latinas and teen pregnancy was so prevalent.

> My mother would go around telling people,..[my daughters] are going to college. Hopefully. If they don't get pregnant. She always wanted us to accomplish much but the support…was negative.

Finally, Eva, whose mother dropped out of high school because she was pregnant, used that knowledge to challenge teen pregnancy as being the only story of Latinas. Eva relayed the story of participating in a precollege program for Latinas in which many of the participants knew they were going to college, it was just a matter of where. Eva felt embarrassed when part of the program included a "crying baby class". Students were given a doll that needed to be fed, changed, and held. It bothered Eva that other summer programs on campus did not participate in this class. Eva wondered if it was because the other programs were predominantly White. She left wondering if the program directors really saw the students as high achieving.

Latinas' parents sought to convey expectations of high achievement to their daughters through their stories. At times it was difficult for them to maintain those expectations; yet all the Latinas had a sense that college was possible for them.

Modeling resiliency and direct teaching about racial discrimination

Some parents shared stories about their own racial struggles with their children so that they would know that race was something that they would have to contend with. Isabela explains:

> As I got older and my dad got a better position, he had to fight and claw [his way] because he was Mexican. I didn't understand at the time but I know when I went to [college] he was like 'mi'ja you are going to experience that--I went through it at my job'.

Fed by racist notions of Latina/o underachievement being due to their inferiority to other people and groups, Latina/o parents are not immune to these narratives. Blanca explains,

> My dad for example walks around with his head down when he is among English speaking people. He feels to be Mexican [it is] his destiny to suffer in the world... My dad was never part of our life.

> My mother was the kind of mother who would fight for her rights and for her children's rights with a knife. She didn't see herself as 'I deserve less because I am Mexican [and] neither do my children.'

Some families helped their daughters to challenge the dominant narrative. They do this by first identifying the common perception which says that Latinas will not achieve and set counter expectations. Sofia explains,

> You can't ignore statistics…People always tell you—you can't make it…It starts with family [helping you] to overcome and not just settle. When you have the opportunity you have to take advantage of it.

Even when parents do not internalize the narratives about Latina's inferiority, it does

not mean that they necessarily know how to support their daughters, but they know that their daughters have to learn how to struggle on their own in order to be resilient. Hermenia shares,

> We were on the way [back to college] and she was dropping me off and I started crying.
> I told her ' I'll just work for one year and then I'll go back, next year.'
> She said, 'Well you are not going to do that, because if you stop now, you'll never go
> back.'

> I was crying...but she didn't stop, she just kept on driving and dropped me off.

Finally, there is Iris, a high achieving student, whose sister had a learning disability. She was deeply bothered by how special education students were treated in her school. Iris wondered why schools could not act more like families. Her family knew that her sister could not do everything that they were doing, but they still always found a way to make her a meaningful part of whatever they were doing. In their family, they create a space in which everyone is a valued member.

Conclusion

Latina/os have participated in the U.S. educational system for generations, yet there continues to be widespread failure in educating Mexican and Puerto Rican students (Donato, 1997; Nieto, 2000). As the largest ethnic minority group in the nation, Latina/os under-participation in the professional sectors of our economy (which requires higher levels of education) can no longer be seen as a minor issue affecting a small segment of society. What do the stories of the women in this study tell us about what needs to be done to create change?

The stories presented here illustrate how Latinas and their families disrupt the dominant narrative of educational underachievement. The typical explanation for their achievement tends to reside in a cultural and familial deficit understanding of who succeeds and who does not. In other words, it is easy to explain the success of these students in terms of their being anomalies, their being unusual, and exceptional in terms of their intellect, their passion, their drive, etc. These Latinas and their families are not exceptional. This begs the question then, how did these students succeed when so many with similar backgrounds are failing to do so?

The answer is obviously complex. For some, it was a family move that took them out of a tracking system that would not have prepared them for college, and landed them into a college bound track. For others, it was encountering key people at crucial times in their lives. Such as the chance meeting with alumnae of a four year institution that put them in touch with a university that their own families could not. Many other such circumstances had bearing on these students success. But what role did the stories retold in this study play in the student's subsequent success? And why did these particular stories hold the power that they did for these student's lives?

These stories set expectations, taught about race and modeled resiliency, reminded the student that they are part of a larger family, community, and legacy that is far beyond their individual selves, and taught about the reality of struggle and hard work and that this is part of what life is and much more. These stories show that those who have succeeded learned ways to counter the common misperceptions of Latinas.

Further, these stories may be revealing of insights regarding why these Latinas tended to understand these stories in the particular ways that they did. This may be related to how gender tends to play out in Latina/o families. Girls are often expected to help in the home, with household chores and childrearing responsibilities, much more than boys. This puts Latinas in close, consistent contact with family members and the opportunity to hear the family stories and their interpretation and reinterpretation.

Another insight may be related to the fact that many of the interviewees were children of immigrants. This generally meant that many of the students' parents were closely tied to their culture of origin, which was often strongly reflected in the home. The findings indicate that this home environment contributed to the conduciveness of the sharing of stories and their influence.

Finally, the women in this study consistently displayed a high level of maintaining or developing contact

with their culture of origin. This cultural knowledge appears to be enabling them to understand the stories being told to them in a deep and culturally relevant way which then serves as a guide to negotiating the obstacles that lead to academic success.

Understanding the role of such stories helps us to imagine new ways campuses can support Latina students' academic success. What is needed for wide-scale success of Latina/o students is a transformation in our institutions of higher education. Such a transformation is unlikely, but possible if there was a convergence of interests[7] by institution(s) of higher education, and external influences such as college rankings and accreditation boards. The convergence of interests would entail reflection about the purpose of higher education and action to achieve that purpose(s). As a result of such reflection, higher education might take a more expansive view of the purposes of education which are congruent with the values of students, families, and communities.

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7. The term *interest convergence* is used by Critical Race Theory scholars (Bell, 1992) to analyze societal or macro changes historically and are argues that progress towards racial equity, will only occur if it benefits those who are in positions of power.

EPILOGUE

In the tradition of CRT, a narrative of what might be possible in higher education is presented. Esperanza's story takes place 25 years in the future; St. Cecilia is a campus that has been transformed toward fostering the success of <u>all</u> students.

Esperanza

I felt awkward visiting St. Cecilia after all these years. To be honest, my daughter, Esperanza, was more excited about her acceptance than was I. I am grateful for my education, but somehow I just thought my daughter could do better. Of course, it didn't matter how I felt. Today was the convocation. It was Esperanza's day. I was surprised at how many families were there. I inquired about the large turnout to a young woman, whom I presumed was a student.

She responded, "Oh, St. Cecilia recognizes the sacrifices that families have to make for students to be successful, and wants to acknowledge them. It is also a time when St. Cecilia recalls its Transformation."

I must have had a blank look on my face. She went on.

"Several years back the college was moving up in their rankings and becoming more and more renowned. There was also a growing awareness of the impact our graduates have on communities—as professionals and as individuals who engage in philanthropy. As civic engagement became more important to the rankings there was a fear that we might not be able to maintain our position because our graduates did not know how to work effectively with diverse populations. Graduates were not aware how their background had shaped their work and level of community engagement. Furthermore, academic majors and careers were narrowly focused. While, we were learning the 'book stuff' significantly less attention was paid to us learning the 'life stuff'.

"This is really interesting", I said, "but I am surprised to hear the College's 'dirty laundry' being aired at an event like this."

"Let me back up. We are taught the history of the Transformation and are encouraged to share it with others. It is not only a tradition, but one of the ways that St. Cecilia 'walks the talk.' We recount the story of the Transformation because it is an essential part of who we are as an institution."

"The transformation in our education started with a group of Latina students who challenged St. Cecilia's to do more to support their academic success and the success of all students. They argued that their academic success was threatened through stereotypical encounters with fellow students and faculty; further they reasoned that their fellow students would become professionals who would marginalize their colleagues or those they were supposed to help because they were unaware of their own biases."

"I want to hear more about how students become, Transformed, is it?"

The student laughed, "Well, to begin with, we take a philosophy class. I don't remember the exact name, but it was based on the African proverb: *I am because we are*. This course emphasizes critical thinking, cooperative learning, and reflection. The first part of the course helps us to build a strong connection to other students and encourages us to learn together. In the second part, we learn that we are all members of multiple communities and inequity is reproduced within communities. We become aware of what is 'normal' in our everyday lives and if there is some aspect of our lives that does not fit what is 'normal', we analyze why. We constantly reflect on our actions. It was a really interesting class."

"Wow, it sounds like it." I remained skeptical. "But how does this help you with your career or in working with community?"

"The class then helped us understand how all of us make judgments about others based on what is deemed 'normal' and because of our positions as professionals, we need to be mindful that our judgments can have unintended negative consequences for those we work with. We are taught that to be effective professionals we need to ask, 'what is going on here? How do the others understand what is going on here? What is my role? What are the potential negative and positive consequences? By the end of the class, we realize that equity is inseparable from excellence."

"I see your point. So, what about faculty? It sounds like they have been a key component to the

Transformation."

"Well, the Latinas claimed that the College was not doing enough to support them academically, right around the time of accreditation. St. Cecilia did a little self-scrutiny and realized that most of the faculty were raised in middle-class, monolingual English families from the suburbs. The faculty didn't see teaching students of color as an essential part of their jobs. They were not mean people, but in the grand scheme of things they were more concerned with their specific discipline. However, the reality is 'minority' students are the majority on a lot of campuses, and a growing population at St. Cecilia. Consequently, after the Transformation, the curriculum is more infused with diversity than it has ever been; faculty are rewarded for creating opportunities for community engagement by students; racial achievement gaps are measured annually with progress being made regularly. They also successfully recruited new faculty with equity and diversity as part of their research interests. These faculty were encouraged to challenge conventional thinking about what it means to teach and learn. Faculty also must mentor new students, so they understand more about students' lives."

St. Cecilia's campus climate and how it engaged all members of the campus community in the process of learning had been Transformed. St. Cecilia was a place where Esperanza could be successful.

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