Research in Brief - Addressing the Identity Development Experiences of Hispanic Women

Glenda Droogsma Musoba Ph.D.
Texas A&M University

Veronica Lynn Owles
Miami Dade College

Suzanne R. Onorato Ed.D
Agnes Scott College

When many White Americans talk about the borderlands, they think geographically, but the borderlands for many Hispanic* college students are the place they live every day no matter what their geography. The borderlands are where two cultures mix, and for young Hispanic women, that is their daily lives. However, they would not want it any other way.

Based on interviews with over 30 Hispanic female college students across three research projects, we saw patterns that have implications for student affairs practice. The studies included a cross section of nationalities including Central American, Cuban, Mexican, and South American women living in a large city in the south and attending a Hispanic serving institution. One addressed identity development (Owles, 2009), one specifically leadership identity development (Onorato & Musoba, 2015; Onorato, 2010), and one first-year experience (Musoba, Collazo, & Placide, 2013). While these patterns may be true of other ethnic groups, (for example, White women raised in traditional families or recent immigrants may report some similar experiences) we address Hispanic women from these studies. We also caution against assuming this is the experience of every Hispanic woman. However, with the demographic shifts in the United States and Texas in particular, understanding the experiences of Hispanic students is critical for student affairs professionals. We offer some suggestions for practice that come from our interviews.

Leadership or general identity development programming must address gender and ethnicity simultaneously.

Virtually every Hispanic woman we interviewed had a merged ethnic and gender identity. While researchers usually study ethnic identity or gender identity independently,
these are not experienced separately by Hispanic women. They could not talk about being Hispanic without talking about gender expectations, and they could not talk about being a woman without talking about being a “good Hispanic woman.” Therefore programming for leadership or identity development will not reach these women without considering these identities simultaneously.

**Programming about gender should provide opportunities to process the contradictory messages about gender roles in family and society.**

Many of our participants spoke of a public message and a subversive message they received about gender roles. “Be a good Hispanic woman, but don’t be dependent on a man.” Publicly they were expected to adhere to prescribed gender roles, usually dictated by the family and supported by social and cultural norms of the extended families and local community.

Interestingly, there is also a counter-narrative against traditional gender roles. Behind the scenes, the mothers and aunts encouraged them to be strong and independent and avoid being vulnerably dependent on their spouses. They were encouraging their daughters to adopt new ways of thinking about success and family, but not to the point where they sacrificed all cultural values. These young women viewed their mothers, grandmothers, as well as other female family members as the cornerstone of strength in the family; therefore, they did not reject notions to value family first. There is a strong narrative of feminine strength. This generation of women want it all: family, career, leadership roles, etc.

**Program with Hispanic families in mind.**

Traditional developmental theories based in White cultural norms of developing autonomy may frame these Hispanic women as immature, but they see their connectedness with family as a strength and are less interested in independence. One student said, “Family, gotta love ’em, can’t leave ‘em.”

Further, administrators must confront negative stereotyping about Hispanic families that come out of a deficit narrative. The vast majority of the young women felt supported by their family in pursuing a college education, and spoke of family members who told them they could accomplish anything. Yet, they found it stressful to be a full-time college student and meet family gender role expectations. When they experienced conflicts between family life and education, it was usually family members’ lack of knowledge of the value of study groups, internships, co-curricular involvement, and other reasons to be on campus outside of class. Programs for families to understand the full undergraduate experience and university expectations are desperately needed. Once these young women’s parents understood, they supported their daughters’ involvement.

**Identity development must consider lenses from sociology and anthropology as well as psychology.**

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Until recently researchers only considered one developmental lens. These women’s cultural heritage, experience of otherness in relation to the dominant culture, and family dynamics are a part of their identity, and these aspects are not accounted for in staged psychological models. Further, in interviewing young women in a Hispanic dominant community and university, the experience of otherness was much less a part of their development. Some Hispanic identity development models (Torres, 2006) put a strong emphasis on negotiating their relationship to White dominant culture, but that was much less of a relevant experience for students where White culture was less dominant. Embrace their value of paying it forward.

Many Hispanic women come from the immigrant experience where they have a deep appreciation for their family members’ sacrifice for a better life for them. They feel a deep obligation and desire to be successful to honor that sacrifice even among those who were generations removed from actual immigration. This was usually a stronger motivation for academic achievement than competition for grades. Further, they often embraced advocacy and social justice for newer immigrants which tied to these deep beliefs. Institutions can provide service learning or volunteer opportunities that align with these values and develop volunteerism habits.

Provide role models of peers who were successful.

Student guest speakers in first-year experience classes provide the “show me the way” that Torres (2006) talks about in her research. The women spoke of these senior students as an important part of the orientation and first-year experience course. Similarly, when talking about their leadership identity development, many of the women spoke of older role models and mentors whom they identified as similar to them. The individual encouragement of these mentors was important to their owning a leader’s identity and taking on leadership roles. They may need help understanding the realities of gendered opportunities in our society.

Many of the women believed that barriers for women were a thing of the past and would not affect their opportunities for advancement in their career. They believed their generation is different despite evidence to the contrary in their own lives in campus leadership positions. For example, they simultaneously spoke of equality with a future life partner, despite complaints that all of their brothers were raised traditionally.

Conclusion

Hispanic women come to campus rooted in their cultural heritage, as we all do. As higher education professionals, we need to embrace this heritage and see it for the strength that it provides. If we are going to live our diversity narrative, we will adapt our programming to build on their cultural strengths.

*We use the term Hispanic rather than Latina because the majority of women we interviewed self-identified as Hispanic.

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References


