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Hispanic Women in Leadership: Opportunities, Barriers, and Strategies

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Chapter 4

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> *Otro modo de ser humano y libre.*
> *Another way to be human and free*
> *Otro modo de ser.*
> *Another way to be.*
>   Rosario Castellanos

Research in leadership that focuses on gender and ethnicity issues provides us with little practical information for women. The few studies that do exist point to gender and race discrimination (Doughty, 1980; Marcias, 1994; Gorena, 1996). Researchers must move beyond the documentation of negative past and present conditions for women and minorities and begin to look at ways these individuals can achieve equality. Additional "cultural studies" will aid in the task of analyzing the power relations that occur in all social settings. If we can discover the source of women's support, we can increase this support for others. By examining the barriers women face, we will better educate persons on how to recognize and address discrimination. This information may also help women deal with barriers more effectively and help to create greater equality for women.

Scholars have studied the absence of women and minorities from administrative and leadership positions (Edson, 1987; Ginn, 1989; Hansot & Tyack, 1981). Many studies of women include minorities; however, the focus is primarily on African American women. The literature and research concerning Hispanic women leaders remains limited.

The purpose for conducting this qualitative multicase study was to understand six Hispanic women leaders' perceptions of the opportunities and barriers they faced in their career progressions. We identified these, as well as leadership characteristics or strategies, that enabled the women to succeed in non-traditional careers predominately held by men. We used interviews to collect data that provided insights into the understanding of career opportunities and barriers of Hispanic women currently in leadership positions. We developed questions to gain insight into the overall career progression of Hispanic women leaders, then to inductively focus on specific prominent areas.

Participants included Hispanic females with at least five years of administrative or leadership experience. Selected women held leadership positions in education, politics, and business. Because the focus of this study was to explore both opportunities and barriers to career progression, selected women included those who achieved their positions by working their way up through the ranks. In others words, women who inherited their positions from family-owned companies or entrepreneurs did not meet the criteria for this study. Four participants requested pseudonyms. The remaining two participants requested the use of their real names.

Data analysis occurred simultaneously with data collection through the assigning of a one- or two-word description to every two or three sentences of the transcript (Miles & Huberman, 1984). By grouping these short descriptions into like categories under broader terms, they later became the major themes of the study. Using the "folder method" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992), we addressed the categories containing the greatest number of coding entries. These categories then became the major identifying themes.

Current Literature

To understand what makes women unique as leaders, one must look at the development of women in today's society. As girls grow up, they face the culturally and historically ingrained definitions of womanhood and femininity. One lesson learned is that women, like children, should be seen and not heard (Ferguson, 1984). Women's behavior and talk is not seen as equal to men's but is assessed against this standard of silence. Women who deviate are thought to be loquacious and "out of line." Scholars show that women learn this lesson well. They experience greater difficulty than men in asserting their authority and in getting others to take them seriously. Women also experience difficulty in utilizing their capabilities in the world of work and in gaining the respect of others for these capabilities (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997). These authors suggest that women experience difficulty identifying themselves as authority figures because authority figures known to them do not include women in their "we." Society teaches women that men are their protectors and supporters. Men hold the power and have the ultimate authority.

The barriers to equality for women and minorities include the "glass ceiling," occupation and position segregation, androcentrism, and ethnicity. The first, the glass ceiling, primarily affects only women who are high achieving because it is mainly at the very bottom and at the very top of the job prestige hierarchy that women receive overtly unequal job treatment (Kerr, 1985). The term "gatekeepers," commonly refers to the keepers and protectors of this glass ceiling. Gatekeepers are the backbone of the well known "good old boy network." These predominately white males possess authority and exert influence over the hiring and evaluation of school administrators, public administrators, and business executives. The procedural order for hiring upper managers, principals, and superintendents exists through sponsorship. Political power remains with the more affluent, white, well-educated male (Ortiz & Ortiz, 1993).

The second and third of these barriers are occupation and position segregation. Occupation segregation refers to the phenomenon of assigning minority administrators to special programs and schools that are predominately made up of the same minority group as the administrators (Marshall, 1992). Position segregation refers

to a phenomenon that occurs when women and minorities secure appointments to supervisory positions. These supervisory positions have lower status and different job titles than similar positions held by men (Johnston, 1991). Again, society channels women and minorities into positions that prevent upward movement.

The fourth barrier, androcentrism, is the practice of viewing the world and shaping reality from a male perspective. Writers and researchers (Hansot & Tyack, 1981; Kerr, 1985) discuss models that describe the barriers blocking women's access to leadership roles. Kerr suggests that women possess internal socialization and sex stereotyping that guide their behavior and limit them, essentially blaming the victim. The "Horner Effect" (Fear of Success Syndrome), the "Cinderella Complex" (the fear of success and desire to be cared for), and the "Imposter Phenomenon" (a strong belief of not being intelligent but having "fooled" everyone) describe three internal barriers.

Hispanic women face the additional difficulties of racial discrimination and cultural influences. Major areas of conflict center on job and family responsibilities. Research providing information on Hispanic women's employment focuses primarily on the impact of their employment on the family (Gonzales, 1988). Amaro, Russo, and Johnson (1987) noted that Hispanic women face additional areas of stress because of their ethnicity. These areas include more rigid and traditional sex-role norms and expectations. Their study associated spouse support and ethnicity of spouse with measures of stress. Hispanic partners offer less support to their wives for their work and careers than non-Hispanic partners. This lack of support results in increased stress in balancing the roles of mother, wife, and career woman.

Participants

Anna Moraga—Anna is from an immigrant family. She recently accepted a very high level appointment in federal government.

Gloria Tristani—Gloria was the first woman elected to the position of State Corporation Commissioner. She is currently running for governor of her state.

Mia Vasquez—Mia is currently a public school superintendent.

Martha Moreno—Martha is the first female judge appointed to her position in the history of the state.

Barbara Perea Casey—Barbara taught high school Spanish for 22 years before appointment to her current position as public school superintendent.

Rosa Astorga—Rosa is in upper-level management at a Southwest utility company.

Findings

The interviews with the six Hispanic women who participated in the study indicate that the women received support from family, spouse, mentors, and others (professional and scholarly peers and women's organizations). Opportunities noted by the women included honesty, lookism, language, and affirmative action. (Lookism is the phenomenon of society's emphasis on girls' and women's looks.) Barriers noted by the women included lookism and not being taken seriously, family and cultural expectations, the need to be better prepared, and ethnicity. The strategies used by these women to overcome barriers and take advantage of opportunities included being prepared, taking control, mobility, risk-taking, and dealing with lookism.

Support

Most frequently, the participants spoke of family and spouse when discussing areas of support. All but one of the women talked at length about the support for their careers they received from their present spouses. None of these women remain married to their first husbands (three of whom were Hispanic), and none of the six women is presently married to an Hispanic man. Gonzales (1988) found that when the high-achieving Hispanic woman marries within her own ethnic group, the choice can be complicated by an ideological incompatibility with regard to sex roles. Hispanic women with male Hispanic partners receive less support for their work and careers.

All of the participants spoke of their parents and grandparents as having been important influences while growing up. Support from parents and grandparents came primarily in the form of encouragement to do well in school and to develop high standards for themselves. Five of the six women's extended families continue to support the participants' careers by providing child care and/or emotional support.

Mentoring has a positive influence on the career patterns of Hispanic women (Marcias, 1994). In her dissertation study, Marcias found that 68 % of the Hispanic women surveyed reported having a strong and helpful mentor. Three of the women in this study talked about the support they received from mentors. It is interesting to note, and in keeping with current literature, that the mentors were male. Two of the women spoke specifically of negative experiences they had had with women in the workplace. The mentors these women spoke of primarily gave them encouragement and self-confidence but did not provide long-term support.

Other sources of support discussed by the participants included professional friends in the same field (but outside their present place of employment), scholarly acquaintances, and women's organizations. These individuals provided the women an opportunity to network with others who would maintain confidentiality.

Opportunities

As might be expected, the women experienced few opportunities directly related to gender and ethnicity. Only one woman, Gloria (who is running for governor), spoke of the "honesty" advantage. According to Gloria, people tend to perceive women in politics as being more honest and trustworthy than men. She said, "We're perceived as more honest. Whether we are or not, I don't know, but the perception is, a woman is not the possible corrupt politician that a male will be." This perception is an advantage to her in her quest for the governor's office.

All of the women in the study speak fluent Spanish, and Spanish is the first language of all six women. They all spoke of the advantages and opportunities they experienced as a result of their fluent knowledge in this language. Two of the women are also fluent in other languages, including Italian and French.

Only one woman identified lookism as an opportunity. She also identified it as a great barrier. In her business travels, Anna has been able to use her looks to gain the attention of important officials in Latin American countries. She laughed as she said, "I have this tremendous knack for opening doors in Latin America . . . when you look the way I do, with green eyes and blond hair, you are not the typical woman in Latin America!" Once she has their attention, she "gets down to business." Many women may disagree with this approach, but it works for Anna.

Three of the respondents attribute at least one of their successes to affirma-

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

Barriers

Five of the six women talked extensively of the difficulties they faced because of lookism. Lookism greatly reduced the ability of these women to maintain authority in their positions and be taken seriously. One participant mentioned that the men she worked with did not take her seriously because they viewed her job as "recreational" since her husband also worked. They viewed her as being in the "support role" at home and at work. The women discussed their childhood training to "support" men and the difficulty they face in overcoming this training. This becomes especially difficult when others push this stereotype on them repeatedly in the workplace.

Family and cultural expectations provided a barrier to all the women interviewed. Many of the women spoke of the lack of information they received about college while growing up. Most grew up in extreme poverty with uneducated parents who knew nothing of college or financial assistance. Their families also instilled in them what their roles in life would be, that of wife and mother. Several women followed these traditions in their first marriages. As noted earlier, none of the women remain married to Hispanic males although three had first husbands who were very traditional Hispanics.

Sometimes referred to as an internal barrier is the need of many professional women to be better prepared in all aspects of their positions than their male counterparts. This sense of not being prepared enough seemed to stem from the greater societal expectations of women. All the women interviewed talked about this barrier. Commonly referred to as an "internal" barrier, there is evidence in the literature that society does place additional demands on women. All the women in this study concurred. Mia summed up the external expectations causing internal barriers for women when she said, "For women, we have this need to be ready to do things. I don't know where it's coming from, that institutional barrier, that when we do something, we're expected to do it very well, extremely well."

All participants discussed specific instances related to ethnicity and prejudice. These ranged from being transferred to "work with her own kind" (position segregation) to dealing with others' low expectations and perceptions. "Position segregation" is well documented in the literature as are low expectations for minorities (Szockyj & Fox, 1996; Shakeshaft, 1987; Ortiz & Ortiz, 1993).

Strategies

It is of particular importance to note the strategies used by these women to overcome the barriers they faced in their career progressions. All of the women interviewed talked at length about the need for higher education and better preparation than their male counterparts. One of the most significant events standing out in Gloria's career is the receiving of her law degree. She said, "The law degree empowered me. Women have to be more qualified and more educated." The need to be better prepared led to longer working hours.

Taking control of their careers was a common strategy. They learned that they were responsible for taking care of themselves and their families. Taking control of their careers also meant that they must confront, rather than always ignore, sexist or racist behavior. Other ways these women took control of their careers included increasing their potential to be mobile. They accomplished mobility by taking the risk of applying for positions and by expressing a willingness to relocate.

Three of these successful women found it necessary to make changes in their appearance to draw attention away from their femininity. They did this to reduce the negative effects of lookism. They cut their hair and no longer wear dresses, heels, or jewelry. One woman puts her hair up and wears her glasses.

Conclusions

Common themes of support, barriers, opportunities, and strategies emerged, even though the six Hispanic women come from varied backgrounds and professions. The women in this study received support similar to that reported in the literature. Sadly, it appears that women still do not receive mentorship support from other women, a fact also documented in literature.

As previously noted, family can be a support for women as well as a source of added stress and difficulty, especially for Hispanic women. All the women followed the expected traditions of early marriage, and all but one soon became mothers. Trying to balance home and career was difficult for all, but in the case of the three women who had married Hispanic men—impossible. Unable or unwilling to follow the strict traditional roles their Hispanic husbands demanded, they all divorced and remarried non-Hispanic (Caucasian) men. There is documentation in the literature that Hispanic males are not as supportive of their wives' careers as non-Hispanic males (Gonzales, 1988).

Lookism emerged as a theme in the discussions on barriers, strategies, and opportunities. The women told stories of encounters with lookism and how the strength of that phenomenon resulted in their changing their appearance. Lookism also aggravates another problem dealt with by all women interviewed—that of not being taken seriously. Not being taken seriously caused five of the women to become workaholics in order to prove themselves, to the point of causing potential health problems.

Specific opportunities received by these women were negligible. The one exception was the opportunities offered by Affirmative Action programs. Affirmative Action provided three women the opportunity to obtain their initial positions in their career progression. Affirmative action is not entirely responsible for their success, but it did help.

Lessons Learned

Hispanic women continue to face significant difficulties integrating traditional expectations and career, especially if married to an Hispanic male.

Hispanic women need a professional support system and "womentors" (female mentors).

Lookism continues to be a negative force for women in the workplace.

Professional Hispanic women may be taking health risks trying to meet unreasonably high expectations.

Affirmative Action is a positive force helping Hispanic women in their career progressions.

A great deal of disparity exists in the workplace for women and minorities. The need for stronger gender equity protection remains.

Hispanic women need increased opportunities to network with other women at conferences and/or workshops that will aid them in career planning, developing self-confidence, and risk-taking.

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