



2012

## Quiero Ser Alguien En La Vida: Hispanic Women and the Role of Culture in Educational Attainment

Lupita Maria Pivaral  
*Loyola University Chicago*

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

QUIERO SER ALGUIEN EN LA VIDA:

HISPANIC WOMEN AND  
THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN  
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS

PROGRAM IN SOCIOLOGY

BY

LUPITA M. PIVARAL

CHICAGO, IL

AUGUST 2012

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank every individual who helped me and made my thesis possible. Without their guidance and support, there would be no thesis to write. I am grateful to all of the talented professors in the sociology department at Loyola University Chicago. Their devotion and conviction to the field served as an opportunity for me to grow personally, as well as academically. I especially want to thank Dr. Judson Everitt for his assistance and encouragement throughout the entire thesis process. I sincerely could not have accomplished this without his help.

I would also like to thank the board members of the adult high school where I conducted the research for this thesis. From the beginning, they took a genuine interest in my study and have been supportive of my work every step of the way.

My family has always been very supportive of my academic aspirations. I am grateful to them for their continued love and support as I pursue my academic goals. This accomplishment is as much mine as it is theirs.

Finally, I would like to thank my close friends and fellow sociology peers Jennifer Cossyleon and Lorrie Riley. I am fortunate to have been in the company of these two bright and talented young women. Navigating through graduate school and completing this thesis were made a little easier thanks to their friendship and encouragement.

To the women who participated in this study

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## ABSTRACT

There are very few studies that investigate the low educational attainment rates of Latinos, and even fewer that consider the role culture may have on educational attainment. In particular, Latinas have been neglected in academic studies regarding their academic pursuits and performance. This study aims to fill this void in the academic literature. It is based on interviews with 13 Hispanic women who were enrolled in a Chicago area adult high school. The women shared their personal narratives, describing in detail various life events and sharing their thoughts of how these may have lead them to make decisions that ultimately affected their educational trajectories. Their narratives provide valuable insight regarding the Hispanic culture's role in shaping not only their identities, but their educational values and subsequent decisions. Understanding that this ethnic group is shaped by its cultural heritage aids in understanding the factors other than those found at the structural level that interfere with the educational attainment of Latinas. The issue of the low educational attainment levels of Hispanic women is important and deserves attention from the academic community because it is a waste of talent and important role models for successive generations of Latinas who wish to pursue academic and professional careers.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE STATUS OF LATINO EDUCATION

Education is often considered to be, “an investment decision. Positive returns to education provide the incentive to make an educational investment” (Diprete and Buchmann, 2006; 2). Therefore, the pursuit of higher education is frequently done with the foresight that it is a long term investment in one’s professional and financial well being. Education as an investment that will reward generously in the future would appear to be a common sense decision for individuals to make for themselves and their families. As obvious as such a decision may be, what are often not as apparent are the obstacles that interfere with making these kinds of life altering decisions, nor the people who suffer the most from the presence of these obstacles. If pursuing higher education is the obvious choice to make for a better future, then why isn’t there uniformity of educational pursuit across racial and gender lines? The absence of specific racial and ethnic groups within the realm of higher education, and subsequently in professional fields, begs the question of what is happening to these groups that makes their presence in higher education practically non-existent.

Despite the historical legacy the United States has of excluding white women and people of color from the academic arena (Vasquez, 1982), it appears that American society has overcome such a shameful past, resulting in the improved accessibility these groups have to higher education. Unfortunately, the right to pursue a higher education

continues to be plagued with societal barriers that make educational achievement difficult to overcome for certain groups within our society. This is readily seen in the levels of educational performance and attainment between whites and racial and ethnic minorities, which are significantly lower (Sólorzano et. al., 2005). Noting such disparities only confirms that the United States has yet to achieve racial and ethnic equality in education as is often preached and believed. Moreover, these disparities reflect unresolved social issues that continue to hinder the educational performance, growth and well being of specific groups and thus, must be resolved.

Besides serving as a long term investment in future well being, education has also proven to be a source of empowerment for historically disenfranchised groups (Zambrana, 1988). Hispanic women are one such group that experience disenfranchisement, yet do not appear to experience empowerment through education. Hispanics are the largest minority group in the United States, having surpassed African Americans (Sólorzano et. al., 2005). Despite their strength in numbers, they have alarmingly low rates of educational attainment (Sólorzano et. al., 2005). Even lower are the numbers of Hispanic women pursuing higher education (Zambrana, 1988). As the biggest minority group predicted to become the majority population one day, Hispanics are unprepared to face the challenges of a constantly changing world that requires the critical thinking and knowledge that a higher education can offer.

### **Literature Review of Hispanics in Higher Education**

There is little, if any, research that exists on the topic of Hispanic women in higher education. The struggles and needs of Latina women have been mostly ignored by

the social sciences, and their minute presence in higher education is no exception (Zambrana, 1988). Most literature that exists on women in higher education concentrates on the educational gains of white women or assumes that findings of one minority group (i.e. white women, racial/ethnic minorities) can be generalized to Hispanics, and more specifically Hispanic women (Zambrana, 1988). Despite these limitations, it is important to consider existing research in order to improve future data collection methods that accurately represent Hispanic women, as well as to make the appropriate conclusions of the educational experience of this specific group.

### **Women in Higher Education**

One study that provides insight into the educational gains of women in higher education was done by Diprete and Buchmann (2006). They examined gender specific trends in regards to the pursuit of higher education. What they found was that women were more likely to pursue higher education than men and generally outperformed men. Diprete and Buchmann (2006) suggested this trend could possibly be explained by the “insurance” afforded by higher education, such as higher wages, which protect women from poverty. Other studies offer similar explanations about education as future investment (Vigil, 1988). Furthermore, they mentioned that this insurance could also encourage lower rates of children born out of wedlock and lower risks of divorce.

Though Diprete and Buchmann (2006) present compelling evidence that women are pursuing higher education in larger numbers, a problem with their research is that it focused primarily on the educational gains of white women. By disregarding racial and ethnic differences in educational attainment between white women and women of color,

they assume that this trend is consistent for all women. They do not consider specific factors, such as race or structural inequalities, which may facilitate white women, but hinder women of color, in the pursuit of higher education. Therefore, Hispanic women cannot be assumed to experience this trend as white women currently are. Although these findings are not applicable to Hispanic women, Diprete and Buchmann (2006) offer a reference group to which Hispanic women's educational progress can be compared.

### **Educational Attainment and Performance of Hispanic Students**

In another study performed by Sólorzano et. al. (2005), the educational inequities of Hispanic undergraduate students in the United States was the main focus. Sólorzano et. al. (2005) reported that Hispanics underperformed in each stage of educational attainment (i.e. primary, secondary, post secondary, etc.) in comparison to other racial/ethnic groups (Latinos, Native Americans, African Americans, whites, Asian Americans). Sólorzano et. al. (2005) used critical race theory (CRT) as a way of understanding the contradictory ways that higher education institutions disable Hispanic students from successfully continuing on through each stage of educational attainment. They argued that although academic institutions appear to have sincere intentions of supporting Hispanic students economically, socially and politically, they also sustain an academic environment that marginalizes and devalues their needs and contributions (pgs. 274-275). Sólorzano et. al.'s (2005) study and use of CRT support the notion that a significant part of the problem lay within educational institutions. Research conducted by other social scientists seems to confirm Sólorzano et. al.'s (2005) assertion about institutionalized academic inequity (Godinez, 2006). Though Sólorzano et. al. (2005) touch on academic insensitivity to the

unique characteristics of Hispanics and their culture, such as language, they do not explore the role of culture as a potential explanation for the discrepancies in Hispanic students' current educational status. Exploring the element of culture would have been interesting to see in their research, especially when considering the argument they make about cultural insensitivity and pressures placed on Hispanic students to assimilate into the mainstream academic experience. It brings attention to other factors that may also be aggravating an already dire situation.

Literature from Rong and Grant (1992) also provides valuable information in the evaluation of where Hispanics stand in the pursuit of higher education. They looked at the educational attainment of Hispanics and Asians across multiple generations. Rong and Grant (1992) reported that increasing numbers of school children in the U.S. were immigrants or U.S. born children of immigrants. Rong and Grant's (1992) study concluded that although educational attainment increased with each successive generation for Hispanics, attainment levels remained low for each generation. This was not the case for Asians, as educational attainment levels improved significantly with each successive generation. A limitation of Rong and Grant's (1992) study was their use of quantitative data. Quantitative research methods make it difficult to know what circumstances may have led to the stark differences in educational attainment levels between Asians and Hispanics. Based on research from Sólorzano et. al. (2005) and others, there is substantial evidence that points to structural inequalities in education as a prominent obstacle in the pursuit of educational attainment, and therefore can be assumed as a constant for both immigrant groups. However, Rong and Grant (1992) exhibit a case

in which two minority groups, both with similar immigrant statuses and cultural needs (i.e. English as a second language), start off on similar footing upon immigrating to the United States, and yet have very different outcomes over time. How is one racial minority group able to overcome structural barriers and experience educational success, while the other struggles to surpass these hurdles? Rong and Grant's (1992) study seems to suggest that the obstacles Hispanics face with regards to low levels of educational attainment are not limited to larger structural problems.

Rong and Grant's (1992) comparison of two minority groups with similar immigration status is useful because it delineates differences in educational outcomes over time. However, they make the mistake of assuming that like Asian immigrants, Hispanics are a monolithic group. The Hispanic population in the United States exhibits marked differences within itself, not only as it pertains to educational attainment and performance, but with regards to race/ethnicity and even socioeconomic status.

Sólorzano et. al. (2005) acknowledge differences in educational attainment between Hispanic groups, though they do not address the role the Hispanic culture may have in creating them. Even within the culture, there exist differences between subgroups, though in general core values remain the same. Understanding that Hispanics are not a monolithic group as commonly believed is important in not only rejecting commonly held stereotypes of Hispanics on both an individual and group level, but also in raising awareness that different circumstances lead to different outcomes, and subsequently different needs.

### **Hispanic Women and Educational Attainment**

As mentioned previously, few studies consider the unique experience of Hispanics in education, and even fewer consider the educational experience of Hispanic women. However, a study done by Helen Moore (1983) offers a glimpse at what this educational experience might be like for this neglected group. She looked at the educational experience of Hispanic women in comparison to their white peers. Moore (1983) argued that a factor that strongly influences young Hispanic women's success in the educational realm is the socialization they undergo from school environments, as well as from the Hispanic culture. In the school setting, Moore (1983) identified language, academic skills, and schools' behavioral and social norms as significant factors for understanding the educational orientation of Hispanic women. Furthermore, Moore (1983) indicated that Hispanic women were inclined towards family norms and stressed the importance of cooperation and respect for authority. Moore's (1983) discussion of socialization and norms places attention on the role culture may have on the educational trajectories of Hispanics in general, but of Hispanic women specifically. Moore's (1983) study is of value because she considers culture as a contributing factor that affects the educational attainment levels of Hispanic women. If Hispanic women are influenced by norms placed by schools and their culture as Moore (1983) suggests, then the role of culture perhaps deserves more attention as a possible explanation for the low educational attainment levels of this group.

Though culture is a factor to consider as a contributor to the academic trajectories of Hispanic women, there are few studies that consider the role of culture. Perhaps this is

because it is difficult to determine the extent to which culture affects educational attainment of Hispanic women (Vasquez, 1982). However, culture can be another way to understand the unique circumstances that lead to the low quality educational experience of Hispanic women. Francisca Godinez (2006) considers the role cultural knowledge and practices have on not only shaping the identities of Hispanic women, but how these may influence the educational experiences of this group. Godinez (2006) poses the question, “What connections do youth Mexicanas make between their cultural knowledge and strategies and the value of schooling to succeed in American society?” (pg. 28). Godinez (2006) explored this by conducting a qualitative study in which she examined culture’s involvement in the educational attainment of Mexican women, as well as how it may shape their identities. Godinez (2006) noted that gendered cultural socialization as a form of cultural knowledge and practice played a significant role in shaping their identities, and also influenced their attitudes about educational pursuit and success. Her study highlighted a dimension of the Hispanic woman’s experience that is often ignored and acknowledges that though structural inequalities play a significant role in the outcomes of their education, culture also significantly influences Mexican women’s attitudes and actions about their educational pursuits.

Michelle Holling (2006) echoed Godinez’s (2006) findings. She considered the narratives of her Latina undergraduate students, asking them to write critical cultural analyses of their own experiences with regards to education. Her students revealed that they constantly struggled to negotiate three aspects of their identity, namely racial/ethnic and cultural identity, sexuality, and gender roles (pg.84). These three aspects were often

times sources of inner, as well as outer, tension and conflict. Holling (2006) discussed that gender socialization and the gendered role of motherhood are values advocated by the Catholic Church and are synonymous with what it means to be a “good woman” within the Hispanic culture. Striving to uphold the virtues of being a “good woman” often conflicted with their desires to pursue their educations more vigorously (Hollinger, 2006). Hollinger’s (2006) study is noteworthy because it intends to give legitimacy to the role culture has in shaping Hispanic women’s attitudes, beliefs, and subsequent actions. Hollinger (2006) suggested that the complexity and dynamic role of culture has the power to influence the actions and attitudes Hispanic women take in regards to their education. Moreover, it reveals the ongoing cognitive dissonance that they feel, as they try to uphold the values of their culture, while also trying to pursue a higher education in the dominant culture that does not always acknowledge or respect these differences.

Godinez (2006) and Hollinger (2006) point to culture as a factor in the educational attainment of Hispanic women that deserves attention. They both note that the Hispanic culture, though rich in tradition and heritage, also has a significant role in influencing the perceptions and attitudes about their gendered roles and responsibilities, which Hispanic women internalize. Moreover, this internalization is aggravated even further by the discrimination women of color experience at the institutional level (Godinez, 2006). Dolores Bernal (2006) explains that, “it becomes clear how the intersection of sexism, racism, and classism forms systems of subordination that create a different range of educational opportunities for Chicanas” (pg. 116). Furthermore, this subordination is also, “intertwined with such things as immigration, generational status,

language, gender, class, and even the contradictions of religion.” (pg.116). The consequences of such oppression result in the demonization of Hispanic women’s immigrant status, their ethnicity, and even their “two spirited” identities, painting them as deviant and morally corrupt (Godinez, 2006; pg. 25).

Roberta Espinoza (2010) considered how Latina doctoral students balance school and home life responsibilities in order to fulfill their roles as “good daughters” within their families. Espinoza (2010) mentions that, “researchers have not adequately investigated the role families and home life experiences play in their academic achievement” (pg. 318). Espinoza (2010) explains that existing research does suggest that family support is critical to the educational pursuit and success of Hispanic women. However, this familial support can sometimes conflict with school demands, which can consequently put Latinas in a “cultural bind” (Espinoza, 2010; pg. 318). Consistent with other studies, Espinoza (2010) explained that cultural obligations for Hispanic families may be of more significance for Hispanic women because they are more often socialized to take on the caregiver role. Characteristics of these family obligations included dependence, subordination, and domesticity (pg. 319). The characteristics create, “an expectation that the ‘good Latina woman’ will always prioritize family needs above her own individual needs (pg. 319). Espinoza’s (2010) discussion of the “good girl” dilemma is important to consider because it gives legitimacy to the role of culture in the educational pursuit of Hispanic women and acknowledges that they may be experiencing cultural conflict when it comes to their gendered roles in and outside of their families.

The consideration of culture may provide a better understanding of the educational attainment levels of Hispanic women and their experience as they travel through the education pipeline. However, culture does not receive adequate attention from the social sciences. As John D. Skrentny (2008) explains, culture tends to be a “last resort” explanation when it comes to discussing racial/ethnic inequality due to political reasons (pg. 59). Skrentny (2008) discussed that it can be difficult for social scientists to, “analyze ethnic or racial cultures without putting responsibility on disadvantaged groups for their plight” (pg. 60). This is perhaps why it is difficult to find literature on the educational achievement of Hispanic women that explores the issue of culture as a possible influence in their poor educational achievement and performance. Skrentny (2008) asserted that despite this difficulty, social scientists should not shy away from examining the role of culture when analyzing achievement and assimilation (pg. 60). In order to do so, “this requires assessing the role of culture in ethnic and racial inequality and the nature of American culture” (pg. 60). Furthermore, Skrentny (2008) advocates for an understanding of culture that can see American ethnic patterns in relation to other societies, as well as understand that American immigrant groups, like Latinos, are shaped by the cultures of their origins (pg. 60).

The existing literature leads me to suspect when structural inequalities are held constant, culture adds another dimension to the problem of low levels of educational attainment for Hispanic women. The literatures I have presented seem to support the significance of the Hispanic culture’s role in Hispanic women’s educational attitudes and trajectories. They suggest that the culture can also limit Hispanic women’s choices of

self-actualization and independence. Research has indicated that the Hispanic culture has a patriarchal and religious orientation and that these strongly influence the gender norms for this group. These patriarchal and religious influences appear to shape Hispanic women's attitudes about their traditional roles as mothers, wives, and even their sexuality, such as the use of contraceptives and engaging in sexual activity before marriage. Additionally, Hispanic parents are often accused of not inculcating appreciation and importance of education on to their children.

While I suspect Hispanic culture has some involvement in the low levels of education attainment for Hispanic women, I also suspect that Hispanic culture does not act alone. Most research on the Hispanic culture paints a less than flattering picture of its effects on Hispanic women's educational achievements. It is often blamed for producing individuals who are poorly educated, and consequently concentrated in low wage, low skill lines of work. This is not what I am suggesting with regards to my own research. On the contrary, my argument is that Hispanic women are influenced by not one culture, but two: the Hispanic culture and the dominant culture. Culture of poverty and cultural deficiency arguments are consistently used against Hispanic women and other women of color to justify their oppressed and disadvantaged position in society. However, these arguments are flawed to their core because they assume that educational deficits experienced by Hispanic women are a result of poor cultural values. Furthermore, they prove to be biased because they suggest that Hispanic women are at fault without acknowledging the structural inequalities and discrimination that takes place against women of color. Moreover, they arrogantly assume that the culture at fault is the foreign

subculture, and that the dominant culture plays no role in this experience. The culture of poverty argument is but another ploy to reinforce the superiority of the dominant culture. The dominant culture also has its own belief system, one that, in regards to education, preaches meritocracy and “pulling one’s self from ones bootstraps”. It also superficially advocates for gender equality. The reality of the dominant culture is that it has more similarities with the Hispanic culture than it cares to admit. The dominant American culture also has a patriarchal orientation and places many obstacles to maintain the status quo and exclude women from male dominated spheres. In this way, both cultures reinforce gender roles and ideals.

With culture of poverty arguments, the dominant culture not only preaches meritocracy, but acculturation into the dominant culture to experience acceptance and success not only in education but in other institutions. Expectations of acculturation from the dominant culture are highly imperious, immediately assuming the superiority of itself and expecting other subcultures, in this case the Hispanic culture, to be left behind in order to gain acceptance and experience the rewards of the dominant culture. This creates cultural conflicts for Hispanic women, which creates confusion and stress about what is expected of them and what they expect for themselves. Adding on structural inequalities makes it even more difficult for Hispanic women to successfully overcome structural and cultural barriers and enjoy educational success.

## CHAPTER TWO

### CURRENT STUDY

The adult high school I selected for this research is very unique because it has made it a priority to adapt to the needs of the population it serves. The school offers classes four nights a week, in the evenings, in order to accommodate the demanding work and home schedules of its students. All faculty and staff are volunteers, making the cost of attendance extremely affordable. Furthermore, the majority of faculty and staff are bilingual, minimizing the detrimental effects of language barrier. Students may enroll regardless of legal status. All of these qualities made this school the ideal place to recruit my participants.

The sample group for this study was comprised of 13 Hispanic women. This adult high school requires that students be at least 25 years old to enroll, have a minimum of nine years of formal education in their country of origin (this includes the U.S.), and have basic English skills. As previously mentioned, this adult high school does not check the legal status of its students, nor does it consider their legal status when offering students their high school diplomas. Students earn a legitimate accredited high school diploma after one year if they fulfill all academic requirements.

Out of the 13 Hispanic women, 10 were of Mexican heritage, 1 was Guatemalan, 1 was Panamanian, and 1 was Puerto Rican. The majority of these women reside in the United States illegally, with the exception of 3 of them who are either U.S. residents

or citizens. The interviews were conducted in their language of preference, which was Spanish for all but one of the women. All of the women were employed, and 9 of the women were married with children.

A qualitative approach in the form of interviews with open ended questions was chosen for this study. Prior to interviewing my participants, I did my best to cultivate trust with them, going a few nights a week to serve as a volunteer at their school. As Randy Stoecker (2005) asserts about engaged methods of research, it is best to nurture the relationship with participants because this encourages them to feel comfortable in offering open and honest answers to researcher questions. Stoecker (2005) adds that the benefit of participants giving honest answers is that the data is more accurate. As I knew I would be asking some questions that would be of a sensitive nature, I wanted to ensure that these women felt safe to share very personal information with me. Though some of their experiences were very painful for them to relive, they courageously disclosed several details of their lives, which made for very rich data.

The intentions of this research are to learn through the biographical narratives of each participant, if cultural factors play a role in shaping the attitudes Hispanic women hold about higher education and their pursuit of it. This study involved asking participants to share personal information as it pertained to the focus of this study, such as educational family history (i.e. what was the highest level of education achieved by their parents, siblings, grandparents), socioeconomic status (here and/or in their native country), marital status, and number of children. Sensitive themes were also touched upon in the interviews, such as domestic and sexual abuse.

### **Limitations**

Although the findings of this study proved to be insightful, it may have been limited by a small sample size. A small sample size may make it difficult to generalize the findings to a greater population of Hispanic women. A larger number of interviewees would strengthen the validity of my findings, though I consider the results to be consistent with the findings of other studies.

## CHAPTER THREE

### FINDINGS

#### **Interviewee Characteristics and Experiences with Education**

The interviewees who participated in this study were mainly of Mexican origin, with the exception of one from Guatemala, one from Panama, and one from Puerto Rico. Students enrolled in the adult high school are required to be 25 years of age or older, and so the interviewees were between 25 to 45 years of age. Of the 13 women, 8 of them were married with children, while 3 were unmarried and had no children, 1 was co-habiting with her partner and had no children, and 1 was divorced but had children. Most of the interviewees indicated that they were employed, many of them full time. During the time this study took place, several of the women indicated that they were residing in the United States “without papers”. It is for this reason that the adult high school is not mentioned by name and all of the names of the interviewees have been changed as to protect their identities and those of their family members.

As formerly noted, the adult high school requires that students have a minimum of 9 years of formal education, either in the United States or their country of origin. Most of the interviewees described their educational experience during the interviews in the context of the education system of their native country. In general, basic education in

Latin American countries are divided into three phases. The first phase is called *la primaria* and refers to grades 1 through 6. This phase of education is the equivalent to an elementary education in the United States. The second phase is called *la secundaria* and includes grades 7 through 9. This phase is roughly the equivalent to junior high school. The last phase of basic education is referred to as *la preparatoria*, which includes grades 10 through 12 and is the equivalent of high school. Many of the women indicated that they only managed to complete “la secundaria” in their countries of origin, while a few were able to graduate from *la preparatoria*.

The overwhelming majority of the women began their narratives by stating their desire to better themselves and their families, which they considered their main motivation to return to school. All of the women frequently used words like *superarme* (to better myself), *crecer* (to grow), *desarrollarme* (to develop), and *desenvolverme* (to open up) to indicate to me why continuing their education was the best choice for them. As Elena, a woman of Mexican origin, shared with me, “my dream is to be someone in life”. A high school diploma held the promise of finding job opportunities that involved less physical labor and better pay. In addition to improving their lives economically, they believed they were developing themselves intellectually and academically. Many of them told me that they hoped to continue their education after high school. They felt that their current academic experience was preparing them for additional schooling. In Elena’s case, though she had graduated from beauty school and was a licensed stylist, her true dream was to go to nursing school. “I’ve always wanted to be a nurse,” she said.

Like Elena, some of the women had academic aspirations prior to enrolling in the adult high school. Ana, a woman from Panama, was another interviewee that also aspired to become a registered nurse. Ana shared that she came from a family in which her father and siblings were all professionals in the medical field and her mother was a licensed psychologist. She told me that she was the only one in her family that did not pursue a higher level of education, which bothered her but also motivated her to move forward with her education. Ana alluded that there were some circumstances in her past which she felt interfered with her educational pursuits. These circumstances caused her to put her academic career on hold, until now. Similarly, Sayda also came from a home in which both her parents were educated and had long careers as teachers in Mexico. She grew up in a home where the appreciation for education was implicit. Like Ana, she had planned to continue her education, but certain life events interfered with her educational plans.

Ana and Sayda were very unique with regards to their academic aspirations because, unlike many of the other women, they came from homes in which the expectation to exercise their potential was a given. For several of the interviewees, the realization of their own potential did not become apparent to them until they began the program. In Brenda's case, she worked full-time and then became a stay-at-home mom for about two years when her first daughter was born. She says,

I didn't know what I wanted to do. Before coming here [to the adult high school], I was already married, a woman with my daughters. I did all of my chores, I had everything organized. I thought that's it. I had already made it as a mother and a wife. That's it.

Brenda, who was of Mexican origin, had no plans to continue her education prior to coming to the adult high school, nor was education a way she considered to “improve herself” as she indicated at the beginning of our interview. She credited the adult high school staff and all of the resources they provide for not only giving her a positive academic experience, but for also helping her to consider career and education options after graduation. The realization that they can be more than just mothers and wives, as Brenda reflects, was often a source of empowerment for these women. This was an important realization because many of them, especially those who were married with children, based their identities on their roles as caregivers and financial providers for their families. It boosted their confidence to know that though the well-being of their families was extremely important to them, they could pursue their interests, and in fact, should try to dedicate time to themselves.

### **Economic Hardship as an Educational Deterrent**

The overwhelming majority of the interviewees indicated that they were not able to complete a high school level of education in their country of origin. When I asked them why they had discontinued their formal education, most of them shared that their family’s financial situations led them to abandon their schooling. Many of the women came from large families, like Dora, who was the oldest of eight sisters. Supporting such large households was difficult for many of their parents. Some of them grew up in households in which their fathers were the primary breadwinners for the entire family, while their mothers often took domestic roles, serving as their children’s primary caregivers and keeping up with family and household responsibilities.

Watching their parents struggle to make ends meet and put food on the table was difficult for many of them to experience. The overwhelming majority of the women felt that they had a responsibility to help support their families financially as best as they could. It seems that graduating from *la secundaria* was a pivotal moment in many of their lives where they made the decision to either continue school or find work. This was the case for Elena, Brenda, and Dora. These three women shared that they felt responsibility to contribute financially to their homes, but also noted that because they were older than their other siblings, they felt even more obligated to do so. Ana, Elena and Dora also shared that they experienced some favoritism on behalf of their parents to support the younger siblings, especially when it came to school. Many of their younger siblings are now professionals and have continued their education, which they know is a result of their contribution to their family. Regardless of the obligation they felt to participate as breadwinners, they all said that they did not regret putting their dreams on hold for the family. Family well-being may often take precedence over individual needs and dreams among these families and such a mentality appears to carry over into many of their marriages as well.

Poverty and the family's financial situation in childhood resulted as educational deterrents for several of the women. However, such hardship can also serve as a source of motivation. Sonia, a Guatemalan immigrant, described the poverty she experienced in childhood. Sonia's experience with poverty was extremely painful and she admitted that it continued to affect her. Though she was very young when she made the decision to

leave school, she did not doubt that finding work was what she needed to do in order to help her family. She said,

I grew up with my sisters. My mom had to go out to sell and do many things, so I grew up with my sisters. My childhood was, I'll tell you, it was a little hard but at the same time happy. I was with my siblings, but at the same time my parents had to go out to find food for us. So, it was a little complicated. So it was...I felt it was a little hard. Lots of neglect too, neglect because my mom would leave and leave me there [at home]. I would come home and I would have to help people, carry bags, look for ways to win the bread so that they, my siblings, could also eat. I was always looking for ways to help around the house. It's sad. At the same time, maybe that's why one decides to get married young. You say, the economic situation that one lives, that also affects you. And you say, I don't want to go through that anymore. I don't want to suffer anymore. It becomes complicated for you, it becomes difficult. But, I have persevered, thank God.

Sonia's heart-wrenching story reflects that sometimes it is not a lack of academic aspirations that interfere with the pursuit of an education. The burden of meeting basic survival needs is overwhelming, especially when this burden falls on a child. As she was preoccupied with "winning the bread", it became clear that neither she nor her parents could afford the time or money to send her to school. It is truly remarkable to see these women, as in Sonia's case, make unpleasant choices in order to survive. As Sonia put it plainly, "sometimes one in life doesn't decide for oneself." Sonia's comment refers to her decision to marry very young. She and Pilar, a Mexican woman, both married at the age of 17. For both of them, marriage was a way to escape financial hardship and stressful family situations than it was an expression of love. Both women hoped that marriage would end their suffering and bring stability into their lives. Looking back at her decision, Sonia said that she was happy with her choice because, "things had gone well with him". She felt that her husband treated her well and that she was finally in a

financially stable environment. Unfortunately, Pilar had a much different experience. She did not find the relief in her marriage, rather a continuation of her traumatic childhood.

### **Confrontations with Domestic Violence**

While some of the women recalled coming from loving homes and never witnessed nor experienced abuse, sadly they were the exception rather than the norm. Domestic and sexual abuse, as well as neglect, were vivid parts of many of these women's experiences in childhood. It was a common sight, some of them said, to see their fathers beat their mothers and their siblings. They often recalled their mothers enduring these abuses and suffering in silence. Some of them said that lamentably they continued this cycle of abuse in their own marriages. Elena and Pilar shared that their husbands were frequently abusive and violent towards them, often insulting them and putting them down. Pilar described a night her husband came home, saying that,

He took me into the room and began to beat me, pregnant. He put his foot on the belly of my son, and then I said, 'You're going to kill the baby!' and he didn't understand and beat me, beat me, he finished beating me. He went to the window and broke the window.

Her neighbor, who she recalled was as a great friend, called the police and encouraged her to file a report. She was scared and at that time had no family other than her husband in the United States, which she felt influenced her decision not to file a report. In a separate incident Pilar said her husband beat her so hard he left her unconscious. Again, she said that she could've filed a police report. This would've sent her husband to jail. However, she chose not to file the report because she did not want to leave her son without a father.

Elena had also experienced domestic abuse at the hand of her husband. After enduring his abuse for many years, on one particular night she reached a turning point and decided that she would follow her dreams, regardless of the obstacles,

I was there many years obeying him and everything, until one day I decided for myself. One day he came home drunk in the early morning and I was doing laundry, but I couldn't sleep because I was worried. I said, 'Maybe someone hurt him or something happened to him'. Then he told me that he wanted to talk to me. I said, 'You know what? You're drunk. Just go to sleep.' And he pulled me, that day he pulled me and he hurt me. Then, I said, 'Well, I'm not going to implicate him because I know he's drunk right now and if I make myself crazy then there will be two crazies here at home.' And then he pulled me very hard and said to me- I will never forget what he said to me. He said to me, 'You know what? I feel so sorry for you. I don't know why I married you. I feel sorry for you.' Then that was what...I felt so bad. I felt bad because I am not garbage. I don't want to be supported by anyone.

It was difficult for Elena to relive this memory for me, but it was an important moment in her life because it was the day she validated herself and realized that she wanted to follow her dreams, with or without the support of her husband. Elena also spoke of the conversation she and her husband had that following morning after the incident,

But you knew what you were doing. So then, he told me, he looked at me and he told me, 'So'. So, I told him, 'You know what? I am fed up with this life. You humiliate me all the time, you tell me all the time that I'm nothing, and this last time, at night, in the morning, that you felt sorry for me, you shouldn't feel sorry for me.' I told him, 'Because you know why?' I told him, 'I, thank God, all the clothes I have, has also been because of me and my work and effort'... 'You know what? From now on you will not stop me. From now on I will go to school, and if you want I will find someone to look after my kids'.

Elena recalls that finding the courage to confront her husband was difficult because she was scared of him. Like Elena, Pilar also admitted to being afraid of her husband. They both shared that they tried to be obedient wives, and even remained loyal to their husbands during incidents of abuse. When I asked them why they chose to stand by them,

they explained their choices were influenced by traditional expectations of marriage held for women. As Elena explained to me,

I was very scared of him. Because, just imagine, in Mexico, your parents teach you that, well I come from that lineage of my parents that my mom would say to me, 'If you're going to get married, only with one man, you're going to be with only one man and no one else, daughter.'

### **Traditional Expectations in Marriage and Motherhood**

The advice that Elena's mother gave her of marrying only one man for life provides an understanding of how these women are affected by traditional expectations. Similar to Elena, Pilar also shared that her father was very adamant about her adhering to tradition and wanted her to marry "the right way". To marry the "right" way meant that she must be a virgin and practice abstinence until her wedding night. Pilar says, "I married the right way, like he wanted, in white, not having any relations until I married my husband". More than just marrying the "right" way, Pilar and Elena explained to me that being with their spouses, and even displaying loyalty in the face of abuse were expectations held in place for them by tradition. Pilar observed the impact conforming to tradition has had in her own life by saying, "I relived the life I lived as a child. Because my dad also drank. And that tradition is the same one I lived at the beginning. That tradition comes from generations back."

Many of the interviewees often recalled their parents being strict about their behavior and their friendships in childhood. For instance, Dora remembered her mother forbidding her from sitting on her father's lap or any relatives that were men. She also recalled that her mother did not allow for her to play with boys, not even boy relatives.

When I asked her why she thought her mother was so strict, she speculated that it was her belief that girls needed to be protected. In Brenda's case, she admitted that she became pregnant with her first daughter three months into dating her husband, which caused a tremendous amount of stress for her because that was "not part of the plan." Her plan involved dating her husband for some time, eventually get married, and then have children. Telling her brothers of the change of plans caused a lot of anxiety for her because she feared they would react negatively. She eventually married her husband to make things "right". Brenda's story, along with those of the other interviewees that are married with children, also reflects the expectation to wait until marriage to begin a family. Pilar's father made perfectly clear that he would not welcome any grandchildren born out of wedlock because he feared that the family's reputation would be ruined.

Waiting to have children until marriage was an expectation the interviewees' parents had of them and many of them had for themselves. Although motherhood was a welcomed experience, they admitted that it could be difficult to raise their children because their spouses were not very involved as caretakers and their financial situations often required that they work outside the home. Some of the women described themselves as their children's mother and father because their husbands did not engage with the children and did not feel that it was their obligation to do so. The difficulty of raising children, along with the necessity to work, encouraged several of them to abstain from having anymore children. Moreover, some of them admitted to problems in their marriages, which also influenced their decision.

It appears that tradition plays a powerful role in shaping the identities and life choices of these women. The awareness of tradition's influence varied, as some women made the connection between their life choices and traditional expectations, while others perceived their decisions as second nature. There were also varying degrees of reconciliation between traditional expectations and the interviewees' actions. Moreover, the inculcation of tradition went beyond direct instruction from parents. Parents also presented these cues through interaction with not only their children, but the other spouse. For example, Pilar was very aware of tradition's role in her life as a result of her father's demands of her and his treatment of her mother. In contrast, Sonia grew up with parental neglect and did not mention tradition at all during our interview. Yet, when she and her husband decided to formalize their relationship, there was no question that they would marry. Gloria and Gabriela, two sisters from Mexico that joined the program together, were among the younger interviewees. Both sisters remembered being taught some traditional expectations in their youth. Both of them lived with their parents, but neither of them was married or had children. They were aware that they defied tradition by postponing marriage, but this did not seem to bother them. However, they did say that both planned on marrying through the church when the time came.

### **Parental and Spousal Support**

Because many of the interviewees experienced traumatic childhoods and some of them were currently in unstable marriages, it was especially important to them that they be positive role models for their children. To have their children see them make the effort to continue their education and persevere through adversity motivated them to continue

forward. Many of them felt strongly that it was important to not only encourage their children academically, but to be involved in their education as best as they could. Pursuing a high school degree made many of them feel more prepared to help their children, and even saw it as a way to relate to them. Though there is an unquestionable amount of love and devotion for their children, many of them wanted their children to see them in a role beyond that of being a mother. For Elena and Brenda, it was extremely important to them that their children see them making the effort to continue their education because they wanted them to see that they were, “capable of so much more.”

Protecting their children from economic hardships and family problems they experienced in their own childhood was a major concern for them. Many of them said they knew they would never be able to leave anything of economic value to their children, which saddened some of the interviewees. Nonetheless, they felt hopeful that their children could achieve a better quality of life for themselves if they continued their education. Many of them considered an education as the only inheritance they could leave behind. They wanted their children not only appreciate their efforts and sacrifices to give them more opportunities, but also be inspired by them and accomplish what they couldn't.

Though many of the interviewees talked extensively of the importance of being their children's role model and offering advice to continue their educations, only a few of the women recalled their parents actively supporting their education and offering academic advice in their youth. Unlike most of the interviewees, Ana and Sayda remembered a very different experience. Both sets of parents had careers and both

women grew up in homes where education was a way of life. Academic excellence and pursuit were an expectation in their homes. In contrast, the other interviewees do not remember their parents encouraging them to do well in school or continue their education, most likely due to the financial strain and preoccupation with family well-being experienced by their parents. Perhaps it may also have to do with the level of education achieved by their parents. Unlike Ana and Sayda's parents, many of the parents of the interviewees had achieved a level of education similar to or less than theirs. Some of them could even recall the educational levels of their grandparents, remembering that they barely had any education and were even illiterate until adulthood.

Though family support is important, sometimes it is not enough to trump other obstacles. In Ana's case, having the influence of her family could not save her from postponing her dreams of becoming a nurse. Like many of the other interviewees, Ana made the decision to leave school in order to contribute financially to her household. Her mother was a single parent supporting a family of four on a teacher's salary. As the oldest of three daughters, Ana felt it was her obligation to help her mother make ends meet financially. She also said that the unstable political climate in Panama during her adolescence made the pursuit of an education more difficult because safety was a major concern. Ana's mother ultimately made the difficult decision of sending her daughters to the United States, sidelining her dreams even further.

Support from their spouses and significant others, or lack thereof, also seemed to affect the interviewees. Celia, one of the interviewees that was not married but co-habitated with her boyfriend, said that he was very supportive of her desire to continue

her education. Gabriela and Gloria also said that their boyfriends were supportive of their efforts to continue their education and become professionals of some kind. In comparison, some of the interviewees that were married shared that their spouses were supportive, while others said they were not at all. The most notable difference between interviewees that had support from their partners and those that did not was visible in their self-esteem. Those that had support felt more confident in their abilities to achieve their academic goals, even more so when they perceived their partners as willing to share the household chores and child care. Interviewees that did not have this support perceived it as yet another obstacle they had to overcome.

As the high school requires that all students commit to taking classes four nights a week for three hours each of those nights, the husbands were concerned that their wives would neglect their household and motherly responsibilities. Some husbands were appeased by compromise, while others rejected the idea of their wives leaving the home all together. Compromise often included the husbands taking care of the children for a few hours while the interviewees were at school and some “light” domestic chores, such as washing the dishes or sweeping. Many of the women prepared all of the meals for their families, but on school nights meal preparation became difficult. Sometimes the husbands were responsible for preparing meals on their own, or the women resorted to short-cuts, such as buying meals that were already made. Though their husbands contributed to lightening the load for their wives, the women continued to carry the majority of the household responsibilities. Pacifying their husbands and demonstrating to them that

school was not a distraction from their family obligations was a very important part of the compromise. As Brenda said, “I don’t give him any reason to complain about the house”.

The majority of the women did not expect or demand that their husbands take more active roles in their homes. Though they did ask for help with the children and household chores, both the interviewees and their husbands continued to assume that they would still do more of these chores. Their compliance to family and household responsibilities reflects the internalization of gender roles in these women. Awareness of the inequality of their gender roles varied. Some of the women, like Pilar, were aware that they had much more responsibility than their husbands and that it was exhausting balancing work, school, motherhood, and home obligations. Balancing all of these responsibilities had discouraged them from making the commitment to continue their education in the past. Others accepted this arrangement because their husbands were the main financial providers and they considered it only fair that they take on more family responsibilities.

More than just concerned with their obligations as mothers and homemakers, some of the spouses discouraged their wives from continuing their education because they feared that they would become independent and seek more freedom. Pilar’s husband, for instance, mentioned to her several times during their confrontations that he noticed she was “changing”, which he disliked. Pilar explained to me that her husband had finished *la secundaria* like her, but had no interest in continuing his education. She described him as complacent, preferring to work at a dead-end job than to do “something with his life”. She felt that her husband didn’t like the idea of her becoming more

confident and independent because he feared that she would feel capable to do more on her own and would maybe even leave him one day. Pilar said, “He’s stuck and he wants me to be stuck like him, but I don’t want that.”

Dependence on the husband was an arrangement that many of the interviewees witnessed in childhood, but seemed to affect those that were currently married the most. Many of them recalled their fathers as the primary breadwinners of their households, while their mothers attended to the children and kept up the home. Many of them said that it was common for their mothers to be financially dependent on their fathers. Moreover, many of them recalled their fathers being strict and jealous with their mothers, often prohibiting them from meeting friends and attending social gatherings without them. Many of the interviewees, like Elena and Pilar did, explained this marital dynamic as characteristic of their culture’s tradition.

Some of the women used the term “machismo” to describe their husbands and explain their actions. When I asked the women to explain what they meant by this term, in general they said that it referred to a man who was possessive, jealous, and domineering of his wife. He expected her to maintain a clean home and have food ready on the table and take care of the children. This definition also included their expectation to be the primary, even sole, breadwinners of their households and have their wives depend on them financially. The women who used this term mentioned that they felt it was unfair and one-sided because their husbands demanded that they fulfill these roles, but they were not allowed to demand the same from their husbands. Elena explained to me that the term *machismo* also implies that the men are the heads of the household and

the decision makers. As Pilar described her father's jealousy and control over her mother, she also said that now she was living the same experience with her husband. She explained that her husband limited her social life because he did not like her meeting with friends, especially if they were men. He considered those kinds of friendships suspicious and disrespectful. She believed that he did not trust her to be in the company of any friends, much less if they were men, because he feared that extramarital affairs would ensue. However, her husband has no qualms of looking lustfully at other women in front of her, which she finds bothersome. She even admitted that her husband had been unfaithful to her and had contracted chlamydia from his extramarital affair.

Pilar and some other interviewees were aware of the double standards that exist within their marriages. It was clear that most of the interviewees desired to be independent, but this was hard for their husbands to understand or accept because it had a negative connotation for them. The women explained to me that in their culture, independence is often synonymous with *libertinaje*, or licentiousness. Sayda said that her husband had that mind set for many years, which was sometimes difficult for her because she grew up in a home where her independence was encouraged and respected. Eventually, he realized that her independence had nothing to do with wanting to "go crazy" and act immorally. Independence for Sayda, as for the other women, is an expression of identity as well as the ability to make smart, competent decisions for themselves.

### **Legal Status and Language Barrier**

Though the interviewees shared that they felt motivated to continue their education to improve their employment opportunities or pursue additional education, they admitted that the dynamics in their marriages and family affected their self-esteem. The responsibilities of having to participate as breadwinners, housekeepers, and caregivers, in addition to minimal demonstrations of love and support from their spouses affected their confidence in their abilities to perform well academically. They also said that their legal status, limited proficiency in English, and lack of education also affected their self-esteem. They felt empowered by their education, but were extremely concerned about how the language barrier and legal status would affect their efforts to “improve themselves.” They recognized that these factors would inevitably interfere with their progress. Brenda shared with me that there were many instances in which she applied for jobs, but was not considered because she lacked the “proper identification”. She said to me, “Why does a simple piece of paper have to make you feel so bad?”

The fragile self-esteem of some of the interviewees led to feelings of intimidation. The interviewees did not doubt that they wanted to continue their education, but admitted that they felt discouraged by the requirements both academic institutions and potential employers had for them. Some of them displayed their self-doubt by comparing themselves to other Hispanic individuals who had similar aspirations and perceived them as having the upper hand, even if this was not the case. They contended that their higher levels of education, fluency in English, and “papers” prepared them to find better jobs or continue their education. Though some of the interviewees determined that prospects for

achieving their goals looked bleak, they would continue to make the effort to achieve their goals. The women frequently mentioned having hope and faith in God that everything would turn out for the best, which most likely helped them cope with the uncertainty of their futures.

Overcoming feelings of intimidation and self-doubt was not easy for many of the interviewees. However, they unanimously said that finding the strength and courage to continue their educations was one of the best decisions they made. They credited the adult high school for awakening them to new experiences and ways of thought. For instance, some felt empowered to stand up to the domestic violence they experienced in their marriages and realized that they did not have to allow their husbands to mistreat them. Furthermore, they felt that it was their prerogative to be independent from their husbands, financially and socially, as they also contributed financially to the home and carried more of the family and household responsibilities. The adult high school provides group and individual therapy sessions for their students, and it was through these sessions that many of them came to these realizations. For example, where once some of the women said that their husbands expected complete obedience and had instilled fear in them, now they felt the courage to advocate for themselves because they were not, as Elena put it, “garbage”. They felt that they were growing on a personal and intellectual level, which made them happy and hopeful for the future.

### **Discussion**

The interviewees provided tremendous insight into the struggles Hispanic women face and must overcome in order to make educational gains. My findings strongly

supported that the Hispanic culture plays an important role in the educational attainment of Hispanic women, but also reinforced the continued significance of structural barriers in their pursuit of education.

The interviewees overwhelmingly demonstrated that their desire to continue their education was not lacking. However, circumstances beyond their control limited their possibilities of pursuing their educations more vigorously. The academic aspirations of this group of women appeared to be strongly influenced by traditional gender expectations held by the Hispanic culture. These gender expectations delineated their roles as primary caregivers in their families and promoted the prioritization of family over individual needs. Making the decision to commit to their education was difficult for some interviewees, as the pursuit of an education often reflected a conflict of interests between fulfilling family obligations and committing to their education. Economic hardships were also obstacles in making an educational commitment because they made participation in the workforce not only a necessity, but a mandatory measure to take in order to care for their families. Moreover, struggles with language barrier and legal status in the United States limited their academic and employment opportunities.

Despite tremendous amounts of adversity these women experienced, they demonstrated their resilience and their desire to, “to do the best they can.” Like these women, there are many more who make concerted efforts to “improve themselves” through education. However, these efforts are not acknowledged or even respected by their culture or American society. Hispanic women face the difficult task of juggling their responsibilities as wives, mothers, and wage earners and do so within defined gender

boundaries. Adding education to the to-do list can be too overwhelming for them, especially when there is no one to help lighten the load. Furthermore, Hispanic women struggle to overcome familial lineages of economic hardship and low educational attainment.

Though Hispanic women face justifiable reasons for their poor educational and economic status, this is not what society chooses to see. It prefers to blame Latinas for their shortcomings and unfairly accuses them of robbing “documented” Americans of low wage jobs and social welfare resources, when the reality is that they are trying as best as they can to compensate for the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities. In truth, Hispanic women cannot be expected to overcome such limitations alone. If Hispanic women demonstrate the desire and the effort to continue their education, it is up to the dominant culture to change its mentality and meet these women half way so that they can experience the academic and economic success they have aspired to and begin the process of breaking away from low academic achievement and socioeconomic status. To meet them half way is to give Hispanic women the opportunity to be the role models for their children that they wish to be and the start of a new family inheritance, one characterized by high educational attainment and improved economic opportunities.

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## VITA

Lupita M. Pivaral graduated from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2008 with a Bachelor's degree in sociology. She recently graduated from Loyola University Chicago with a Master's degree in sociology. Her current interests are in sociology of education, especially as it pertains to minority population.

