On the Line in the Motor City: Narratives of Latina Auto Worker Culture

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Bio:

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Abstract:

Latina auto workers are an unrecognized population within the U.S. auto industry. This study gives voice to them by using personal accounts of their struggles working on an assembly line while raising a family. I discuss the shared vision of the American Dream of Latinas and explore how their desire for the American Dream is made all the more difficult by lifelong marginalization and the challenge of cultural assimilation. In particular, I explore the settlement patterns of Latino families to Michigan, their personal experiences navigating the auto factory work place and the effects of their role as an auto worker on their families. To gain a broader understanding of the experiences of Latinas working in the auto industry, I also look at their perceptions of their own childhood experiences. Studying their interactions with others in the auto factory and exploring factors affecting the raising of their children will illustrate the complexity of their everyday lives.

Introduction

Why did Latinas enter the auto industry to work in factories? How did Latinas navigate auto industry factory life? How are Latinas coping with the auto industry crisis today? How could Latinas have enjoyed a job where they worked eight to ten hours a day, five days a week, for 30 years, making car parts on an assembly line?

Latina auto workers are an unrecognized population within the U.S. auto industry. This study gives voice to a group of overlooked workers by using personal accounts as told by Latina auto workers – a voice that expresses their struggles working on an assembly line while raising a family. I will discuss the shared vision of the American Dream of Latinas. They desire a job that provides a good, stable income for themselves, and they want their children to have a better childhood than their own – a childhood in which there is no racial discrimination, a better education, ample opportunity, and a feeling of community belonging. However, their desire for the American Dream is made all the more difficult by lifelong marginalization and the challenge of cultural assimilation.

For this ethnographic study I chose to research the lives of Latina auto workers in Southeastern Michigan. I initially started out collecting research data with the intention of looking at the effects of the current auto industry crisis on Michigan male and female auto workers and their families. Shortly after my field research began, my interest shifted to the lives of Latinas in the auto industry. In particular, I wanted (1) to explore the settlement patterns of their families to Michigan, (2) to understand their personal experiences navigating the auto factory work place, and (3) to examine the effects of their role as an auto worker on their families. To gain a broader understanding of the experiences of Latinas working in the auto industry, it is necessary to look at their conditions and perceptions of their own childhood

experiences. Studying their interactions with others in the auto factory and exploring factors affecting the raising of their children will illustrate the complexity of their everyday lives.

Literature Review

Latino Emigration

A historical analysis of how and why Latinos migrated to Michigan begins in the early 1900s. As a result of a labor shortage created by World War I, more Mexican workers were allowed into the United States from 1917 to 1918 (Triplett, 2004). During the 1920s and 30s, many Latinos began working as agricultural workers. They were recruited from the Southwest for seasonal harvest work (Badillo, 2003; Rosenbaum, 1997). The streams of migrant Latino workers had three main jumping off points: California, Texas, and Florida. Migrant workers that streamed to Michigan were primarily from cities like San Antonio and Austin, Texas. A large Michigan-based sugar beet company heavily recruited Latinos because of a sudden shortage of labor resources (Badillo, 2003; Rosenbaum, 1997). Some migrant families eventually “settled out” (Lindborg & Ovando, 1977). This meant that they settled in near areas where they had previously worked in the fields. These workers moved into manufacturing jobs, many finding work with automobile subcontractors supplying parts to the U.S. auto industry (Badillo, 2003). Many began filtering into Michigan cities, including Detroit. The movement of migrant workers into the automotive factories of Michigan was to be the beginning of Latino family traditions of lifelong work in the auto industry.

Up until the mid-1980s, almost 40% of all U.S. auto employment was located in Michigan (Broman, Carpentier-Alting, Hamilton, Hoffman, & Thomas, 1990). The foundation of the American auto industry is the auto worker. Auto plants up to the 1990s operated production assembly lines with manpower instead of automated machines. The few automated machines that

were in the plant were operated by people. Primary assembly and production of automobiles was accomplished by the hands of people. This workforce was not made up of just men. Historical research revealed that in 1917 the General Motors Automotive company built an aircraft facility in Detroit, Michigan and began supplying military aircraft to the U.S. government for World War I. Female factory workers were hired to stain wooden propellers for airplanes. This was the earliest recorded example of women working in an automotive production facility (Davis, 1999).

The recent economic crisis has severely affected the state of Michigan and more significantly auto industry workers. Its long-term effects, though unknowable, are likely to be severe. This prediction is consistent with previous research on the unemployment effects of auto plant closures on the social well-being of auto workers in Michigan. A 1987 study examined the mental health of Michigan auto workers who were facing loss of jobs due to plant closings and found that male and female auto workers of various ethnic backgrounds had physical and mental health problems related to the stress of job loss (Broman, Carpentier-Alting, Hamilton, Hoffman & Renner, 1990). Decades of economic fluctuation within the industry would prove challenging for auto workers and be especially hard on Latina auto workers. This paper makes a major contribution to the minuscule bibliography extant for Latina auto workers.

Context

Michigan: Home of the Motor City

For the purposes of this paper and to maintain confidentiality of those Latinas who participated in this study, I will use pseudonyms for the names of cities, auto plants and participants.

City of Briarwood

I conducted this study in southeastern Michigan. Field work centered around two small Midwestern cities: Briarwood and Riverwood, Michigan. The U.S. Census Bureau reports Briarwood's 2007 population as 21,867, with demographic estimates of 84.3% white, 13% Latino, 4.7% African American, and 0.3% Asian. See Figure 1.

City of Riverwood

The U. S. Census Bureau only had 2000 population statistics for Riverwood, Michigan. They reported a total population of 8,574 with demographic estimates of 95.8% white, 4.4% Latino, Asian 0.7%, and 0.2% African American. See Figure 2).

Michigan has a total population of 10,094,027. Demographic data shows 79.6% are white, 3.9% are Latino, and 14.1% are African American. The two main categories of industries in Michigan are (1) educational services/health care/social assistance at 21.8% and (2) manufacturing (includes auto industry) at 19%. There were originally two General Motors automotive plants in which all of the research participants were employed. The Lake Forest plant, located in Riverwood, first opened in 1965 and later closed in 1987. This plant employed approximately 5,000 auto workers at peak production periods. The second plant is located in Toledo, Ohio which is less than 13 miles from the Briarwood and Riverwood area. The Inglewood plant, first opened in 1957, is still in operation. The majority of Inglewood plant employees are laid off with only a skeleton crew currently working.

Latinas interviewed for this study were auto workers between the ages of 50 and 77. Their employment status ranged from temporarily laid off, retired, and permanently disabled.

Methods

Focus Group

Several anthropological methods were used for this study. First a focus group was conducted to gain insight into the lives of the target population. This allowed me to discover any unknown issues and/or patterns among the population. There are terms that auto workers use when working in a plant and the focus group helped define the “native language” spoken in this workplace. My key participant, who is also my mother, worked in an auto plant for 15 years before finally leaving to go to college. She aided in participant recruitment for this study. Recruitment through “snowball effect” resulted in eight Latinas participating in the focus group. See Figure 3.

Semi-Structured Interviews

A second type of method was the use of semi-structured interviews. This provided the most data to analyze for this study. Six questions were asked during the interviews which ranged in time from one hour to two hours in length. Participants were interviewed in their homes and interviews were audio recorded for later analysis.

Archival Research

An important part of this study involved historical documents. I collected personal photographs from the Latina participants. These photographs reflected social moments from their work experience such as friendly gatherings or special events. One participant provided a monthly General Motors newsletter from her plant which contained a retirement photo of her and other retiring workers that year. See Figure 4.

Another source of archival research was the local newspaper. Research participant Martha, gave me a newspaper she had saved from 1987 which showed a front page article about the Riverwood auto plant closing and the potential economic crisis it would have on the local

community. The front page story had a large photo showing Martha and other auto workers walking a picket line to demonstrate their support for the workers of the plant. See Figure 5.

Results

Seasonal Workers — Stepping Out

Several participants explained that they and their parents had been migrant workers. I discovered that numerous Latinas in this study were from migrant families who traveled between Texas and Michigan. Latinos use a “word of mouth” method to communicate within the cultural community. It is common for someone say, “I heard” when referring to the way in which they learned about something. This was one of the ways that Latinos learned about work in Michigan. Latino workers would come to Michigan during the growing season or warmer months and then return to Texas. At first Latino workers came alone from Texas but later sent for or came with their families. Migrant workers considered women and children additional hands to help the financial stability of the family. More than any other head of family, the migrant worker is dependent on the earnings of his wife and minor children (Schaffer, 1959). Young children would go to school during the day and then be expected to work in the fields after school and on weekends. Leonore, who is a temporarily laid off auto worker from the Inglewood plant recalls her childhood experience, “I would go to school and then after school I would go to work. We had nine in the family so we had to work!” (Leonore, personal communication, July 24, 2009). This lifestyle had negative effects on children. As the picking season ended, children would be pulled out of school in the middle of the year because the family would move back to Texas.

Some Latino families eventually stayed in Michigan by “stepping out” from the traditional migrations of seasonal agricultural workers, settling near the fields where they had worked in Michigan (Badillo, 2003; Lindborg & Ovando, 1977; Rosenbaum, 1997). These men

were able to gain entry into small local manufacturing plants. A primary reason for Latinos to “settle out” was so their children could receive a better education. Even though Latinos came to Michigan seeking a better life for their families, they were not able to escape discrimination and some families still needed their children to work in the fields. Many Latina mothers found this uprooting of the family every season to be extremely hard. Research participant, Martha describes her childhood experience:

Mom got tired of migrating from Texas to Michigan. It was a difficult trip every year for everyone. The lack of money and the physical and emotional toll it took was overwhelming. She wanted to settle in Riverwood and convinced my dad to look for employment. (Martha, personal communication, July 25, 2009)

The growth of the auto industry in Michigan created more work opportunities. Auto manufacturing jobs provided higher than average wages and excellent health benefits which were viewed by Latinos as highly desirable jobs. During the early 1960s, a number of auto manufacturing plants were built in Southeastern and many adult Latino male children of settled-out migrant families began working in these plants. I learned that many of the Latina research participants were just graduating high school during this time or had just started their own family. They were encouraged by family and friends to try to obtain jobs in the auto industry because of the high pay and benefits. Mary recalls her experience in leaving migrant farm work and obtaining her first auto factory job:

I was mainly a farm worker. That's what my family was. So you see I was the first one that got away from that. So I came here at the age of 17 or 18. From there when I got married I went to work at the Lake Forest plant. Everybody knew everybody. Little by little, everybody started getting factory jobs, bettering

themselves and the younger ones were getting an education. (Mary, personal communication, July 23, 2009)

Latina Labor

As their migrant parents did in the past, Latinas used word of mouth to gain entry into the auto industry. Mary recounts how she learned about openings at the auto plant:

Word of mouth I think. I've been friends with Esther and I've known Esther longer than anybody else. Me and Esther go back to 1965 and we were working in the tomato cannery in Adrian. And Esther was still in high school then. Then Esther graduated and went to work at the Lake Forest plant. And I think she was the one that told me about all them. Then I started working there. (Mary, personal communication, July 23, 2009)

Eva describes how she learned about job openings at the Lake Forest auto plant:

I don't know if it was your mom or dad that was there and they told me that they were hiring. Anyway I got in there and I was supposed to have a job, a sewing job or job putting buttons on seats, something, but I ended up doing some other job and I did it for 90 days. (Eva, personal communication, July 19, 2009)

Following the family tradition of helping their husbands by earning a living, Consuela recalls her motivation for seeking work in the auto plant:

I knew that was the best place [Lake Forest plant] to work around here, so I thought that if I'm going to go out and work and help my husband, I'm going to work some place right and make money. So I went out there and put my application over there. I got hired in 1972. We went in at 5:00 at night and we worked till 3:30 in the morning. We were working 10 hours a day. But boy when I

got my first check, I couldn't believe it, and they were only paying us, like \$3.80 an hour but we were doing a lot of overtime. We worked Saturdays, too. My first check was way, way big, I was in shock! I thought man, I've never made this kind of money! That was a very good wage, a very good wage! I was making more money than my husband was making. (Consuela, personal communication, July 23, 2009)

The experience of gaining entry into auto plants was not difficult for Latinas. However once they became employed, they soon learned that earning a high wage comes with a high price. They experienced physical and emotional stresses that effected the raising of their own family. For some Latinas understanding and dealing with the auto plant work structure was easy and for others it was more challenging.

Comparing the Auto Plant to a Community with Social Structure

In its simplest form an auto production plant can be described as a community with social structure. This community has overseers, class systems, rules, and cultural norms for its citizens the auto workers. Auto manufacturing companies created and encouraged alienated labor, a combination of Taylorist division of labor and assembly line style production (Milkman, 1997, p. 43). The Taylor System is a theory of management that analyzes production methods for frequent improvements. The system produces a high level of control over employee work activities. Assembly lines create a monotonous, uncomfortable, and extremely boring work environment. Alienated labor is beneficial to a company's profit margin because efficiency increases production and reduces overhead. Management pushes workers to make a certain quota every hour. The more a worker can produce during their shift, the higher the company profits will be. However this can be detrimental to the worker both physically and mentally. Social

structure within the plant is created and maintained by negotiations between the auto company and the United Auto Workers (UAW) union. The UAW represents the interests of hourly auto workers and negotiates new contracts between workers and the auto company. Contracts include rules on work practices such as attendance standards, internal or external employee transfers, and discipline procedures for workers, just to name a few. It is the responsibility of the foreman to run departments according to company policy while at the same time making sure workers follow contract rules. Auto plant production expectations can cause both physical and emotional stress on hourly workers. Female workers seemed to suffer more significantly than male workers in the plant due to the type of jobs women did. Women worked on sewing machines and men worked stocking and checking finished product.

An important issue that was raised by the Latina participants was the long-term health effects on their bodies as a result of years of repetitive factory work. Socorro describes her physical condition:

The effects of the job on the body was especially with the arms. Pulling and twitching our hands and fingers because of the sewing. Now I have foot problems and arm problems. Sometimes my hands go numb. A lot of impact on our bodies! Some people would endure the pain rather than go to the doctor or hospital.

Employees have different kinds of insurance which meant their office visits might be more than others. (Socorro, personal communication, July 24, 2009)

Overseers in the factory are referred to as foremen or supervisors, and management is referred to as “the front” by workers. Plant social structure created a class system of power and control which at times was central to many disagreements between workers and foremen. The relationship between the foreman and hourly workers seemed to be

fluid in that it was subject to change when outside factors are introduced. For example an increase of part orders for a plant affects production goals. Each department has a foreman assigned to oversee workers. Foremen have daily production goals they must meet for their shift. In order for a foreman to meet his daily production goal, his workers must work quickly without stopping the sewing line and put out good pieces. Factors such as an injured worker, a slow worker or bad assembly work could cause production goals to be missed. Bad work also referred to as a “bad piece,” requires a worker to take apart the piece and then put it back together, thus slowing production. Pressure and stress put on foremen to meet production goals by management significantly affects their attitude and supervision of workers. Employee injuries are downplayed by foremen and management without consideration of the physical or mental well-being of the employee. If a worker is off the line because of illness or injury, production goals are not met. Socorro explains about the first time she was injured on the job:

I remember the first time I sewed my finger. I couldn't get my finger out because I was on a 300 model machine and that one you couldn't make it go backwards to put the needle back up. I had to wait for the mechanic to get me out! He had to disassemble the machine and the belt so that he could make it go up. So meanwhile I'm stuck there with my hand in the machine and I was real nervous and I wanted to cry! It [the needle] went a couple of times through my finger and I couldn't get my hand out. There were holes all the way through! So I had to go to medical and all they did was give you a shot for infection and they gave me pain pills! They put ice on it and told me to come back the next day and they

would put ice on and that was it! (Socorro, personal communication, July 24, 2009)

Workers experienced not only physical injuries but emotional distress from management control. Foremen used the threat of being fired as a form of control over workers. It is my opinion, based on the interviews I conducted, that some workers succumbed to the threats more than others. I attribute this partly to the personality type of the worker. When asked about how she felt while working in the plant, Raquel explained her feelings:

I was scared to death to leave my area, because it's like if you do something wrong you might get fired! Some supervisors would say things like, "You better not be taking a long break or you can get fired." They would threaten you. I was real cautious about that and I was terrified to take long breaks. (Raquel, personal communication, July 22, 2009)

During participant observation while interviewing Raquel, I noted that she seemed to be a soft-spoken, nice person. She spoke about helping others whenever she could and discussed her challenges with frequently being taken advantage of. Workers like Raquel were apt to suffer more from the pressure and threats of management than others.

Stress of Plant Closures

Economic downturn within the auto industry results in frequent lay-offs and periodic plant closures. When an auto plant closes, workers are sometimes able to transfer to another plant location. These plants are close by or sometimes in another state. Plant closures are hard on female workers raising a family. Latina workers experience significant affects including marital stress, finding daycare for their children or moving them to a new city. Socorro recalls how she

felt during the time her plant announced it was closing and the situation with her marriage at that time:

Well, I tell you that was very hard. I didn't know what to do because at that time I was thinking of getting out of my marriage because my husband was drinking too much and it was getting more and more on my nerves because he was drinking. It caused a lot of problems because here I am thinking about getting out of my marriage and I won't have a job. What can I do! The only one I had to worry about was my daughter and she was only about nine or ten. My other ones were older. I thought, if I go to another state, who's going to take care my daughter? If I go to Grand Rapids who's going to take care of my daughter? It would be a stranger – I was scared! It caused me a lot of stress, I was so stressed through those months trying to figure out what to do! I worried about my daughter, she was depending on me and I didn't want to just put her with a stranger. (Socorro, personal communication, July 24, 2009)

A significant amount of stress results between workers inside the auto plant. When new workers transfer in from a closed plant, existing workers can be cruel and make the work environment for new workers unpleasant. Socorro describes a confrontation she had with a new female foreman when her plant closed and she was forced to transfer to a new plant:

We had problems even with the foremen, they didn't want us. I remember I ended up on the assembly line and, of course, we [friends from other plant] all look for each other, so we would all ask if things were going okay, if you were fine. We would stop and talk when we could on our breaks to our friends. And then the foreman called me to her desk one time and she said, "Listen! You better stop

your talking.” And I said, “Why, what am I doing wrong?” She said, “I see, every time I turn around there's somebody over there talking to you.” And I said, “So.” She said, “So I don't want anybody talking to you.” I said, “Show me on my contract right now that I can't have anybody talk to me, I also want you to show me where I'm putting out bad parts for you, which I'm not! Am I stopping the line, NO I'm not! So you know what, get me my committee man [union representative] I'm not going to put up with your crap!” And she looked at me because everybody was terrified and my friend Emma said, “Aww you're in trouble now!” I said, “I don't care and people are not going to stop talking. She has no reason, if I'm not putting bad parts off the line! She has no reason.” So I called the committee man and I told him, so he went over and got on her case. After that she kind of became my friend and she gave me a setup job! Which all I had to do was relieve three people and that was it and make sure they had parts. (Socorro, personal communication, July 24, 2009)

There were other common situations that could cause stress for women working in the auto plants. The Lake Forest plant had a reputation of being a “Peyton Place” in which many of the Latina participants described as a place where a lot of people were cheating on each other. Socorro recalls a situation when asked about promiscuity in the plant:

There was a lot of hanky-panky going on there! Even the foremen had a lot of the gals there [that] they were going out with. In fact, back in '69 or '70, there was a foreman who was flirting with girls big time and making it hard on them. In fact I knew this girl that a foreman was after and she said, “No I won't go out with

you.” And before you knew it she got fired, he found a reason to fire her! I told her to go to a lawyer because we knew the reason she got fired was because she wouldn't go out with him, but she never did. There was a lot of sexual-harassment! (Socorro, personal communication, July 24, 2009)

Effects on Family

Latinas experienced a high amount of stress when they were not able to work a daytime work shift to be home for their children. A major contributor to their ability to hold a day shift was the amount of “seniority” they had. Seniority is based on the date you were eligible to join the union. A person was eligible to become a union member when they had worked more than 90 days consecutively and had been laid off longer than they had previously worked. Many of the Latinas in this study were not able to work a day shift because they had low seniority.

This study focuses on stressful events Latinas faced in the work place; however, there were also happy and enjoyable experiences as well. Future literature resulting from this research will examine friendships and coping strategies by Latinas in the auto industry workplace.

Discussion

My Migrant Family

My paternal grandmother was from Brownsville, Texas and my grandfather was from Austin, Texas. They migrated to Michigan with their family. My grandfather “stepped out” by obtaining a job in a small engine manufacturing plant in Riverwood. This enabled them to settle in the Riverwood area and raise their young family. My maternal grandfather brought his family up from Texas as seasonal workers and he later settled in the Briarwood area after finding a manufacturing job. Unfortunately, I never met my maternal grandmother because she died of

leukemia when my mother was eleven years old. She picked in the fields as a migrant worker up until her death at the age of 49.

My Legacy as an “Almost” Latina Auto Worker

Imagine a place in the United States where in the local high school there are only three Latino students in the entire school? Imagine that this same school does not have any African American or Asian students either. With the influx of people coming to the U.S. over the last several decades this seems almost impossible to imagine. For me it was a reality. I grew up in a small town in Michigan that was made up of white, middle class people. My paternal and maternal grandparents migrated from Texas and Mexico to Michigan as migrant farm workers looking for a better life for their families. My parents were born in the U.S. but still needed to work in the fields to help their families get by. I remember being taken to the tomato fields as a child with my mother and paternal grandmother while they worked to make a few dollars per bushel of picked tomatoes.

Needless to say, I had quite a different childhood compared to the other kids in school. For as long as I could remember I was always treated differently in Michigan. I was never encouraged by the school counselors to think that I could or should go to college and do something great with my life. I remember my white friends talking about college prep courses and advice the counselors gave them, but I did not have that support from the school. It was assumed I would get a job in a local factory and work there until retirement age because that seemed to be the only choice we had as Latinos in that town. My parents were auto workers at the local automobile plant and they were always worried about getting laid off. Even though my parents suffered frequently with potential strikes, layoffs, or plant closures, my father wanted and expected me to work at his automotive plant as soon as I graduated high school. The auto worker

tradition was strong in my family. My father believed that manufacturing work helped his parents to move from the poverty of migrant work to a better life when they settled in Michigan. He created an even better life for his own family by gaining entry into the auto manufacturing industry. However, I felt in my heart that I could do something more meaningful with my life which created a strong need for me to figure out how I could get out of Michigan and avoid the fate of being an auto worker. Seven days after I graduated from high school, I boarded a plane to Los Angeles and never looked back. The first 18 years of my life story were deeply interconnected with the auto industry and, as a result, my research interest is on Michigan auto workers. I did not want to be a prisoner of prosperity like my parents. I did not want to experience the ever changing economic roller coaster of the auto industry. I wanted something better for my life. My parents chose the auto industry as career paths because they did not want to work in the fields like their parents did for most of their lives. So like my parents, I looked at them and chose to do what I thought was better. To seek a different work career rather than work “on the line.”

Future Research Goals

The lack of information on female auto laborers, particularly on Latino populations, contributes to the inability to effectively address their many enduring issues. This is especially pertinent given to significant U.S. Latino trends – population growth rate and increasing socioeconomic disparity. I attempt to provide historical data which will show young Latinos that their ancestors have progressed and moved into better economic standing. It is important for Latinos today to know that their families, especially their mothers, have progressed. This will hopefully empower and inspire them.

In order for governmental agencies to begin recovery plans, having a better understanding of the population can increase the success of future support programs such as employment re-training, mental health counseling, and social services. I hope to encourage a process of development and change which will call for greater communication among Latinos themselves. This will strengthen their ability to help each other by discussing common needs and interests as well as assist researchers in social program development to aid with the economic crisis that Michigan and the auto industry is facing. My goal is to take this research on Latina auto workers and tie it into the community. Increasing awareness of Latino history and culture will help provide a greater context for people to better understand Latino issues.

U.S. Census Bureau - 2007 Race and Ethnicity Statistics for Briarwood, MI

Figure 1. Race and ethnicity for Briarwood, Michigan

**U.S. Census Bureau - 2000 Race and Ethnicity
Statistics for Riverwood, MI**

Figure 2. Race and ethnicity for Riverwood, Michigan

Figure 3. Latina focus group, July 17, 2009

Figure 4. Mary (far left) celebrating her 30 year retirement with other retirees.

Figure 5. Martha (second from left) demonstrating against the closure of her plant in 1987.

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