

**The Education of a Latin American Student in the United States:
Diversity, Identity, and Assimilation**

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Bio:

Johnathan Myers is currently a senior anthropology student at the University of North Texas. He will complete his bachelor's degree in the summer of 2006 and then pursue a master's degree in cultural anthropology. His career goals include earning a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology and pursuing a career as a college professor.

Abstract:

This study examines the immigration of a young girl into the United States from South America and her experiences of becoming a part of American society. These experiences, both positive and negative, greatly influenced her decision to focus on a career in education. Many immigrants lose the aspects of their native cultures that once defined their individual humanism. This is apparent in the increase of collective assimilation to American culture in many immigrant groups. My research centered on an individual who embraced her Latin roots and gained a desire “not to study exotic others, but why others exoticised her.”

Introduction

Latin-American immigrants face many obstacles in their pursuit of higher education within the United States. They encounter opposition from many fronts. Oftentimes there are language barriers that compromise teacher-pupil communication. Racial stratification and subordination also pose an obstacle for the student to overcome. Although the United States is a multiethnic land with a common ideology of equality among all of its inhabitants, there is still an underlying ethnocentrism that cannot be subdued. Another barrier raised by American society is the great push for immigrants to assimilate to the commonalities of Western culture. This equates to immigrants trading in their native identity and surrendering to social conformity. This research will address these issues from the perspective of an immigrant from South America, and her success in overcoming these barriers.

My informant emigrated to the Midwestern United States from a small border town in South America when she was thirteen.¹ Upon arrival, she moved in with her sister who had immigrated to the Midwest earlier. My informant attended a private Catholic school through high school and then attended a small private college in the Midwest. After graduation, she moved to the Southwest United States to pursue a doctoral degree. Upon receiving the degree in social science, she moved to another university in the Southwest United States where she is now a college professor.

Cultural Conflict

While attending high school in the Midwest, my informant experienced a level of ethnocentrism that she had never experienced before. When my informant would tell other students where she was from, the students would respond, “Are there people running around with feathers on their heads?” This narrow-minded perspective by fellow classmates isolated my

informant. Another example of such behavior occurred when my informant's high school classmates voted her the student with the best tan. My informant was upset that this was the way in which the school would remember her. This type of behavior was a blow, not only to my informant, but to the American people as well. Nuñez-Janes (2002) states that the ideology of "...Americanism sees that the manifestation of a variety of ethnic identities and cultures as an integral part of the U.S. national identity" (p. 67). This perspective looks at America holistically and sees the people of the United States as they really are; a mixed bag of people from all over the world all tied together by common sociopolitical ideas.

Identity is another area in which my informant faced conflict. My informant identifies herself with the city in South America from which she came. When my informant came to the United States, she became a Hispanic. This was a term with which my informant was not familiar. The term Hispanic is a construct of the American government. Roberto Ramirez (2004) states that "[t]he federal government defines Hispanic as a person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race. Thus, Hispanics may be any race" (p. 3). This term is quite vague. Hispanic is a term that groups together many different people from very different cultural backgrounds. This ethnic nomenclature devalues the identity of many immigrants. The generic taxonomy of humankind used by the United States to distinguish South and Central Americans distances them from the familiar security of their native culture. My informant felt "exoticised" in school. This is one of the pivotal experiences that drove her toward teaching. My informant stated that most students get into social science to study exotic others, but she wanted to study why others exoticised her.

Bilingual education is very important to my informant. She has experienced the constraints of the English-only education system. When my informant first started school in the

Midwest, she knew very little English. The sink-or-swim situation that my informant faced shaped her perspective about the importance of bilingual education and also emphasized its deficiencies. My informant had several experiences throughout her life that made bilingual education a topic of importance. People would avoid my informant because they could not speak Spanish and my informant could not speak fluent English. My informant described a time where she was walking up a stairwell with another international student and the crowd parted. There seemed to be a fear of the unknown among the English-only students in my informant's high school. Another experience that influenced my informant's perspective about bilingual education occurred when she was giving a presentation in graduate school. My informant started to get nervous and her accent became thicker; this led to some laughter from the assembly. My informant felt quite betrayed by the faculty after this incident. The faculty did not apologize for the incident and none of the students showed signs of remorse. This is one of the factors that influenced my informant to become a professor. My informant stated: "I think my responsibility as a teacher, which is ultimately what I am, is to my students. If we aren't here for the students, then who is going to be here for the students?" My informant says that when a student comes to her and is excited about being in school or is discovering new ideas, it reaffirms her career choice. These are the events that give my informant fulfillment. She states that, "just the fact that I get to see a student graduate and move on to other things that they are passionate about is kind of like my vitamin pill, what gets me through the day." These sentiments reaffirm my informant's enthusiasm about teaching and gives retrospective proof that she still has the motivation to make a difference.

Conclusion

My informant overcame many obstacles in her pursuit of higher education. She overcame a language barrier that was not only a learning barrier, but also led to discrimination from fellow students. My informant also held on to her identity even though there were factors pushing her toward assimilation. The events discussed by my informant remind me of a quote from William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*:

If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear as it is: Infinite.
For man has closed himself up till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern
(2005, p. 14).

Humans have a fear of the unknown. They create stereotypes and myths to account for the differences they see in the world and cannot explain. Not until we accept differences can we begin to truly live.

Endnotes

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References

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