

Survival Strategies of *Mexicanas*

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Bio:

Jannell Robles, born and raised in Houston, Texas, is currently a junior at San Jacinto College in Pasadena, Texas. She plans to pursue her studies in Anthropology and Spanish at the University of North Texas. Jannell's interests include issues related to race and ethnicity, Latino/a Studies, Political Science, and Women's Studies. Her research with the National Science Foundation REU Summer Program in Anthropology at UNT concentrates on the survival strategies of *Mexicanas* in the United States. Jannell hopes to continue her research as she completes her BA.

Abstract:

Mexicanas, women who migrated from Mexico to the United States or are of Mexican descent and living in the United States, have unique ways of dealing with life's hardships and struggles. In this research I identify their ways of coping as types of survival strategies. *Mexicanas* use these strategies to preserve culture and to cope with the social and economic differences within and between Mexico and the United States. This research attempts to explain how the strength of their survival strategies and their accomplishments contradict negative views of *Mexicanas*. *Mexicanas* rely on resistance and survival strategies to ensure their well-being. The strategies discussed in this research include *Sobrevivencia* (survival, resilience, resistance), *Valerse por si misma* (financial self-reliance), *Convivencia* (formation of family and community networks), and *La Educación y Consejos* (socialization/education in manners and moral values through advice and story-telling).

Introduction

Mexicanas, women who migrated from Mexico to the United States or are of Mexican descent and living in the United States, have unique ways of dealing with life's hardships and struggles. In this research I identify their ways of coping as types of survival strategies.

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Description of Research

Mexicanas contribute much to their family and community. In order to value and understand *Mexicanas'* beliefs, it is important to realize the strategies used to resist internal colonialism¹ and endure in a social environment hostile to their culture. *Mexicanas* are confronted by a set of social values that regard their culture as deficient or dysfunctional. A recent study of family "...that promoted the nuclear family as the standard, portrayed Latino families as dysfunctional and therefore responsible for their own lack of social progress" (Villenas 1999:4). This study demonstrates a narrow and inaccurate view of Latino families. Critical race theorists argue that "schools teach students of color that what they learn in the homes is primitive, mythical, and backward," and that schools also devalue the viewpoints they bring to the classroom, labeling them "backward, deprived, and deficient" (Villenas 1999:4). It is clear that for the most part schools do not find the experiences of many students of color, including *Mexicanas*, important or relevant to their education. The attitude of not wanting to know or understand their viewpoints might explain why there is such a high dropout rate among *Mexicano* and *Mexicana* students.

Chicana scholars such as Villenas discuss how the educational system positions *Mexicanas* as incapable while providing evidence of their capabilities for engaging in most current forms of literacies, such as computer and reading literacy (Villenas 2005:276). This research focuses on the survival strategies of *Mexicanas* and also their ability to adapt and resist social and economic pressures (Villenas 1999:103). The literature reviewed for this research focuses mostly on working-class mothers who migrated to the United States as married or single (widowed, divorced, separated, never married) women. Most of the literature did not discuss or address the influence of men in the lives of *Mexicanas*. This may be due to the fact that the authors were more influenced by their mothers' experiences than by their fathers' experiences. It may also be related to the additional oppression *Mexicanas* suffer as a result of sexism in contrast to their male counterparts. The majority of the literature reviewed for this research focused on *Mexicanas* living in the United States. Most of the *Mexicanas* whose lives I read about live in towns along the U.S./Mexico border and throughout the states of California, New York, North Carolina, Texas, and New Mexico.

Four Principles of Life

Mexicanas rely on resistance and survival strategies to ensure their well-being. A mother is expected to provide necessities for her child in four aspects of the child's life: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. Providing for the physical aspect includes providing life's most basic necessities for survival such as food, shelter, clothing, and health needs. These physical needs are partly met through financial means. The emotional needs are taken care of by the way mothers help their children cope with their emotions and feelings. The mental aspects are provided for through creativity and development of intellectual potential. The last aspect, spiritual, is developed through a disciplined moral grounding. Providing the necessities that go

along with each theme (physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual) is not just for children, but for adults as well. Furthermore, these four aspects are interrelated needs that *Mexicanas* put much effort and energy into ensuring for themselves and their children.

Sobrevivencia

Chicana feminist theorists identified these four aspects as strategies of *sobrevivencia* used by *Mexicanas* in their daily lives. Sofía Villenas defined *sobrevivencia* as “survival and beyond” (Villenas 2005:274) and “resilience and resistance” (Villenas 2005:275). Other descriptions of this concept are the ability for *Mexicanas* “to survive sexism, class oppression, and discrimination while laying their mark on the world” (Delgado-Bernal 2006:152) and the ability “to endure but also create meaningful lives” (Villenas 2005:275). These strategies include the idea of *valerse por si misma* (financial self-reliance), *convivencia* (formation of family and community networks), *consejos* from elder *Mexicanas*, *la educación* (socialization/education in manners and moral values through advice and story-telling) and spiritual epistemologies (theories of knowledge). In an ethnographic study of Latina farm workers in California, Castaneda and Zavella addressed the impact of a male-dominated work environment on the daily routines of *Mexicanas*. According to one of the women they interviewed, the

...normal work regalia include heavy shirts, baggy pants, sturdy shoes, gloves, hats (often attached to scarves covering their necks), and kerchiefs over their mouths- so they appear cloistered while working, with only their eyes visible... ‘Well the number of women in the fields is much smaller than that of men; we can’t always be in a crew of only women. It’s important to protect ourselves from them (the men) and from what the other women can think. If one walks around showing off her body, then the gossip will get around that we’re not there to pick strawberries but to find men. [2003:135]

The Latina farm workers in California were physically and emotionally drained by the experience of working with a high number of male farm workers. This work environment affected the women physically because they had to wear heavy clothing in order to avoid degrading comments and physical harassment, which in turn could possibly result in overheating and exhaustion of the body. It is also emotionally draining because the women have to deal with the idea that they could be physically harassed everyday at work, their reputation could be at stake, and their dignity could be taken away.

Valerse Por Si Misma

For *Mexicanas*, the ability to be economically self-reliant is tied to the idea of *valerse por si misma* (Delgado-Bernal 2006:149), which describes the capacity to provide financially for themselves and their children. It is a strategy used to ensure survival in case a man is absent or is not providing financial necessities. *Mexicanas* using this strategy do not depend on anyone else to provide for their needs (Villenas 2001:682). For example, a *Mexicana* farm worker in California who was a middle-aged woman, overweight, and a single mother of five children, considered herself to be particularly unattractive and not marriage material to *Mexicanos*. Yet, with the high male-to-female ratio among farm workers in California, she had received two marriage proposals but said, “I can’t trust men. It’s better if I work to support myself” (Castaneda and Zavella 2003:137). Self-reliance allows this *Mexicana* to choose to be the sole provider of her children and herself. It seems that the *Mexicana* knows that, for lack of trust, she cannot rely on a man and therefore chooses not to give a man power over her survival.

Convivencia

Another strategy that *Mexicanas* use to meet the needs of the physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of life is *convivencia*. *Convivencia* is a form of socialization through which

Mexicanas build strong relationships among family and community. *Convivencia* promotes encouragement, empowerment, and reciprocity. This concept is also defined as “how to be together,” “communalism,” or as “communal spaces of teaching and learning” (Villenas 2005:273–275). An example of *convivencia* that promotes empowerment and is a communal space of teaching and learning is described by Delgado-Gaitan (Villenas 2005:274). She speaks of a program made up of a group of Latina mothers designed to help their daughters work to develop computer literacy (Villenas 2005:274). This program challenged the women to develop computer skills and think critically. From the program, the women gained empowerment by learning new skills that enabled them to teach and help their daughters with computers. Therefore, they can play a key role in their daughters’ success in school. The challenge of learning computer skills and gaining that empowerment was both mental and physical as they must train their hands to use computers. This challenge was emotional and resulted in a sense of empowerment by the women.

Delgado-Gaitan also describes an emotional support group for mothers of critically or terminally ill children. This group for Latina mothers served as a tool of encouragement for each other and was centered on the idea of how to be together. The Latina mothers in this emotional support group shared hope and faith with each other by creating tools of spirituality (Villenas 2005:275). Spirituality is a very important aspect of *Mexicanas*’ lives. As Sofia Villenas mentions, *Mexicanas* have strong spiritual epistemologies: “Spirituality is a driving force underlying women’s *sobrevivencia*” (Delgado-Bernal 2006:144).

La Educación y Consejos

La educación is *Mexicanas*’ “funds of knowledge,” which “includes both manner and moral values” (Villenas 2001:674). “Funds of knowledge” are the “resources of education and

knowledge found in Latino/Mexicano households” (Villenas 2001:673). The literal meaning of *educación* in English is education; however, this type of education is very different from formal education. It is used instead to encourage manners and moral values. *Educación* is also “a dialectical form of education because it is inclusive of what is thought and learned in all social spaces, including home and community” (Villenas 2001:674). According to Villenas, for some *Mexicanas* *la educación* was at least as important, if not more so, than the formal education that their children were provided by the schools. “Raising a well-educated child was about teaching *buen comportamiento* (good behavior)...moral education was a collective responsibility and ‘*el pueblo les enseña a vivir*’ (the community teaches them how to live)” (Villenas 2001:16).

To illustrate *Mexicanas*’ understanding of *educación* Villenas quotes Valdes from her book *Con Respeto: Bridging the Distances Between Culturally Diverse Families and Schools*: “For most ordinary Mexican families, individual success and accomplishment are generally held in lesser esteem than our people’s abilities to maintain ties across generations and to make an honest living.” As mentioned before, *la educación* is not formal education but rather it is valuing those who are “educated in the moral sense” (Villenas 2001:13). Mexican families value collective knowledge and success rather than individual success and knowledge. However, *Mexicanas* in the United States are confronted with the American value of individualism. This emphasis on individualism goes against *Mexicanas*’ value of community collectiveness. *Consejos*, according to Sofia Villenas, are “nurturing advice and moral lessons” (Villenas 2001:675). The advice given by elder *Mexicanas* is sought because of their expertise on life experiences—their good *educación*—which in turn helps younger *Mexicanas* deal with the emotions that result from the clash between American and Mexican values.

Research Design

The major stages of this research encompassed data collection, analysis, preparation of a written report, and poster presentation. The method used for the data collection was a literature review, specifically of *Mexicanas* living in the United States. The readings were comprised of essays, articles, and books based on ethnographic studies and theories about *Mexicanas*' lives. Ten books relating to the topic were found at the University of North Texas library. An additional thirteen articles were found by searching through Internet engines such as Anthrosource and other social science search engines. One of the main authors whose work influenced this paper was Sofia A. Villenas, an anthropologist and education professor at Cornell University. Other influential scholars include Vicki Ruiz, a historian in Latino/a Studies, and Concha Delgado-Gaitan, an anthropologist and activist for immigrant Latino education reform.

The analysis of the literature reviewed was arranged based on the common themes of survival strategies found in the readings and their relevance to four aspects of life: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. These four aspects of life were mentioned by a mentor who influenced my thinking about psychology and other disciplines in the social sciences. Also, because a short period of time was given to write this paper, the readings were organized by writing abstracts and keeping annotations. The analysis was done by writing about the interrelatedness of the strategies in daily journals.

Discussion and Personal Reflections on Research

It excites me to read the different ideas and concepts that Chicana feminist theorists have added to the Latino/a Studies scholarly vocabulary. Because I am a Latina student, most of the readings gave me a sense of familiarity because I could relate to them in some way or another. However, initially, the readings seemed a little confusing and unfamiliar to me because I had not encountered a lot of scholarly works concerning the Hispanic population from the Chicano/a

perspective. In the past, I had mainly read about and learned from a Eurocentric viewpoint. Of course, in school I was taught with a Eurocentric curriculum and agenda, one that is claimed to be “objective, historically accurate and universal” (Villenas 1999:4). The Chicano/a perspective has expanded my thinking to a more accurate view of Mexican history and oppression of *Mexicanos/as*. A main reason why I choose to read several of Sofia Villenas’ works is because of her perspective and relationship to her population. I was initially exposed to her work by reading the article “Colonizer/Colonized,” and I was immediately attracted to the Chicana feminist perspective because it was revolutionary and innovative.

Some of my future interests include learning more about Chicana feminist theories and pedagogies. I would like to examine the relationship and communication between teachers and parents for ensuring the success of *Mexicano/a* students. Additionally, I would like to conduct research on stereotypes, beliefs, and perceptions that Americans have of *Mexicanas*’ roles in society. Some future applied work might include promoting understanding to non-Mexican Americans and *Mexicanos* about *Mexicanas*’ contributions to work, family, and community. Through personal experience and this research, I have learned that American society commonly devalues *Mexicanos/as*’ opinions and knowledge. The purpose for this research and perhaps for future research is to promote awareness and understanding about *Mexicanos/as*’ lives in the United States and their roles in American society. This research has been challenging for many reasons: not only was it time consuming because the material was dense and it was the first time I had conducted in-depth research, but it also made me question my beliefs and identity in relations to others.

Notes

1. In order to understand the internal colonialism that *Mexicanas* suffer today, one must understand classic colonialism and the history of how the United States' relationship to *Mexicanos/as* has shifted from a classical colonialism to an internal colonialism. Classic colonialism traditionally refers to the establishment of domination over a geographically external political unit, most often inhabited by people of a different race and culture, where the domination is political and economic, and the colony exists subordinated to and dependent upon the mother colony. Internal colonialism, on the other hand, is the colonization of a group of people by the "common process of social oppression" that developed out of the imperialist era of classic colonialism. Thus as part of the same process, internal colonialism can be viewed as a distinct extension and form of Western colonialism (Almaguer 1971:10). Although now the Chicano's relationship to the White society is an internal colonial one, the Chicano's colonial status came about by a classic colonial conquest.

As is typically the case with European colonialism, the victims of colonization are of a different race and culture and have already developed a social system markedly different from the intruding colonizer. Also true of classic colonial expansion is that the colonizer promoted war for the purpose of gaining control of a geographically external, foreign land. Chicanos were the indigenous people of what are today the Southwestern states and the Mexican-American War was the battle that culminated years of bitter racial strife between the people of Northern Mexico and the United States.

The war's end brought with it the "formal recognition" of differing powers between the conquered people and the victor. It was the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that legally set the future social and political relationship between the two nations. The treaty provided safeguards for the cultural autonomy of the *Mexicanos* by allowing them to retain their language, religion, and culture, plus providing specific guarantees for the property and political rights of the Indo-Mestizo population. In addition to these colonial mandates, the treaty also stipulated that the citizens of Mexico, within the ceded territory, were to become de facto citizens of the United States within one year after the Treaty's ratification. Thus it was the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that became the document of formal colonization for the Mexican in the Southwest (Almaguer 1971:11). The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the North American invasion of Mexico in 1848 and one-half of Mexican Territory was forcibly annexed by the United States. The treaty, among other things, guaranteed the linguistic, cultural, and educational rights of Mexican people who found themselves in conquered territories. Yet like all other treaties with indigenous peoples, this one too has been broken many times over (Villenas 1999:418).

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