

The Remnants of Colonial Difference in the Post-secondary Experience of Chicana/os and Latina/os

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Abstract

The development of a Eurocentric ideology in the Americas is best described by Edward Said's discussion on power in *Orientalism* and Walter D. Mignolo's discussion on the production of knowledge in *The Idea of Latin America*. Due to the prevalence of an ethnocentric ideology in America, our education system has relied on this deficit model to influence how Chicana/os and Latina/os are viewed in institutions of higher education. The deficit model focuses on students' inabilities rather than their abilities and as a result scholars have developed retention models that reflect this ethnocentric view. Vincent Tinto's highly acclaimed model on student departure rests largely on the idea that the student is the primary, if not the only actor in the pursuit of an undergraduate degree, and therefore, he/she must fully integrate into the college environment in order to succeed academically. This paper focuses on the possible effects that assimilation into the college environment can have on the Chicana/o and Latina/o student. Given the projected growth of the Chicana/o and Latina/o population, the process of separating the Chicana/o and Latina/o student from important resources and knowledge provided by the home, family and community may result in the loss of important social capital that will be key in meeting future United States societal and economical needs¹.

¹ According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the Latino/Hispanic population is projected to account for 30% of the nation's population by the year 2050.

Introduction

Despite efforts to increase Chicana/o and Latina/o baccalaureate attainment, Chicana/os and Latina/os are graduating at lower rates than any other minority group in the United States (Oseguera, Locks and Vega 23). In 2006-2007 Hispanics represented 13% of undergraduate students in higher education, and are projected to increase to 39% by 2017 (NCES 2007). In order to better serve future student populations, institutions of higher education need to provide culturally sensitive curricula and programs and move away from educational reforms and policies that have been established for the traditional white, male, middle-class population. Retention theories in higher education privilege a Eurocentric perspective—educational attainment is an individual goal, the student is the only actor in the pursuit of an education. In respect to Chicana/o and Latina/o culture, research has shown that education is viewed as a collective effort among the student, family and community: when a student makes the decision to continue their education, the decision in most cases is made between the student and the parent. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine the continuance of Eurocentric ideologies in North America since the Spanish-Native American encounter and subsequent racialization in Vincent Tinto's model on student departure. Given its foundation, I argue, this model, in turn, hinders Chicana/o and Latina/o students in higher education by employing *subtractive schooling*.

Background

I begin this section by providing a review of factors suggested by literature to contribute to the development of Eurocentric ideologies in the United States and focus on how these factors may have contributed to the Chicana/o and Latina/o educational experience in the U.S.

Historical Perspective. The Americas exist today as a consequence of European colonial expansion. It is important to note that historically speaking, narratives and historical documents of the colonial expansion of the Americas have been written from a European perspective because European colonizers had the knowledge and ability to produce written works in a valid/legal language. Walter D. Mignolo in *The Idea of Latin*

America explains that Indigenous people and African slaves were left out of history because many of their practices were not considered valid forms of knowledge. Because of a heterogeneous population in the Americas—of different race, class, religion, language, and culture—individuals were not only segregated based on purity of blood and skin color but also on their language, religion, knowledge, place of origin, and culture. As a result, this created an ethnocentric view of the world that favored a biased perspective of others, which in turn perpetuated the belief that one group was superior over another (Mignolo 7). People in the Americas were thus categorized based on their similarities and proximity to the assumed model of ideal humanity: a white, Christian, European male.

Mignolo states that in this social configuration, knowledge is carried out in language, and so are social order, organization and value. He relates the production of knowledge and power to those who have ability to produce written works which are thus considered the only valid form of knowledge. Since only a limited few had access to writing only they could contribute to the “idea of America” and everybody else was to adapt to that idea if they wanted to be part of this newly formed society. Edward Said describes this relation between knowledge and power in *Orientalism* where he suggests a Western view of the Orient in which the Western world claims and gains power, control, and knowledge over the perceived other. Even though he developed this theory to describe the relationship between Europe and the Middle East, the idea of “the other” is still applicable to the colonization of people and land in the new world because it legitimizes power for dominating, restructuring and having authority over those who are considered inferior and are often believed to lack valid forms of knowledge. American society, which is but a Western model, privileges a view that shows Chicana/os and Latina/os as “the other” or as those who lack valid forms of knowledge.

The Chicana/o and Latina/o Educational Experience in the U.S.

Because of the marginalization of cultural and ethnic groups in the Americas since colonialism, the United States’ education system has adopted a similar framework. The university environment is greatly influenced by dominant North American culture in that it has the

authority to define group norms and expectations. When a group's culture, values, beliefs and behavior patterns differ from those of the university environment, the university can argue that those specific cultural beliefs are a disadvantage to the student and the university's core cultural beliefs (Castillo, et al. 269).

Research suggests that educational institutions, programs, policies and common practices have relied on the deficit model to emphasize minority, low-income, first-generation students' inabilities rather than their abilities (Green 22). Underrepresented students are viewed as less intelligent than their peers who have initially populated colleges and universities. Policies and programs encourage scholars and educators to view nontraditional students as lacking the ability to succeed in higher education and to believe that they will continue to fail regardless of their skills and knowledge.

Scholars suggest that students' differences are viewed as deficiencies; their language, beliefs, common practices, and everyday life experiences are seen as the root of their educational failure (Gonzales 25). However, the reason minority students are viewed as having educational deficiencies is that the cultural capital they possess varies from the university's own. What this means for Chicana/o and Latina/o students is that their cultural and ethnic identity and upbringing are a disadvantage and contribute to their academic failure.

Assimilation into the U.S. Education System. Chicana/o and Latina/o students are believed to be less prepared than their peers when entering the university, and as a result, scholars believe that the best way for them to succeed in the college environment is by conforming to the university's cultural norms. The most notable literature on college student success is Vincent Tinto's highly acclaimed model on student departure. In *Leaving College*, Tinto discusses that students must separate, transition and incorporate from their past communities to the college community for completion of their education. Tinto argues that past communities—which he defines as typically associated with family and local area of residence—differ from college not only in composition but also in the values, norms, and behavioral and intellectual styles that characterize their everyday life (95). Therefore, students need to

incorporate and adapt to the new norms and behavioral patterns of the college setting that will allow them to successfully complete their college education. Tinto's model on student departure attempts to accommodate the Chicana/o and Latina/o experience into existing theories intended to describe the experience of white college students.

Assimilation. For the Chicana/o and Latina/o student assimilation is a non-neutral process because it is perpetuated through educational policies, laws and curriculum. First, scholars believe that the student's culture and surroundings may be a contributing factor to his/her academic failure; therefore, if the student wants to succeed academically it is crucial for the student to separate from his/her home community that is believed to be surrounded by violence, drugs and gangs. Among scholars, it is the belief that the Chicana/o and Latina/o "culture [does not] encourage achievement, and that failure is not looked upon with disgrace" (Mattos 1997). Second, the student's cultural and ethnic background is not reinforced by the institution through class and curriculum. Class material and lectures are generally not culturally sensitive or geared towards a diverse student population and as a result, the Chicana/o and Latina/o student might not engage in the university learning experience because he/she may not see herself/himself reflected or able to make the connection with the content of the class. It has been argued by scholars that students learn best when they are able to identify and make connections with what they are learning (Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti 2005).

Assimilation, which Tinto refers to as incorporation, requires the students to separate from their family and past community and to break away from his/her traditions, customs, values, language, etc. At the same time, the student must adapt to the university's dominant white American culture in order to succeed academically. Angela Valenzuela argues that "[i]ts widespread application negatively impacts the social, economic and political integration of minorities" (25). Assimilation requires separation from the student's family and past communities for they are not deemed of value and of knowledge to the institution. Tinto's model is subtractive to the Chicana/o and Latina/o student because it takes away the manner in which students make sense of their life and world.

As a result, institutions practice through curriculum, programs and policies what Valenzuela identifies as subtractive schooling: schooling that does not reinforce or allow students to put into practice previous acquired knowledge and resources from home and past communities into their classroom experience. Schooling in this sense is organized to subtract important resources from the Chicana/o and Latina/o students that will allow them to complete their college education. As explained by Valenzuela, “It divests youth of important social and cultural resources, leaving them progressively vulnerable to academic failure” (5). The Chicana/o and Latina/o experience in institutions of higher education are not taken into account because the university setting, including faculty and staff, is predominantly white and in most cases unable to identify with students of color and understand how they view and make sense of their lives, their surroundings and their world.

The Value of the Chicana/o and Latina/o Culture in the Student

Culture and Knowledge. It is important to understand that cultural practices and resources mediate the development of thought (Moll 4). Students become engaged and are drawn to learning when they are able to make a connection and find familiar what they have just learned (Gonzalez 8). The better a student can identify with a topic, the more the student becomes interested in the learning process. The Chicana/o and Latina/o student has been typically defined as “at risk” because of his/her demographic characteristics (Amanti 7). As a result, scholars suggest that educational practices may tend to overlook other practices that represent an important advantage for the professional development of the student. It is important to acknowledge that the Chicana/o and Latina/o student is a multidimensional student with a variety of knowledge acquired by living and negotiating his/her life in two different cultures. In most cases, students are completely fluent in two languages that allow them to produce knowledge for two different groups. Each student comes into the classroom with knowledge and an understanding of the world in ways that make sense to him/her. The Chicana/o and Latina/o student is capable of academic success regardless of his/her background.

In an attempt to validate the Chicana/o and Latina/o students' practices, beliefs, and intellectual styles for classroom integration, *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Household, Communities, and Practices* by Norma Gonzalez, Luis C. Moll and Cathy Amanti tries to represent households and communities in terms of the resources and the knowledge they possess. Their proposal alters the perception of working-class and poor communities as lacking in forms of knowledge and resources for the Chicana/o and Latina/o student. They suggest that we view these households in terms of their strengths and value them as resources that can assist in the education of Chicana/o and Latina/o students (X). With this new perspective, it is possible for educators and administrators to value the knowledge and resources generated and accumulated throughout the student's life. Educators may understand where skills derive from and why they are important to this student population and culture/community as a whole.

The ideology of funds of knowledge allows viewing Chicana/o and Latina/o culture, values, beliefs and intellectual styles as important factors that contribute to Chicana/o and Latina/o baccalaureate attainment. These skills, practices and knowledge are the result of formed and transformed sociohistorical circumstances (Amanti, Gonzalez, and Moll 1). Students, families and communities have learned to adapt quickly to new environments in order to ensure their survival. In their struggle to maintain their personal and cultural identity, they have developed an enormous ability to mobilize and a clear understanding of social relations (Amanti, Gonzalez, and Moll 48). These social relations have become an essential part of their everyday life and survival.

Social Networks in the Family. The social relationships developed between families, friends and community represent a great resource for the Chicana/o and Latina/o household and therefore the student. These relationships provide a safety net and aid in time of crisis for the family by exchanging a variety of information and resources such as finding jobs, housing, and dealing with government agencies (Velez-Ibanez and Greenberg 58). For the Chicana/o and Latina/o youth these social networks provide guidance and support throughout the university experience: from university admissions, academic advising and financial aid to emotional and moral support as the student navigates an unfamiliar

environment. Chicana/o and Latina/o households and students depend on their social networks to deal with the complexity of their environments, and the political and economical challenges (Velez-Ibanez and Greenberg 59).

The mutual trust developed within these social networks result in strong bonds that are often formed with individuals. These bonds result in multiple relations that develop into constant visits that allow individuals to become familiar with each other's households. Children are trusted within these homes that contain other funds and expose them to a variety of funds of knowledge that are passed down to them. Not only are the children exposed to these new funds of knowledge, but they also have the opportunity to experiment with these funds in different environments (Velez-Ibanez and Greenberg 61-62).

Social Capital in the Family. It is these resources and forms of knowledge provided by the family and community that create social capital to the Chicana/o and Latina/o student. Social capital exists in the relations among people; in the family social capital "is the relation between children and parents [and, when the family includes other members, relationship with them as well]" (Coleman S110). Therefore, social capital in the family is a resource for the education of the family's children because the family can provide information about programs, student services and support that otherwise the parent and the student might have been unaware of. These social networks can also mentor students on issues and practices that may not be addressed or practiced in educational institutions. In a three-year study about Chicana/o and Latina/o educational experience in the U.S., Angela Valenzuela interviewed Michelle, a Mexican American girl and her friends, about the advantages of keeping close to their roots. Michelle, whose parents are leaders at a catholic church, organize social activities and create a college fund at their church. The mother, a bilingual teacher, reinforces to Michelle and to her friends that it is important to develop complete fluency in Spanish because according to her "the future is brown" (Valenzuela 155). Michelle's mother views the world through a wider lens and understands what the future holds for her daughter and friends. She understands that living in a diverse country like the United States it is essential to have more abilities than simply speaking and writing in

English. She passes down her knowledge and the resources she has accumulated to Michelle and her friends.

Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital. Social Capital in the family and community play an important role in the creation of human capital for the Chicana/o and Latina/o student (Coleman S109). Human capital is the skills and capabilities of a person that account for the worth or value of an individual in the market. The difference in skill and resources is what sets apart an individual from the competition and makes the individual a better asset. Social capital facilitates productive activity for the individual and allows for an individual to achieve a goal that might have otherwise been impossible for the individual to complete (Coleman S101). For the Chicana/o and Latina/o student, this means that the skills acquired at home such as fluency in Spanish and administration of the household economy will help her/him better serve future U.S. populations. According to scholars these skills and knowledge will be of great significance to meet future U.S. societal and workforce needs because these individuals will be more tolerant towards and understanding of the needs of different cultural groups. As a result, these skills and knowledge will not only represent a great advantage in their development as individuals but in their professional careers as well.

Conclusion

By employing Tinto's model on students' retention to Chicana/o and Latina/o students we are hindering the development of their human capital. In telling Chicana/o and Latina/o students to assimilate to the university's values, beliefs, culture and language, Tinto's model distances them from the funds of knowledge, resources and social capital provided to them that constitute an important advantage in the development of their human capital. Because of the social structure of the university and/or institution of higher education, social capital from the families and communities are much less present and as a result we can expect a declining quantity of human capital in Chicana/o and Latina/o students in pursuit of a higher education. By stripping away the student's socio-cultural identity, the manner in which he/she makes sense of the world is taken away. The everyday experiences that define the

individual and the way in which he/she sees life and makes sense of things is not present in the university experience; instead, it is annulled together with the possibility for the student to succeed academically.

As a result, through this process, Tinto's model enforces a subtractive schooling model for the Chicana/o Latina/o student because it subtracts from the skills, resources and knowledge not taught at school but at home. These skills and resources are key in a foreseeable future in which the needs of a diverse and rapidly growing Chicana/o and Latina/o U.S. population must be met. By telling the Chicana/o and Latina/o student that in order to succeed in the college environment he/she must assimilate, the student is forced to separate from his/her family, friends and community, who up to now have been responsible for almost everything the student knows. In this sense, institutions provide a subtractive schooling to the Chicana/o and Latina/o students by requiring them fit into an American model while stripping away their culture. Institutions of higher education need to better serve diverse student populations to increase baccalaureate attainment so that Chicana/o and Latina/o students can graduate at higher rates in order to meet the future needs of a changing U.S. population.

We need to consider models in education that maximize the diverse make-up of the U.S. culture. One such model is Walter Mignolo's idea of co-existence in which he expresses a need to consider an-other logic, an-other language, an-other thinking when producing new knowledge. In the Chicana/o and Latina/o educational experience this would ensure that the institution equally values the Chicana/o and Latina/o culture and the white American culture. Under this scheme, the Chicana/o and Latina/o student would be seen as equally prepared as her/his white peers and take part in creating new forms of knowledge. The institution would not try to enforce an ethnocentric model way of life, beliefs and thought upon the student. Most importantly, however, the Chicana/o and Latina/o student's social capital—the ideas and ways of viewing and understanding the world—is not dismissed but simply accepted and respected in a process that is beneficial for the individual, the institution and society, a process that best reflects the diversity of American society.

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