Hispanic Women Managers and Professionals: Reflections on Life and Work

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Much of the research on professional and managerial women actually describes the experiences of White women, excluding those of other racial and ethnic backgrounds. This exploratory qualitative study focuses on the life and work experiences of Hispanic women in managerial and professional positions and how those experiences influence their career possibilities. Data from individual interviews of first-, second- and third-generation Hispanic women in the USA are used to illustrate a framework of career possibilities that reflects both cultural and personal perspectives. Implications for further study are addressed.

Keywords: Hispanic women, Latinas, careers

Introduction

The past decade has brought about a higher proportion of White women in managerial positions. However, on the whole, women of colour have not advanced into management as readily as their White counterparts (Catalyst, 1999). Similarly, increased interest in workplace diversity has prompted more gender-based research; but research that includes race, ethnicity and culture along with gender remains limited in comparison (Ferdman, 1999). As a consequence, women from Hispanic origins (Latinas), while growing in number in the USA, remain under-represented in the literature on management and career development. There are likely to be two reasons for this. One is that statistically, there are relatively few Hispanic women in organizational positions of power outside their home countries (Catalyst, 1999). While feminist efforts have assisted the progression of White women in the workforce, many other women still languish behind in gaining opportunities for promotion,

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power and pay (Catalyst, 1999). This is not to imply that White women have yet reached equity with White men in most work settings, but the data suggest that the glass ceiling has moved higher for White women from the managerial level to the executive suite (Powell, 1999). This has not been the case for other women, as evidenced in labour statistics on women in managerial and professional positions. Recent reports reveal that White women hold 38.6 per cent of those positions, while African American women hold 30.6 per cent and Hispanic women lag behind at 22.4 per cent. Data on service positions show the reverse, reinforcing Fouad’s (1995) observation that Hispanic workers often are over-represented in service occupations. Hispanic women occupy 30.3 per cent of service positions, followed by African-American women at 27 per cent and White women at 18.8 per cent (US Department of Labor, 2004). Separated from the White male majority by two counts of difference, their gender and their race or ethnicity, Hispanic women face additional barriers to career progress that their White peers do not.

The other likely reason for the limited literature on Hispanic women/Latinas is that so many cultures are encompassed within those categories that researchers may be uncertain how to approach this multi-dimensional group. To study these women together under an umbrella term may yield some patterns and similarities, but data must be interpreted cautiously, remaining cognizant of intra-group differences. Ideally, researchers would approach each cultural entity separately (e.g. Mexican women and Puerto Rican women), but their limited representation in managerial and professional ranks makes gathering sufficient numbers by specific cultural background challenging (Ragins, 1999). Despite the inherent difficulties, including race and ethnicity in gender studies is essential. As Ferdman (1999) notes, gender is lived in the context of culture. Considering issues of gender outside a cultural context yields an incomplete picture of reality. Racial and ethnic identity and gender roles are intertwined and therefore must be considered together when addressing the life and work experiences of women of colour.

The term ‘Hispanic’ is a designator of race and ethnicity in that it is indicative of some common cultural values as well as some significant within group differences. (This term will be used, rather than ‘Latina’, because it was the descriptor chosen by most of the women in this study.) Values frequently associated with traditional Hispanic cultures include a strong attachment to family, collectivism, fostering harmonious group relationships and well-defined gender roles. Differences include the family’s country of origin, their citizenship status, religion, socioeconomic status and primary language preference (Fabelo-Alcover and Sowers, 1998; Marin and Marin, 1991). Consideration of those similarities and differences led to the following questions: how do ethnic identity and family-instilled values contribute to professional goals among Hispanic women? What structural challenges hinder career options for Hispanic women in professional positions? How do experiences differ between Hispanic women who are immigrants and those who are
residents from birth? These questions are considered through a framework
that addresses the key antecedents contributing to career possibilities.

Limiting this study to one city in the USA is a salient feature of this project. Unlike research focusing on large population centres where Hispanics are the majority minority, in this community they represent under 6 per cent of the total population, less than half the national percentage of 12.5 per cent. This proportional difference results in less urgency to meet the needs of these newcomers and few resources being devoted to their support and acculturation. A limited community infrastructure poses several challenges to first-generation Hispanics. However, this situation is not unique to the location of this study. As the global workforce becomes more diverse, the next phase of exploration must include small as well as large communities to determine what members of under-represented groups encounter as they pursue life and work outside the traditional majority (Cox, 2001). This project responds to that need by focusing on the experiences of a sample of Hispanic women in managerial and professional positions to gain insight into potential interests and needs of Hispanics/Latinas in small community workplaces. It takes the umbrella approach of including women from varied countries of origin, recognizing the limitations inherent in that choice and addressing that issue in the discussion.

Methodology

The dearth of available literature on this varied population and the exploratory nature of this project led to the decision to support this exploratory model with qualitative research (Creswell, 1994). Maxwell (1996) notes that a qualitative approach is particularly useful to obtain the perspective of the participants by gaining insights into their experiences and to better understand both the context in which they act and how that context affects their actions. A phenomenological approach was selected to fit the purpose of this study, describing the life and work experiences of immigrant and US-born women from Hispanic origins (Creswell, 1994). Both life and career experiences were addressed, because past research has noted the importance of family within many Hispanic cultures (Marin and Marin, 1991; Gowan and Trevino, 1998).

Semi-structured individual interviews allowed the women to tell their stories, recognizing the unique cultural experiences of each participant. The questions were developed following a review of the literature and extrapolation from a previous interview protocol used to assess career experiences of African-American women (Hite, 1996).

One researcher conducted all the interviews. The initial contacts were made through referrals from colleagues who were well known in the local Hispanic community (Marin and Marin, 1991). Additional participants were
obtained by the snowball method, with respondents providing the names of others who might be willing to take part in this study.

Each respondent signed a participant consent form and completed a demographic survey data sheet with queries about their personal characteristics (age, marital status, educational level), career involvement (current job title, setting and level and years in the workforce) and generational status (place of birth for respondent and parents).

The latter responses permitted clarification about variations in respondents’ generational history to access potential differences in experiences between immigrants and those born in the USA. The generational categories used are those identified by Marin and Marin, (1991):

1. First generation: born in Hispanic-designated countries (e.g. Latin American, South American or Caribbean countries or in Mexico or Spain);
2. Second generation: born in the USA; parents born in Hispanic-designated countries;
3. Third generation: respondent and parents born in the USA, grandparents born in Hispanic-designated countries.

The interviews were audio taped, transcribed and analysed by the researcher, supplemented by researcher notes. Another researcher, unrelated to this study, also reviewed the transcripts to verify themes.

This was an exploratory project. Consequently, the small sample size and the limited geographical range selected for participant recruitment may limit the generalizability of data from this study to the larger population of Hispanic women.

Participants

Ten women participated in this study. Five were first generation: two from Puerto Rico, two from Mexico and one from El Salvador. This variation permitted a wider perspective than would be possible if all respondents were from the same country. Four were second generation and one was third generation. Comparison of the participants by those who immigrated (first generation) and those whose were born in the USA (second and third generation) showed the two groups as demographically similar on several points. By age, two in each group were between 25 and 35 and three in each were between 36 and 46. One in each group was single. Three first-generation participants were married; one was separated. Among second- and third-generation respondents, four were married. Parallels existed as well regarding the levels of education they attained, as indicated in Table 1.

Some differences among participants were evident in job levels, although none of the respondents held positions of economic power. One woman was the executive director of a small social service agency and another owned
a small independent bookstore. Comparing the two groups, more first-generation respondents held non-managerial positions and two of those held positions that focused particularly on service to the local Hispanic population (see Table 2).

The framework

The framework incorporates Arbona’s (1995) observation that cultural factors ‘expected to impact the career development and occupational behavior of Hispanics include acculturation level, ethnic identity, race and the experience of discrimination’ (p. 41). The focus here is on aspects that influence career possibilities for Hispanic women in a majority non-Hispanic society (see Figure 1). The factors are grouped by individual cultural perspective (including ethnic identity), acculturation and structural barriers (including race and discrimination). Each will be described and illustrated with interview data.

Individual cultural perspective

The cultural perspective in this framework is made up of a combination of family-instilled values and ethnic identity. Values regarding family

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**Table 1: Respondents by generation and education level**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Post high-school study</th>
<th>Associate degree</th>
<th>Bachelor’s degree</th>
<th>Master’s degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td></td>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* Working towards a Bachelor’s degree.

**Table 2: Respondents by generation and current position**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Non-management</th>
<th>Middle management</th>
<th>Top management</th>
<th>Business owner</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Second</td>
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responsibilities, work and persistence came up often in this study as factors that influenced career goals. While discussions of the importance of the family and work–life balance are relatively recent in US organizations, values regarding and learned from family have long been a critical reference point in traditional Hispanic cultures (Gomez, 1994; Marin and Marin, 1991) and that was evident in this group of study participants.

The importance of family was identified as a key value by all ten of the interviewees. Among those born in the USA, references about the centrality of family were clear but general in nature, with comments like ‘family was first and foremost’, ‘it is the core’, or as one woman stated, ‘when anything major happens in my life, or even small things, first thing I do is get on the phone and call my family.’

First-generation respondents also cited the importance of family, but the references came in the form of illustrations of direct dependence on one another, such as working in the family business, taking responsibility to obtain food for everyone during difficult financial times, or being the caretaker for siblings. One woman described her continuing sense of obligation to the family’s financial stability, noting, ‘I have to make sure that I can help my mom support herself, because she wouldn’t be able to do it without me, that my brother will be okay to go to college and that I will be able to help him before I can actually think about having kids or having my own marriage.’

In many cultures, family roles may complicate career choices for women, resulting in decisions to turn down advancement opportunities or to select jobs that accommodate family priorities (Hite and McDonald, 2003). However, Bingham and Ward (1997) observe that women from cultural groups

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**Figure 1: Career possibilities framework**

- **Cultural perspective**
  - values: family, work
  - ethnic identity

- **Acculturation**
  - language proficiency
  - Socioeconomic status

- **Career possibilities**
  - Language limited
  - Culturally specific
  - Mainstream
  - Entrepreneurial

- **Structural barriers**
  - representation
  - discrimination

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that place primary childcare responsibility on the mother figure experience more home–career conflicts. In this study, for example, one participant noted that spending several years out of the workforce as a stay-at-home mother had hindered her career. Another said that her children accompanied her to many work events because of her husband’s traditional beliefs that children belong with their mother. A third woman was not a parent but played a significant role in supporting her family. While she accepted her situation, she also recognized its limitations, noting particularly that it had slowed her educational progress:

Even though for me it has helped to have responsibility of home, I feel sometimes like it has hindered to a lot of my dreams, a lot of the stuff I wanted to do.

Balancing work and family needs is a common theme in gender research, but strong cultural expectations regarding marriage and motherhood add another dimension and can complicate choices for Hispanic women who are striving for career success while maintaining their cultural heritage.

Another value acknowledged among many of the participants from both groups was the combination of a strong work ethic and persistence. Some simply described doing some kind of work from an early age. Others recalled how hard their parents had worked, setting an example. One second-generation woman mentioned getting the clear message it was a privilege to have a job. A first-generation respondent said, ‘I know if you want to have something in your life, you need to work very hard.’ Several referred to being poor, but at the same time, they described responses that showed their resilience; for example, working in more than one job or moving the family across country to seek more work opportunities. This sense of tenacity was reflected in similar statements from parents recalled by two respondents, one first-generation and one third-generation: ‘you want to do it, you can do it’, and ‘there’s nothing you can’t do once you set your mind to it’. While phrases like these are common in many cultures, they are particularly poignant in the context of under-represented groups that are more likely to face struggles in pursuit of those goals.

Four women, one first generation and three second generation, specifically cited the value of self-determination and persistence. One respondent mentioned both: ‘I’ve always been very driven so I knew what I wanted and I had a family that encouraged me.’ Another woman’s tenacity was prompted by wanting to defy stereotypes about Hispanics. She said,

Society looked at Hispanics not going very far in their education and in jobs. They looked at them as having factory work positions and entry level positions and I wanted to be above that. I wanted to be out of that norm. … I wanted to show them that no, that’s not so. That’s not true. Even if it’s one person, I think it will show them.
This statement leads to the other dimension in the individual and cultural perspective, ethnic identity. Ferdman and Cortes (1992) describe ethnic identity as ‘the strength and value of a person’s identification with an ethnic category’ (p. 250), meaning, in this instance, how central is one’s particular ethnicity to her persona. Their data show that while Hispanics might feel pride in and desire respect for their cultural heritage, they want to be viewed as individuals, not stereotyped or seen as one-dimensional due to their ethnic background. A second-generation woman in this study provided a revealing example of this, noting that she liked the fact that her ethnicity was not readily identifiable to her colleagues at work, due to her unaccented English and her German-origin married name. She further explained that her family stopped speaking Spanish at home when she was a youngster because ‘my dad wanted us to not have that barrier of the accent that he had to live with.’

Another second-generation participant described several techniques she used to fit into mainstream culture, to avoid being type-cast as an outsider. She provided the following details about how she approached situations:

I observe the individuals and try to do the ‘similar to me’. Engage in behaviors that they would engage in and only have conversations that I know they would be comfortable in, so a lot of times those people miss a lot of my personality and who I am and what I could bring to the company.

Even seemingly simple conversations sometimes posed a challenge:

Even when I would have conversations with people at work and we would talk about what we had for dinner, I would make up what I had for dinner because what I really did have was beans and rice and something that, you know, was ethnically appropriate, versus what everybody else was talking about, steak, potatoes.

Interestingly, Keefe and Padilla (1987) note that pride in one’s background does not necessarily diminish, despite differing generational status (recency of immigration or distance from first-generation immigrants). Typically, the first generation is assumed to be most connected with their culture of origin. However, they observe that while some third- or fourth-generation Mexican Americans may have lost details about their cultural origins and may not speak Spanish, they continue to be proud of their heritage. This may result in a literal spanning of cultural boundaries. Some describe this ability to cross from one culture to another as ‘bicultural’, but others find that term inadequate, preferring the phrase ‘cultural blends’ to capture the complexity and the negative as well as the positive aspects of crossing cultures (Keefe and Padilla, 1987).

Realistically, women in this study lived within two cultural contexts. The extent to which they felt conflicted, or completed, or both by this experience was often a function of their generational status as well as their ethnic
identity. For example, among first-generation respondents, one stated that sometimes she felt pulled between the two cultures, but that she had learned to adapt. Another was effusive, ‘I love everything about the two cultures. I couldn’t see myself just being here or just being in El Salvador. I think it would be boring.’ She went on to explain that she liked the openness of US culture, but she was glad to have the comfort of her own food, music and language.

Two participants made statements that were nearly parallel in expressing the integral nature of their cultures in their lives, but one was describing her home culture and the other was describing her dual cultural identity. The first-generation respondent stated:

My culture is my way of living. It is part of who I am. It is not a thing I can hang in the closet and then put it on. It’s who I am.

The second-generation woman started by saying that she and her siblings were very Americanized, but she had kept her Salvadoran culture as well:

It’s who I am. It’s not that I think about it. It’s just who I am. I am part of two cultures and it just can’t be one without the other. It’s like it’s one culture.

Another second-generation respondent echoed the sense of being very comfortable with her personal integration of two cultures. These illustrations lead to further discussion about acculturation.

Acculturation factors

Acculturation is a complex process of cultural interaction resulting when ‘an individual or group of individuals from one culture enters a different culture for an extended time’ (Domino, 1992, p. 57). Arbona (1995) puts this topic into a work context by connecting level of acculturation with career development and suggesting that language proficiency, socioeconomic status and educational attainment are directly related to the acculturative process.

Certainly, language proficiency and work opportunity showed a direct relationship among participants in this study. Three of the first-generation respondents described early US work histories made up of jobs that required minimum skills, yielded low pay and offered few if any opportunities for advancement. Coming to a new place and starting from nothing, with limited fluency in English, often means limited employment options. This may be less likely in cities with large ethnic neighborhoods that become almost self-sustaining enclaves, but it is a key factor when non-English speakers are a small minority in a community. One job option mentioned by first-generation participants was work that centered on interaction with the local Spanish-speaking population, for example, assisting newly immigrating families in a social service agency or being the contact for non-English speaking
customers at a retail call center. These were poorly paid jobs with limited futures, but they required proficiency in Spanish, a skill these women had. These early jobs provided transitional employment while the women become more fluent in English. As one participant recalled, ‘My English was very, extremely limited back then, but I was in the international department, so most of the calls were in Spanish, so that kind of helped.’ Participants in this study typically left these jobs as their English skills improved and other opportunities became available. However, for those who arrive with few economic resources, hoping to find financial relief in the land of opportunity, spending months or in some cases years in these positions perpetuates their low socioeconomic status.

Closely linked to economic stability is educational attainment. Values about the importance of education and opportunities for such pursuits vary within and across cultures, as illustrated by participants in this study. For some, higher education was simply a given in life. The two respondents from Puerto Rico stated that valuing education was reinforced not only by their families, but also within the larger context of their national culture, because it was very difficult to compete for good jobs without a college education in Puerto Rico. For both of them, higher education was perceived as a necessity, not a choice, reinforced by the fact that extended family members held college degrees. One recalled her parents’ clear support of academic preparation:

Since I was growing up, you know, he (father) was always emphasizing, ‘you need to be self sufficient. You cannot be dependant on anybody and the only way that you can do it is by getting your education.’ And my mom always said, ‘you know, the only thing that people cannot take away from you is what you know.’ So, I always remember that.

This view also was expressed by one of the second-generation participants whose parents emigrated from El Salvador. She recalled:

It was never an issue of whether you are going to go to college or not, it was from when you were little, you are going to go to college. You know, ‘what do you want to be when you grow up?’

She prefaced that statement by noting that her father, an accountant in his home country, did not fit the stereotypical view of a Hispanic male because he fostered independence and achievement in his daughters.

Three of the second-generation participants also described fathers or grandfathers who defied traditional cultural stereotypes in their support of education for women. In each of these instances, the father/father figures themselves had left school in sixth or seventh grade, but encouraged education for the respondents, perhaps as a means to a better life for the next generation. Cardoza (1991, p. 133) reinforces this view, noting, ‘educational attainment is one of the most important means by which to gain
socioeconomic mobility and independence for women. This is particularly true for minority women.’

Three of the first-generation women also pursued education with the intention of making a better life, but two of them did so with only mixed support from parents. One of the respondents from Mexico described her father’s disdain for higher education as a reflection of his own family’s practice of leaving school early and marrying young. She always had enjoyed school, so she persisted anyway, with the encouragement of others in the community and the example of her mother’s hard work to spur her on. Another participant recalled that her father’s positive view of education was neutralized once her parents divorced because her mother, struggling financially to support the family, was not supportive of higher education. She cited that struggle, along with encouragement from a close friend, as a motivating force for her own pursuit of a college degree:

[A]fter you suffer so much and you go through so much, growing up with a single parent and you know that she’s trying very hard, but without an education, I mean, what, she can make, what, $7–7.50 an hour? You know that you have to try as hard as you can to try and get an education and get ahead so that your kids, you can help them too. And I think it’s a very difficult situation. I think that many of us desire to continue in education to have a good job, have all these dreams, but it’s a really tough one and you have to sacrifice a lot of things, even your own happiness at times.

The third-generation participant provided a different perspective of education. She stated that in her large family of 14 children there simply was no money for college. While she and her siblings were encouraged to complete high school, additional education was not emphasized. Cardoza (1991) notes this viewpoint among some Hispanic families that support the idea of education but limit their expectations to reflect their economic reality. In contrast to those respondents who sought additional academic preparation as a way to improve their economic opportunities, success for this woman meant getting into the workforce early to begin earning money. She later completed a secretarial school course of study to widen her job prospects and eventually started her own business.

Despite personal values that foster tenacity and resilience and the acquisition of skills that may smooth the way for acculturation, members of under-represented groups often face additional challenges. In seeking employment possibilities, the work environment becomes another factor for consideration.

**Structural barriers**

Structural barriers in society and in organizational systems frequently restrict progress for under-represented individuals entering a majority culture.
Challenges range from the discomfort of being among the few and finding limited resources in place to assist your transition to the more insidious practice of discrimination. Participants cited experiences on both ends of that spectrum. A first-generation respondent provided an example of the former when she described her rationale for choosing to relocate within her company to a different part of town:

[It] caught my attention because there were all those minorities and I said, ‘There I won’t feel alone.’ You know ‘cause you walk downtown and with these big people, they are so much taller than me, because I am too short, Hispanic, black hair ... I mean, there are not many people that look like me. I mean, you have like White, tall, blue eyed, you know, these beautiful blonds, you know, with their suits. And they don’t talk, I mean, they’re just serious, they just pass you by and so I said, ‘Maybe I’m looking for a change and maybe (new location) would be it.’

Just as early gender studies often refer to the first women to enter male-dominated organizations as ‘pioneers’ forging new trails, the women in this study were part of a pioneering minority in a community in which one ethnic majority predominated. Similarly, they often found themselves as tokens, needing to prove and re-prove themselves, and sometimes wearying from the task.

At the other end of the spectrum of structural barriers, one second-generation women gave this account of what she perceived as ethnically based discrimination:

It’s always there and sometimes it’s so subtle you don’t know if it’s you over-reacting ... but the words being used and kind of the expressions do have those connotations. And you sit there wondering, okay, were they trying to slip a rib in or trying to knock you down a little bit, or was that just something in conversation that they didn’t really realize that that part was offensive? So that’s something that’s constantly on your mind.

She went on the give a specific example from earlier in her career:

It was always an excuse, always an excuse as to why I wasn’t suitable for the promotion and I would watch the people that were getting the promotions that were less qualified, there for less periods of time and then I looked at the structure of the organization as far as the environment ... it was all female, male Caucasian people. And I started to see the struggles that other minorities were having. So, nobody ever really came out and said, ‘you’re Mexican, you’re not going to get this job.’ However after lots of no’s, no’s, no’s and you’ve got all this education behind you and you’ve got, you know, everything that is needed, you start to wonder what’s really the problem.
It is likely in this situation that subtle or aversive forms of discrimination were operating and characteristically, were difficult to detect or describe (Dovidio et al., 1992), leaving the individual uncertain about what action to take and disheartened about future possibilities. Another woman acknowledged experiencing discrimination but talked about subtle negative references that often were difficult to discern, saying that when faced with such an instance, it was ‘hard to know when to take it seriously and when to let it just roll off your back.’ Another first-generation respondent summed up the lack of control in the situation by saying,

Bottom line, because of being a minority, I don’t have any other choice but to show them that I can do it.... So that means working extra hard and doing as much as you can from the heart, even when you don’t want to, try and do it.

Career possibilities

Depending on their socioeconomic status, new immigrants settling into communities with little Hispanic representation often find few formal support mechanisms in place. A common first step is finding work to gain financial stability. As noted previously, socioeconomic status, language facility and educational background will be key factors in determining the opportunities available to new job seekers and will make a difference in the urgency with which positions are sought. Of necessity, they frequently take jobs beneath their education and ability level to cover their immediate financial obligations. This is not by choice, but in response to entering a society that may not recognize their professional certifications or that requires a level of language proficiency that is not always within the grasp of newly arrived workers. Typically, these initial jobs will be only temporary until networks are established and their English competence is strengthened. The respondents in this study clearly noted the importance of informal support and encouragement from their teachers, family and colleagues to foster their career progress and pursuit of professional goals.

Once a reasonable level of financial stability has been accomplished, women from Hispanic subgroups may find a different type of barrier emerge. Bonilla-Santiago (1992, p. 7) observes that Hispanic women may feel pulled by the conflicting goals of ‘success in the mainstream and attachment to the Hispanic culture’. Fitting in by these means requires abandoning — at least temporarily — the goal of bicultural efficacy (LaFromboise et al., 1993, p. 404), that is, ‘the belief, or confidence, that one can live effectively and in a satisfying manner, within two groups without compromising one’s sense of cultural identity.’

One way that Hispanic women may attempt to bridge this gap is to focus their career efforts on culturally specific work. As organizations face a more diverse workforce and customer base, interest in diversity expertise is
growing, even in small and mid-sized communities. A first-generation and a second-generation participant in this study held positions of this type, co-ordinating and providing services for Spanish-speaking clients in their respective organizations. The second-generation woman, fluent in both Spanish and English, noted she made a deliberate choice to focus her career on cultural issues, although she already had a promising career path in another field. She explained:

It goes back to that there are not that many Hispanics here.... I needed something else to take me out into the community to give me a more visible position where I could help more people.

Although more organizations are expressing interest in diversity (Weiner, 1997), the concern arises that even the professional level of culturally specific employment might hinder the opportunities of those who choose that path because it isolates them from the organizational mainstream. Holvino (2000) notes that Hispanics hired to fill a particular niche may suffer from ghettoization and may not be able to move out of that specific area to advance in their careers. Just as the glass ceiling has long been recognized as an informal but firm barrier to upper management for (White) women, will culturally specific positions, even those at a professional level, limit the career progression of Hispanics by holding them in a cultural enclave? The women in this study who had chosen this path had been in those positions a relatively short time, so the long-term effect on their careers remains to be seen.

Certainly, many women from Hispanic subgroups do not choose culture-specific positions, but they may face other hurdles in their pursuit of career opportunities. Institutional biases in some organizations make entry and advancement challenging for those who are not part of the traditional majority and that may be exacerbated if one speaks in accented English or has a dark complexion. Particularly in communities with proportionally small numbers of Hispanic constituents, Hispanic women who hold managerial or professional positions may find themselves as token employees, susceptible to stereotyping and isolation. Others, like one woman in this study, may opt out of potential organizational restrictions to choose an entrepreneurial path. In all instances, the career possibilities for women from Hispanic subgroups will reflect their cultural disposition and acculturation level as well as their personal values and needs.

Conclusion and implications

As Fouad (1995) indicates, the relative dearth of rich research data on the career behavior of Hispanics requires that early studies be exploratory in nature. This study began with questions about how cultural and family-instilled values, structural barriers and generational status influence career
options. The framework represents a preliminary step in learning how these factors might shape career options for women of Hispanic subgroups. Using the framework with qualitative data, this study found unique individual paths as well as some patterns in how the identified factors affected careers possibilities. Not surprisingly, acculturation factors were more relevant to the first-generation respondents than for their second- and third-generation counterparts. The influence of ethnic identity and work–family values were salient for all generational groups. Sadly, so were structural barriers, whether stemming from the discomfort of always being in the minority at work, or from actions that represented subtle discrimination. Further exploration with a larger sample is likely to reveal that the latter is experienced more often by those who physically or behaviorally appear less like the traditional White majority (Cox, 1993).

The varied observations expressed throughout this article underscore some of the challenges of studying career issues for women from Hispanic subgroups. Overall, while revealing some similarities, the data also reinforce the need to recognize that intra-group variation is always a factor when addressing perspectives and behavioral patterns. This is particularly so when an umbrella term like ‘Hispanic’ or ‘Latina’ is used to refer to members of different cultural backgrounds. Only by understanding more about the differences as well as the similarities can we begin to maximize opportunities for all women to reach their potential. While there are many possibilities for additional research addressing women (and men) from Hispanic subgroups, future research suggestions generated from this study include:

- Vertical and horizontal empirical studies, with the former comparing the career experiences of female immigrants from a particular country with those of second- and third-generation women from the same country of origin and the latter comparing the career progress of second- and third-generation women from different ancestral backgrounds.
- Qualitative studies that focus on entrepreneurial women from Hispanic subgroups, noting differences by family country of origin, generational status and type of business or industry.
- Longitudinal research on Hispanic women in culturally-specific jobs to determine how that choice affects their long-term career paths, again delineated by generational status and family country of origin.
- Research that focuses on the effects of structural barriers, like tokenism and discrimination, on the career progress of Hispanics/Latinas and how their experiences compare with those of African-American women.
- Similar studies with men that would provide additional comparison data.

Research focused on the career progress of Hispanic subgroup members has the potential to enhance diversity efforts within organizations as well as to contribute to a more expansive understanding of career development. As Betz and Fitzgerald (1995) note:
Although a multicultural focus and emphasis within career psychology primarily enhance the quality of services to members of previously neglected groups, the entire field of career psychology will gain from the integration of the values and strategies of other cultures. (p. 276).

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Note

1. In this article, the term, ‘Hispanic’ refers to those who were born in or whose family roots go back to a Spanish-speaking country (e.g. Latin America, South America, the Caribbean, Mexico, Spain) as noted in Marin and Marin (1991). It was the descriptor selected by eight of the ten participants in this study. Both other participants preferred terminology that includes their country of origin. The author recognizes that some individuals prefer to use a more specific descriptor that recognizes the family’s country of origin or, if choosing a general term, might prefer Latina.

References


