

Chapter 5

“*Sí, Se Puede Educar*”: Impacts on the Classroom Environment from the Perspective of a US-Born, Latino Male, Religious Minority Faculty



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The Spanish phrase “*Sí, se puede*” was coined by Latina/o activists Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chavez. When translated in the correct context, it means “Yes, it can be done.” This inspiring motto helped unite Latino/a migrant farm workers in California’s Central Valley and Arizona in the fight against exploitation, unfair wages and horrendous work conditions. This phrase has not only been adopted by other civil and labor rights Latino groups around the country, but it has also been transformed to create new meaning for the children of those migrant farm workers who are searching for a better education, many of whom have made their way into my classroom. The Spanish word “*educar*” means “to teach” or “to educate,” but its scope is more social than academic. The Latino cultural value of “*educación*” or “*ser bien educado*” (depicted in the literature as “*ser buen educado*,” but corrected grammatically in Spanish here) connotes being well-mannered, respectful and having high morals (Turcios-Cotto & Milan, 2013). From my lens as an educator, the combination of these two terms signifies an empowering responsibility to not only teach aspiring Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) clinical skills, but also to encourage the underrepresented, to educate students about social justice issues and to help students learn how to respect and even positively esteem those who are different from them.

This chapter is about my experiences as a tenure-track faculty at Fresno State University. I will describe the social location of my macrosystem and ecosystems (department and classroom) while taking into account a Latina/o critical race theory perspective (Irizarry, 2012) and will then describe the changes I have experienced with my development over time as a Fresno State faculty. In addition, I will discuss the social interactions in my social location and describe how I use my power to

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influence my students. Lastly, I will share what I feel needs to change in the education system in order to account for my cultural-social location.

While this chapter focuses on issues and experiences from a Latino perspective, it should be noted that the choice in the term “Latino/a” is used very deliberately. The term “Latinx” has grown and gained lots of popularity in different fields in the social sciences and education; while I empathize with the “Latinx” movement to challenge the male dominance of the Latino culture and to be more inclusive of LGBTQ individuals (deOnís, 2017), the “Latinx” term does not represent my personal experience as a Latino male with stronger ties to my Mexican and Argentine heritage. To me, the term “Latinx” is an anglicization of my beautiful, native Spanish language and represents another form of colonization in the linguistic sense. In my experience, the term “Latinx” is completely incomprehensible to most Latino/as outside the USA, and I would prefer to give preference to the more marginalized Latino immigrant group than to the more privileged US-born Latinos who insist on the Americanized term. I have no problem using the term with those “Latinx” individuals who choose it for themselves but would also like the same consideration and choice and would not like to be lumped into that label.

Eco-developmental Theoretical Framework

Eco-Developmental theory—an integration of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1979) and classical developmental theory (e.g., Braveman & Barclay, 2009)—has been useful in describing experiences of Latinos in the USA, in previous literature (Prado et al., 2010). Consequently, Latino/a experiences are influenced by the interacting elements of the individual’s ecosystem, development over time and social interactions (Prado & Pantin, 2011). The two main ecosystems relevant to my experience with regard to my social location are the microsystem, depicting the influences of my family, church community and school, and the macrosystem, which comprises my cultural experience and the sociopolitical climate of the USA. Changes in my cultural and professional development over time will be presented, and the social interactions that have most shaped my social location in my role as an educator at Fresno State University is discussed.

Identity as a US-Born Religious Minority and Latino Male

Even though I was born in the USA, I identify as a Mexican Argentine and not as an American. My father is from Argentina and my mother is from Mexico. While the Spanish language was my first language, it quickly became dominated by the English language due to microsystemic influences (e.g., school, friends, television, etc.) in my early childhood. I was born in Provo, Utah, but I was raised in Houston, Texas, which I still consider my home and where I come from. Like so many other

Mexican Americans, I too felt that I was not Mexican enough to be accepted by the Latinos in my community, and simultaneously, I felt rejected by those who challenged my “Americanness” based on the color of my skin and Latino features. But most of the ethnic discrimination I have personally experienced has been at the hands of police officers. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to recount the many negative experiences I have had as a male of color with police officers, it is sufficient to say that I am still extremely triggered and have real visceral reactions when I see police officers, especially with their flashing lights.

The importance of spirituality is a very commonly held cultural value among many Latinos (Falicov, 1998); my family was no different in that regard. However, my family veered from the stereotypical Catholic background that so many other Latinos cling to. I am a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. People might be more aware of the nickname given to us by others—“Mormons”—but it should be noted that we are not the “Mormon Church”; that church does not exist. Growing up in the South, I remember feeling like I had to defend my faith against many who believed that we were a cult or a sect and not even really Christian. I guess this is part of the reason Russell M. Nelson, president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, publicly made an announcement reaffirming the actual name of our church and asking members and nonmembers alike to refrain from referring to us as “Mormons” (Weaver, 2018). The Church of Jesus Christ (acceptable abbreviation; Weaver, 2018) has also received a lot of criticism from people who say that it is a US- (and particularly White-) dominated religion. However, people might not realize that since the year 2000, there are now more members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints outside than inside the USA, and that Spanish, not English, is the most widely spoken language in the Church today (Todd, 2000). Much of my “*educación*” (Turcios-Cotto & Milan, 2013) comes from this religious perspective.

Scholars have historically tried to understand Latino culture and parse out gender roles according to their own perceptions; within those perceptions, Latino males have been labeled with the term “machismo” (Ingoldsby, 2006; Moreno, 2007). Aggression, excessive drinking (alcohol), violence, hypersexuality and promiscuity have been prominent embodiments of this term throughout the literature (Ingoldsby, 2006; Moreno, 2007). For example, Ingoldsby (2006) stated, “... the preferred goal is the conquest of many women. To take advantage of a young woman sexually is cause for pride and prestige, not blame, and some men will commit adultery just to prove to themselves that they can do it. Excepting the wife and a mistress, long term affectionate relationships should not exist. Sexual conquests are to satisfy male vanity. Indeed, one’s potency must be known by others, which leads to bragging and storytelling. A married man should have a mistress in addition to casual encounters. His relationship with his wife is that of an aloof lord-protector” (p. 282).

These degrading and destructive narratives are extremely offensive to me. Unfortunately, the Latina female gender role is not much more favorably described in the literature; Latina women are often characterized as being weak, submissive, subservient and self-sacrificing through the term “marianismo” (Ingoldsby, 2006; Moreno, 2007). But if this is the rhetoric that service providers and educators are

ascribing to, then it would make perfect sense why Latinos are underserved and even discriminated against by those service providers and educators (e.g., Irizarry, 2012). I feel like I have spent a great deal of time fighting against negative perceptions and stereotypes of Latinos, and Latino men in particular, all my life. As a licensed clinician and an educator in a MFT training program, I have strived to challenge those assumptions and pretenses and replace them with ones that are more conducive to serving Latinos (Falicov, 2010).

The Ecosystem of My Current Social Location

After completing my doctoral degree from Brigham Young University (BYU), I accepted a tenure-track position as an assistant professor at California State University, Fresno (more commonly known as Fresno State University or FSU). Fresno, California, is a diverse city with a high concentration of Latino/a migrant farm workers, many of whom are undocumented. My career at Fresno State started around the same time that Donald Trump was running for president of the USA. I remember seeing his anti-immigrant and anti-Latino propaganda and thought in my mind that no reasonable US citizen would really vote for him. I was dumbfounded and shocked when he actually won the election. In that moment, the US flag morphed from a symbol of freedom into a symbol of oppression and intolerance to me. I started my faculty position in this tense and adversarial macrosystem at Fresno State University. From an eco-developmental perspective (Prado et al., 2010), I was expecting that the shift in my microsystem—that is, coming from a more homogeneous environment in Utah, where I completed my graduate work, to Fresno, California, where more people looked and spoke like me (Latino/as)—would be an “easier” shift, but it was not. The “*Sí, se puede*” motto was put to test.

When Trump became president, there was a drastic decline in the number of Latino clients seeking treatment at our very own Fresno family counseling center, which is where our graduate students receive their practicum hours. I remember many Fresno State students crying and worrying, fearing the disruption of their families and the deportation of their parents. But I also remember, insensitive White students in Make America Great Again (MAGA) attire harassing, taunting and belittling other Latino students. On one occasion, Fresno State held a celebration to honor the statewide holiday Cesar Chavez Day, which is observed in memory of the Central Valley native Latino who cocreated the “*Sí, se puede*” motto. This celebration was disrupted by Trump-supporting Fresno State students who rudely interjected and protested, expressing anti-Latino and anti-immigrant sentiments during the celebration. It caused enough of a scene to prompt the president of Fresno State University to make a public statement affirming freedom of speech, while also condemning this lack of “*educación*” (Turcios-Cotto & Milan, 2013) and reiterating a campus culture of inclusion. While I was used to the microaggressions and subtle oppression of Latino students in educational microsystems (Irizarry, 2012; Turcios-Cotto & Milan, 2013), I had to learn how to respond to more blatant forms of

oppression against Latinos under the magnifying glass of other young Latino students looking to me for guidance due to the polarized macrosystem. I was put in a unique position of power as a Latino educator with the highest level of education in a predominately Latino campus community.

In the ecosystem of my classroom, I am very aware of my power and privilege not only as the instructor, but also as a US-born cisgender male. Similar to critical race theory (Bell, 1980), Latina/o critical race theory (LatCrit) analyzes phenomena in terms of race, while including intersections of other factors, such as gender, ethnicity, immigration status, religion, language, etc., which more adequately represent the experience of Latinos in the USA (Irizarry, 2012). In a sense, LatCrit “challenges the Black/White binary that often limits considerations of race and racism to two groups, thereby creating discursive space for Latinos/as who can be of any race and individuals who may be multiracial” (Irizarry, 2012, p. 293).

From a LatCrit perspective, I can think of two specific ways that my presence as a person in power can alter the classroom environment. First, as one who has known discrimination through more than one aspect (ethnicity, religion, etc.), I am more open to the unique oppressive experiences of others that might go beyond race. I am willing to validate those oppressive experiences and teach students to validate those kinds of experiences for their clients. Second, as one who has had issues with authority, I am open to feedback as the authority figure in the classroom and encourage students to challenge authority when they feel they are wronged.

My Development Over Time in My Social Location

My upbringing and personal experiences of oppression would come to impact my response to my ecosystem, but my development as a professional educator also underwent great change, especially in terms of power. Though a brand-new faculty to Fresno State, I was used to the academic rigor of a research university because of my experiences at BYU, and I was quickly branded by my students as the “hard professor.” After much reflection and some great mentoring from senior Fresno State faculty, I changed my approach and “eased up” on some of my expectations for my students, and I started getting a better feel for the Fresno State student ecosystem and macrosystem.

I experienced another developmental change in regards to the faculty ecosystem. Like other new faculty experiences, my first year was marked by much stress, confusion and powerlessness (Austin, 2003), especially related to our governing accreditation and enmeshed department. I was coming from a COAMFTE- (MFT-specific) accredited institution into a CACREP- (LPC-specific) accredited institution. Even though the California professional licensure uses the language “Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist” (LMFT), I had to get used to using the CACREP language of “counselor”; our program is called “Marriage, Family, and Child Counseling” (MFCC). It didn’t (and still does not) make sense to me why our program is CACREP-accredited and not COAMFTE-accredited. When I raised that

particular question, I received no real explanation and was even met with hostility. Our department comprises a school counseling (K-12) program, student affairs and college counseling (SACC) program, rehabilitation counseling program and our MFCC program. Most of the “core” courses are offered to students from all four programs, which lead to some confusion among the students regarding scope of competence and scope of practice. But even with this intermingling, I remember a faculty from another department explicitly saying that our MFCC program and their program are inherently at a turf war, which added to the stressful departmental microsystem.

After 4 years, I have now come to terms with the CACREP accreditation and have learned to better navigate the other struggles mentioned by taking advantage of good mentoring and faculty peer-support systems like other faculty of color (Cole, McGowan, & Zerquera, 2017), even though I have not felt a change in my powerlessness as a junior faculty, especially regarding our department policy and procedures.

The last change I have experienced based on my social location has been the most rewarding to me. Growing up as a Christian, I cannot deny the homophobia I was taught and was socialized to internalize. I particularly remembered feeling scared that one of my gay clients would become attracted to me and would try to change the therapeutic relationship into a sexual one. After much education, struggle and maturity, I can now happily say that I have changed my homophobic ways and now consider myself an LGBTQ ally. Ironically, I have now become a lot more leery of having people learn that I am a member of the Church of Jesus Christ, especially in California, where LGBTQ issues are always at the forefront of cultural sensitivity. But after feeling more comfortable with my multicultural class, I decided to come out to them as a “Mormon.” Students have shared their difficulty in understanding how I can be such an advocate for LGBTQ issues in one-class session, and then in another confess that I am a member of a very conservative church, although I would not consider myself to be a “conservative” or “liberal” (none of these fit with my experience).

While it is true that my religion teaches that acting out homosexually is a sin (but not identifying as someone with same-gender attraction), it also teaches us that we all sin, that God is the only one that has a right to judge us for any sins, and to love one another (Matthew 22:39, New Testament; 3 Nephi 12:43–44, Book of Mormon; Doctrine & Covenants 59:6). I tell my confused students that I love my LGBTQ “neighbors” just as much as myself and empathize with their pain, and that I do not need to concern myself with their sexual identity or orientation, unless they need me as an advocate. This gives religious students hope and encouragement and inspires the “*Sí, se puede*” attitude in other meaningful ways in a safe classroom ecosystem. I completely understand that many LGBTQ individuals have most likely experienced dreadful oppression from members of my church. I don’t feel bad when they might not readily trust me after learning that I graduated from BYU (a private church-educational institution), but I am happy when they do give me a chance to show them a different experience as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Social Interactions in My Social Location

From an eco-developmental perspective, social interactions become a prominent feature in the meaning-making of experiences for Latinos (Prado et al., 2010). This is also in line with macrosystemic influences of “personalismo,” which is a Latino cultural value highlighting the importance that Latinos place on interpersonal interaction, warmth and trust (Falicov, 1998; Leidy, Guerra, & Toro, 2010). My relationship with my students is very important to me; I make it a point to learn and remember each student’s name and to give them positive encouragement when participating in class, especially those from marginalized groups. My own cultural background influences this interaction as well. As a Mexican Argentine who is proud of his cultural heritage, I encourage other minorities to be proud of the diversity they bring into the classroom. I encourage a “*Sí, se puede*” attitude of learning in the classroom and look for ways to not only teach the secular material needed as an MFT, but also the “*educación*” (Turcios-Cotto & Milan, 2013) that extends beyond the classroom, mostly by my own example.

In terms of how students might respond to me based on my social identities, I can think of two different experiences. As a “Hispanic-serving institution,” we are fortunate to have a very high number of Latino students in our programs. In this aspect, my experience in my social interactions with students has been quite positive, as other Latino students have expressed the way they look up to me as a role model. This is most likely amplified, given the many disparities Latinos face in education, such as high dropout rates, low representation in higher education and lower academic performance (Hill & Torres, 2010). I use my power to encourage my Latino students to openly challenge these disparities and to challenge the power structures of higher education that discourage bilingualism, that are insensitive to undocumented immigrants and their personal situations and that fail to provide adequate resources for Latino parents who do not speak English. In addition, I encourage students to challenge the pernicious presidential propaganda so widely promoted in our sociopolitical macrosystem.

I also try to use my position of power to open up space for my more privileged students to engage in difficult conversations, to reflect on their own privilege and to challenge the “meritocracy” narrative most of them have been led to believe (Tatum, 2003). This is particularly relevant in the multicultural counseling course I teach. In my social interactions with them, I try to lead by example in describing all of the “unmerited” benefits I receive just by being a US-born heterosexual cisgender male. But many of my more privileged students seem to struggle most when we go over nationalism, which is such an under-addressed topic in MFT programs even in multicultural education (Platt & Laszloffy, 2013). I also think that the current macrosystem of my social location makes it easier to confuse patriotism with nationalism. Patriotism is a devotion of country and a desire for the country to be the best it can be, while nationalism is the belief that ones’ own country is superior to all others and that its interests are far more important than those of any other country (Primoratz, 2009). As Platt and Laszloffy (2013) so eloquently state, “Just as with

the other ‘isms’ (i.e., racism, sexism, ableism, lookism), nationalism lends itself to patterns of domination and polarization and therefore, like the other ‘isms’ it is important to recognize and confront manifestations of nationalism” (p. 443). This is slightly different from ethnocentrism, which is more of a belief that your ethnicity (not necessarily country) is better than everyone else’s. Some of my students struggle with the cognitive dissonance of believing that this is the greatest country in the world but also witnessing how this government put undocumented Latino immigrant children in cages after running out of room in detention facilities.

The last social interaction that has impacted my current social location circles back to my experiences with other faculty. As mentioned previously, much of what is presumed about Latino “maleness” comes from literature that depicts us as domineering, hypersexual and overpowering (Ingoldsby, 2006). I have tried to show others a different picture. While I feel I have been more successful among my students, I have had less luck among some of my colleagues. One of our responsibilities as a tenure-track faculty is to provide peer evaluations for adjunct faculty. During an evaluation with one particular adjunct (whose identifiers will be omitted for confidentiality), I tried to be as honest and unbiased as possible and frankly felt that her lesson was unacceptable. During my write-up, I not only included very specific feedback on the things I felt were lacking and how she could improve them, but I also shared a few pieces of encouragement and things that she did well. However, during the social interaction of the debriefing, she responded with a lot of reactivity, hostility and sexism. In her official written response, she continued confirming the negative “male” Latino narrative by stating that I was “chauvinistic, domineering and arrogant.” I could understand her disappointment and frustration for receiving her first negative evaluation, but I was trying to be honest and professional, and I think that her additive “machista” comments were unnecessary.

Changes to Account for My Cultural-Social Location

In closing, I feel that there is a lot that needs to change in the education system in order to account for my cultural-social location, but I will only share one idea. From a LatCrit perspective (Irizarry, 2012), educators and administrators need to be sensitive not only to how power differentials are manifested through race, but also through other nuanced cultural factors, such as immigration status, ethnicity and so forth. In order to account for my cultural-social location, challenges need to be made to the concept of “cultural competence.” It is “a myth that is typically American and located in the metaphor of American ‘know-how.’ It is consistent with the belief that knowledge brings control and effectiveness, and that this is an ideal to be achieved above all else. I question the notion that one could become ‘competent’ at the culture of another” (Dean, 2001, p. 624). I echo that sentiment and would add that when students feel that they “learn enough” (definition of competence) about a culture, they tend to prescribe more, overgeneralize, label, stereotype and run the risk of misunderstanding—or worse, invalidating—another’s cultural experience. I

endorse taking an “informed not-knowing stance,” which means that one still strives to educate themselves about other cultures and remains continually open to new knowledge, especially when received directly from their own clients about their own culture (Dean, 2001). “Sí, se puede” (we can) make changes when we have the heart and willingness to do so.

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