

“I think it’s a cultural thing *and* a woman thing:” Cultural scripts in Latinas’ careers

Latinas carry the simultaneity of race, ethnicity, gender, and class in a way that makes their experiences particularly valuable to understanding the complexity of these identities in the workplace. By simultaneity, I mean the ways in which gender, race, class, sexuality, and ethnicity, among other dimensions of difference, together shape the identities and work experiences of women in organizations.¹ For example, White women’s narratives tend to privilege gender over race and Black women’s narratives tend to privilege race over gender.² But for Latinas, the very category Latina fuses the identities of

gender, race, and ethnicity.³ This complex identity, of being neither Black nor White in the USA, creates unaccounted-for barriers in their careers. Judge Sonia Sotomayor faced special scrutiny throughout her confirmation hearings because of how she owns her complex identity as a Hispanic woman of working-class background.⁴ Most research on the challenges of leadership focuses on one aspect of social identity

such as gender or race. The role of culture and ethnicity has been less explored in the management literature, particularly how ethnicity and culture interact with other career and identity elements on issues of advancement and success.

My interest in this topic is fueled by my own experience as a Latina, an organizational consultant, and a scholar.

For example, the practice of “tooting your horn” to make your accomplishments visible in order to be noticed and advance in an organization is not something many Latinas feel comfortable doing. A Latina manager explains this reluctance as both “a cultural thing *and* a woman thing,” making it hard to say to others, “I’m doing a great job!” Many dilemmas that Latinas face in enacting dominant values and work practices have a similar cultural dimension.

By exploring the simultaneity of gender and cultural factors unique to Latinas in corporations, this study goes beyond one-dimensional approaches to understanding the career and leadership opportunities and barriers they face. Three focus groups were conducted with twenty mid-level Latina managers in Fortune 1000 organizations in Boston, Houston, and New York. Drawing from prior research and looking for the uniqueness of Latina identity, sample focus group questions were: How would you describe your career? What support and barriers have you experienced, for example, mentors, networking? How does being Latina influence choices and dilemmas faced in your career? What recommendations do you have for other Latinas in corporations?⁵

Findings

The study identified eight “cultural scripts” in the narratives of Latina managers’ careers. Cultural scripts are commonly held assumptions about social interactions and communication—ways of thinking about what one can/cannot do or say—particular to a cultural group.⁶ Cultural scripts provide an interpretive background for self and others but do not predict or determine behavior. In contrast to stereotypes, which are beliefs toward a group based on over-generalizations and prejudgments that apply to all its members, cultural scripts serve to express values and beliefs one holds about how to be in

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the world. They are learned patterns of framing and interpreting one's own and others' behaviors.

Next, I discuss and give examples of the eight cultural scripts: *familismo*, *machismo-marianismo*, *personalismo*, *simpatía*, *colectivismo*, *el presente*, *respeto*, and *espiritualismo*. The cultural scripts are described independently of each other; however, in the day-to-day lived experiences of the Latina managers, they are connected and often inseparable.

Familismo refers to valuing close, protective, and extended family relations, in contrast to Anglo-Saxon/northern European cultural scripts, which value more individual and nuclear family relations. When asked about mentoring experiences, a Latina manager answered, "Family members are my greatest source of mentoring. Without the support of your family, you just can't work." While confirming the lack of organizational mentors in their careers, most Latinas referred to family members as their greatest mentors and support system.

Machismo-marianismo refers to strongly differentiated gender roles and relations where men dominate, protect, and provide, while women nurture, serve, and sacrifice for their families following the model of the Virgin Mary. Other cultural scripts stress gender equality and flexible gender roles.⁷ Discussing barriers to her career, a manager identified her mother's expectation that she would take care of her husband and the clash with her own wishes to go to conferences and attend work events: "I'm very ambitious. But I was taught that family comes first. It was a problem when I wasn't around to cater to my husband. That's a battle that you fight not only outside your culture, but inside your culture, too."

Personalismo refers to forging meaningful, personal, and trusting relations. *Simpatía* refers to promoting pleasant relations and positive situations and avoiding conflict and disharmony. Two quotes exemplify the role of these related cultural scripts at work:

"The feedback that people like to work with me was great. That's something that is very important to me."

"My challenge has to do with the need to help and be friendly. It was hard to give someone bad news or let someone go."

The cultural script of *colectivismo* emphasizes the needs of the group and community before those of the individual, whereas Anglo-Saxon cultural scripts emphasize the needs and capabilities of the individual first.⁸ One manager talked about her activism in the Latino community and helping other Latinos at work: "As a Latina, you have to help open the door for others. That's been such a driver: to pave the way for others. For me it was hard. Maybe for my daughter it won't be so hard." Recent studies on recruitment and retention of Hispanics confirm that Latinos are attracted to jobs that offer the opportunity to help others.⁹

A focus on *el presente* refers to valuing being present in the here and now because the future is uncertain and cannot be controlled. In talking about her contributions,

a manager said, "I think we have a certain spirit, certain energy as a people. Sometimes you feel something is impossible and you draw on resources that you didn't even know you had. That comes from being Latina." I interpret that this manager's strength, which she attributes to being Latina, comes from her ability to be in the present, grounded in the reality of the moment. Her "energy" does not

come from making plans and visualizing the future, but rather from being present in the moment. A focus on the present contrasts with taken-for-granted assumptions of career development theories that assume an individually determined, long-term, and single-minded approach to one's career.

The last two cultural scripts are *respeto* and *spiritualismo*. *Respeto* refers to granting high regard to persons because of their formal authority, age, or social power, whereas Anglo-Saxon/northern European cultural scripts are based on an equality ethos that encourages egalitarian relations, including challenging authority.

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Talking about how she achieved the job move she wanted, a Latina manager explained her approach: “I said to my manager several times, ‘I know I’m an IT [information technology] person and I’m not supposed to talk to people, but I love talking to people. Can you give me this opportunity so I can learn about relationships and finance?’” The script of *respeto* guides this Latina manager’s strategy; approaching her boss various times, she does not go to the boss’s boss or informally tap her networks, but rather continues to ask her boss for that opportunity until he gives her the go-ahead. I heard other stories of Latinas and the cultural script of *respeto*: they stay for too long with an unsupportive boss, they are hesitant to go around the boss to explore developmental opportunities or address unfair situations, or they stay “stuck” rather than confront the boss.

Espiritualismo refers to trusting and relating to a higher being that provides, guides, and nurtures one’s path in the world, whereas scripts from other cultures may place more emphasis on the world of material objects and needs. One way in which *espiritualismo* showed in the interviews is evident in the way a Latina manager succinctly described her career path: “It all happens according to God’s plan.”

Discussion

Hispanics are the largest minority group in the USA, at 15% of the population or 45 million people. In the workforce, the rate of Hispanic working women who hold management or professional jobs increased from 20% to 23% between 2000 and 2007, faster than that of Hispanic men. With a purchasing power of \$800 billion, a labor force of 20.5 million, and a middle class expanding at a faster rate than all other racial groups, the business case for paying attention to Latinos as consumers, customers, workers, and citizens has been made many times.¹⁰

But in spite of this data, little is known about the challenges and opportunities Latinos and Latinas face in their career and leadership development in corporations. This study expands our understanding of the unique experiences of Latinas in corporations by identifying the cultural scripts that influence the career opportunities and barriers they face.¹¹

Cultural scripts act as both gifts and challenges for Latinas in corporations. As gifts, they are unique resources and perspectives that Latina managers bring

to organizations. As challenges, Latina cultural scripts clash with Anglo cultural scripts and their pervasive and unexamined influence as dominant scripts, which determine organizational practices, guidelines for advancement, expectations about fit, assessments about effectiveness, and so forth.

Thus, Latina cultural scripts may result in disadvantages and a lack of opportunities because when they behave according to another set of cultural scripts, Latina managers

are usually found lacking. In the following section, I offer recommendations for individual Latinas, their supervisors and managers, and organizations to enhance the success and contributions of Latina managers by considering the impact of these cultural scripts.

Recommendations for Latinas

First, understand your own and others’ cultural scripts. A Latina manager explained best what this means in her e-mail to me after I shared the results of this research with the participants: “[That] the cultural scripts contrasted with the Anglo assumptions was a ‘wow’ moment for me. It explains so much about who I am and the work world that sometimes baffles me. Now I know why. I wish every young Latina and Latino could know this ‘secret’ of living and succeeding in an Anglo world.” Latina managers need to be aware of the cultural scripts they bring, recognize their potential influence in their careers, and understand the difference between their cultural scripts and those of others, especially those from the dominant culture that permeate organizational life.

But the process of understanding and working with others’ cultural scripts requires an interactive approach to differences. We become aware of our own cultural scripts through their relation to and contrast with other cultural scripts. It is in a relation of mutual exploration that learning across differences happens, beyond stereotyping or memorizing cultural guidelines about how to behave with those who are different from us. This is also an iterative process, as we cannot learn about our cultural scripts in isolation from others and we cannot passively expect that others teach us about our own.¹²

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Secondly, enhance and utilize your biculturalism-bilingualism. Contrary to assimilation, where one renounces one's cultural differences and adopts the dominant culture, biculturalism is an approach where styles and scripts from two cultures are combined and deployed in new, creative ways.¹³ Bell and Nkomo demonstrate how the experience of African American women managers is structured in a bicultural way as they navigate two "separate and distinct worlds."¹⁴ More recently, Asian Americans have been described as using a bicultural approach named "hybridity": the ability to combine two cultural forms to make something new or to deploy a specific cultural script depending on the specific context.¹⁵ A Latina manager described how she enacts this biculturalism: "I have been in [the USA] for fourteen years and I can be concise, clear; I can get to the point. But I also have that Latino warmth and if I see that you are having a bad day, I'll go and hug you."

Recommendations for Managers and Peers of Latinas

First, find ways to become aware of your cultural scripts and how those scripts may become dominant organizational norms that disadvantage Latinas, who are behaving from a different set of cultural scripts. For example, recent studies highlight the importance of "fit" and detail how lack of fit may impede minorities' advancement.¹⁶ Fit, or its lack, impacts the assessment of Latinas' current performance and leadership potential and the developmental opportunities offered to them. But the concept of fit itself is problematic.

For example, studies have demonstrated how models of leadership are gendered and favor a White, Euro-American, affluent masculinity that is equated with good leadership and leadership potential. Mental models of leadership favor "in control, decisive, aggressive, ambitious, analytical, competitive, independent and individualistic behaviors."¹⁷ When enacting the cultural scripts described in this study such as *personalismo*, *simpatía*, *colectivismo*, and *respeto*, Latinas are demon-

strating the exact opposite of these preferred leadership behaviors. As a consequence, Latinas will be assessed as unfit for leadership roles and lacking in leadership potential, or needing training and development so they can assimilate/fit.

Other problematic questions on the concept of fit are, who determines what a "good fit" is? Is not fit the ultimate subjective criteria? If fit is required, who has the responsibility for changing: the employee or the organization? In a global world, organizations need to strive to expand their styles to meet a variety of markets and cultures, becoming more flexible and inclusive instead of less. Hence, I recommend that managers examine their expectation that Latinas fit the dominant cultural norms and explore what other options, besides assimilation, might be available.

The second recommendation for managers and peers of Latinas is not a new one: be aware of stereotypes and assumptions and their impact on Latinas' career and leadership opportunities. The challenge here is to continuously differentiate between cultural scripts and stereotypes: for example, *familismo* does not mean that Latinas will not relocate, an accent does not mean they cannot communicate, and wanting flexible arrangements to integrate family needs is not the same as lack of commitment to the job. These assumptions are easily drawn from strongly held societal stereotypes; moving beyond them requires constant vigilance and a willingness to communicate and check the assumptions with the Latina herself. This study suggests that the willingness to communicate honestly, without fear of appearing ignorant about Latinas or concern that they will use the "race card" to resist feedback, needs to be fostered and valued as an inclusive leadership competence.

Recommendations for Organization Change

This study suggests three interventions at the organization level to facilitate Latinas' careers and effectiveness at work: (1) expand and offer flexible career paths and options; (2) increase educational, professional, and developmental opportunities; and (3) increase the transparency of key processes such as evaluation and advancement. While these recommendations are not new, findings on Latina cultural scripts make them more relevant, nuanced, and intertwined.

The managers in this study confirmed the desire to have options in their careers and flexible work arrangements.

Managers and peers of Latinas must become aware of how their own cultural scripts may become dominant organizational norms that disadvantage Latinas.

But many times these options depended on a supervisor's willingness to offer them to the Latina manager on a case-by-case basis. Considering that many Latinas still have limited access to the networks of power in their organizations, it is even more important that they have career and leadership options. Additionally, Latinas need to be informed about key processes and procedures such as determining high-potential candidates, performance appraisals and criteria, advancement, and developmental opportunities. We need to make paths, options, and procedures transparent and real in organizations.

Another common theme in the Latina managers' stories was their high regard for education and their appreciation and willingness to take advantage of the educational and professional opportunities they were given through their careers. But educational opportunities are not the same as developmental opportunities. Latinas need to become savvier at understanding this difference and their managers need to take more risks in offering developmental opportunities to Latinas.

Final Reflections

This study sheds light on the role of cultural scripts in understanding the career journeys of Latinas. An implication of these findings is that we need to bring our

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understanding of cultural scripts to bear on the design of career development programs and strategies for Latinas in organizations. For example, networking events would be organized differently if they were based on the cultural scripts of *colectivismo* and *personalismo*. Instead of the one-day, workshop-packed professional conference,

with its individual, fast-paced interactions, imagine a series of intimate gatherings over time, fostering small-group conversations and the building of trusting professional relations.¹⁸

A second implication is the need to explore the cultural scripts of other groups, including Anglo-Saxon men and women. What is the impact of different cultural scripts in the management of differences, inclusion, and diver-

sity in organizations? How do diverse cultural scripts interact in multicultural organizations? How can we understand, relate to, appreciate, and learn from each other's cultural scripts?

Finally, we need to explore how cultural scripts help us study the complexity of identity through the processes of simultaneity. When a Latina manager notes that her challenges at work are both "a cultural thing *and* a woman thing," she is implicitly recognizing the impact of gender, ethnicity, and culture in her career. Cultural scripts also enact dimensions of class, age, nationality, and sexuality, which I do not discuss here due to space limitations. Future studies should more fully explore these other dimensions to expand on the richness of simultaneity. Cultural scripts provide a concrete entry into the complex interactions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, nationality, and class in organizations and can serve to identify points of similarities and differences among groups and individuals in this increasingly global world.

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Endnotes

¹Simultaneity is also referred to as intersectionality. See Holvino, E. 2001. CGO Working Paper No. 14, *Complicating Gender: The Simultaneity of Race, Gender, and Class in Organization Change(ing)*. Boston, MA: Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management; Holvino, E. 2003. Theories of differences: Changing paradigms for organizations. In Plummer, D.L. (Ed.), *Handbook of Diversity Management: Beyond Awareness to Competency Based Learning*, pp. 111-131. Lanham, MD: University Press of America; Holvino, E. 2006. *CGO Insights* No. 24: "Tired of choosing": Working with the simultaneity of race, gender, and class in organizations. Boston, MA: Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management; and Holvino, E. 2008. Intersections: The simultaneity of race, gender and class in organization studies. *Gender, Work & Organization*, DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-0432.2008.00400.x. See also Bell, E.L. & Nkomo, S.M. 1992. Re-visioning women manager's lives. In Mills, A.J. & Tancred, P. (Eds.), *Gendering Organizational Analysis*, pp. 235-247. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

²See, for example, Kim, L.M. 2001. "I was [so] busy fighting racism that I didn't even know I was being oppressed as a woman!": Challenges, changes, and empowerment in teaching about women of color. *NWSA Journal*, 13(2): 98-111; and McIntosh, P. 1988. White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. Retrieved November 30, 2009 from <http://www.case.edu/president/aaction/UnpackingTheKnapsack.pdf>.

³Throughout this article I will use the generic term "Latino" to refer to men and women who self-identity as Hispanic and trace their ancestry to the Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. I reserve the use of the term "Latina" to refer to Hispanic women, reflect-

ing the gender distinction in the Spanish language, indicated as a general rule by the use of an “a” at the end of the word to refer to the feminine and the use of an “o” to refer to the masculine. I also recognize that some of us prefer to use the term Latino/a to refer to ourselves, others prefer to use the term Hispanic, and still others use both terms interchangeably.

⁴See Driggers, M. 2009. The courtroom in a diverse society: Understanding the need for cultural competence. *Research & Action Report*, 31(1): 2-3. Wellesley, MA: Wellesley Centers for Women.

⁵The study *Latinas at Work: Journeys to Leadership* was designed and conducted by Drs. Evangelina Holvino and Plácida Gallegos and co-sponsored by the Center for Gender in Organizations at the Simmons School of Management, the Fielding Graduate University, and Chaos Management, Ltd. Preliminary findings from this research were reported in Holvino, E. & Gallegos, P. 2008. Recent research – Latinas at work: An untapped resource for organizational success. *The Diversity Factor*, 16(1): 17-19.

⁶See Goddard, C. (Ed.). 2006. *Ethnopragmatics: Understanding Discourse in Cultural Context*. Berlin, Germany: Mouton De Gruyter; Rodriguez, R. 2007. *Latino Talent: Effective Strategies to Recruit, Retain, and Develop Hispanic Professionals*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons; Triandis, H.C., Marin, G., Lisansky, J., & Betancourt, H. 1984. *Simpatía* as a cultural script of Hispanics. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 47(6): 1363-1375; and University of New England. (n.d.). What are cultural scripts?. Retrieved November 30, 2008 from www.une.edu.au/bcss/linguistics/nsm/cultural-scripts.php

⁷The *machismo-marianismo* cultural script offers a good example of the difference between cultural scripts and stereotypes. The Latino macho stereotype refers to a tough, dominating, and sexually aggressive masculinity, but the cultural script goes beyond those behaviors to emphasize the responsibility of the man for the well-being of the family.

⁸Cultural scripts like *colectivismo*, *respeto*, and *machismo-marianismo* may seem similar to the popular terms from Geert Hofstede’s research on collectivism, high power distance, and masculinity (see Hofstede, G. *Culture’s Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1980). I prefer the term “cultural scripts,” which does not imply dualistic, universal categories of culture, but instead recognizes the specific ways in which cultural norms and values are enacted in behavioral expectations for oneself and others.

⁹Stone, D.L., Stone-Romero, E.F., & Johnson, R.D. 2007. The moderating effects of ethnicity on relations between cultural values and the importance of job attributes. *The Business Journal of Hispanic Research*, 1(2): 42-53.

¹⁰Benitez, C. 2007. *Latinization: How Latino Culture is Transforming the U.S.* Ithaca, NY: Paramount Market Publishing; Chong, N. & Baez, F. 2005. *Latino Culture: A Dynamic Force in the Changing American Workplace*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press; Hewlett, S.A., Shiller, P., & Sumberg, K. 2007. *Sin Fronteras: Celebrating and Capitalizing on the Strengths of Latina Executives*. New York, NY: Center for Work-Life

Policy; Hispanic Alliance for Career Enhancement (HACE). 2000. *Latino professional pulse*. Chicago, IL: HACE; and Rodriguez, R., 2007, *op cit*.

¹¹This study also contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the barriers for women of color by focusing on the culture-ethnic dimensions and on the understudied subgroup of women of color who are Latinas. See, for example, Catalyst. 2001. *Women of Color Executives: Their Voices, their Journeys*. New York, NY: Catalyst; Catalyst. 2003. *Advancing Latinas in the Workplace: What Managers Need to Know*. New York, NY: Catalyst; and Catalyst. 2007. *Retaining People of Color: What Accounting Firms Need to Know*. New York, NY: Catalyst.

¹²The concept of “stance” is also useful here, where stance is understood as an orientation or position of inquiry and openness to engage with differences. See Holvino, E. & Sheridan, B. *CGO Insights* No. 17: Working across differences: Diversity practices for organizational change. Boston, MA: Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management.

¹³See Gil, R.M. & Vazquez, C.I. 1996. *The Maria Paradox: How Latinas Can Merge Old World Traditions with New World Self-Esteem*. New York, NY: Putnam’s Sons; Padilla, A.M. 2006. Bicultural social development. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 28(4): 467-497; and Rodriguez, R., 2007, *op cit.*, pp. 51-54.

¹⁴See Bell, E.L. 1990. The bicultural life experience of career-oriented black women. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 11(6): 459-477; and Bell, E.L.J.E. & Nkomo, S.N. 2001. *Our Separate Ways*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, p. 231.

¹⁵Dhingra, P. 2007. *Managing Multicultural Lives: Asian American Professionals and the Challenges of Multiple Identities*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

¹⁶See, for example, Carlton, P. & Klassen, D.A. 2008. *Black Women Executives Research Initiative: Findings*. Alexandria, VA: The Executive Leadership Council and The Executive Leadership Foundation; Giscombe, K. 2008. *Women of Color in Accounting*. New York, NY: Catalyst; and Hewlett, S.A. Shiller, P., & Sumberg, K., 2007, *op cit*.

¹⁷Cheng, C. 1996. “We choose not to compete”: The “merit” discourse in the selection process, and Asian and Asian American men and their masculinity. In Cheng, C. (Ed.), *Masculinities in Organizations*, pp. 177-200. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

¹⁸For an example, see Goldman Sachs’ Hispanic Women’s Loft Series in Hewlett, S.A. Shiller, P., & Sumberg, K., 2007, *op cit.*, p. 13.

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