Hispanic Women's Perceptions of Family and Community Influences on Their Empowerment Process

Rita Raboin

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Hispanic Women's Perceptions
of Family and Community Influences
on Their Empowerment Processes

Master's Project

Rita Raboin SND

To Karen and John,
In deep appreciation
for your valuable contributions
to this project, and to
my life.
Much love and
Many blessings,
Rita

in partial fulfillment of requirements for degree of
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University of Massachusetts
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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to all the women who have inspired and supported me through the years. My community of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur were my first educators, mentors and my life-long inspiration. They have been outstanding throughout my life in their fidelity and love. The Sisters of Saint Joseph of Springfield have been steadfast and loyal in their support and genuine friendship throughout my time in Western Massachusetts.

My sister Theresa and my deceased sisters, Elizabeth and Evelyn, taught me unique lessons of incalculable strength and compassion while my mother taught me the meaning of gratitude.

Dr. Salvacion Rosario (Sally) Habana-Hafner, my Academic Advisor, understood from the outset the meaning of community education in my life, and accompanied me with professional dedication and sincerity. We truly walked together.

To all the women, too numerous to mention here, with whom I've had the privilege to journey in diverse cultural settings, and in a special way at the Center for International Education, and the Labor and Management Workplace Education Program, as well as in my beloved Brazil where this work found its impetus, I send you my loving embrace.
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My deep gratitude is expressed to the five outstanding women who contributed so much time, truth, energy, laughter and wisdom to this project. Their lives are the gifts that have been the heartbeat of this experience.

Sincere appreciation is extended to Dr. Sally Habana-Hafner for insightful suggestions and practical applications arising from years of her own solid community experience. Her belief in me was a personal, empowering experience.

To Dr. David Kinsey, who was my first advisor, I express my appreciation for his consistent, respectful, listening and the on-going challenge of his creative, critical thinking.

An introduction to Qualitative Research Methods was an enlightening and practical experience for me due to Dr. Gretchen Rossman's methodical presentations which energized the initial writing of this project.

The excellent references that Dr. Sue Thrasher so generously shared, and the profound cultural and spiritual insights that Dr. Allen Ivey contributed to my life enhanced my approach to this project and contributed significantly to the theoretical foundation of this research. My thanks to them both for their collaboration and personal inspiration.

To Karen and John-Campbell Nelson and Rosela Gementiza I express my deep gratitude for their competent, technical assistance whenever I was in need of their helping hands and open hearts.
Abstract

This research project addresses the empowerment processes of five Hispanic women from their perspectives of the family and community influences in their lives. One woman each from El Salvador, Colombia, Ecuador, and two from Puerto Rico, ranging in age from thirty-five to fifty-two years old engaged in interviews, listened to this content, and shared their feedback as to impacting influences in their lives. Throughout nine meetings they dialogued about discoveries and questions that emerged as a result of a reflective process that developed among us.

How do we reflect about our growth process? Do we know what strengths we bring to how we learn? How did we discover them? How has our family influenced us? How do we learn from the community? These questions motivate and accompany our joint experience.

The research process itself unfolds in an empowering style whereby the women mutually encourage each other to share on deeper levels where cultural, spiritual and gender related issues are explored. Moments of liberating, personal disclosure are integrated throughout the study. Participation was key in this project design, as the listening experiences and our very interactive meetings clearly show.

Discoveries about different kinds of power, what impedes or energizes empowerment processes, as indeed, new indicators for empowerment as these women have experienced them spiritually, are presented here in the findings. Implications for community based adult education groups are examined.
I. INTRODUCTION

This project actually evolved out of a more than sixteen year experience in intense community organizing within the context of Catholic Pastoral activity, and emerging from that, some union organizing with the sharecroppers and tenant farmers in rural Northeast Brazil.

As a result of my observations of human limitations that were inevitable while living out our Gospel imperative for social justice, I assumed the task to study how we could walk with persons in a healthier way, as we all engage in a collective response for a more just world. How could we better able tool individual persons to be more self-reflective within the competitive demands of an option for social change? What authentically empowers them not only politically, but personally?

The purpose of this particular study is to closer examine some answers to this question provided by five Hispanic women as they explore their own perspectives of the family and community influences on their own empowerment processes.

Personal Reflection of Empowerment

Authentic empowerment implies a clearer sense of self and measured responses from identified places of strength inside oneself. Focusing in on the interplay between the individual and community, the particular area of concentrated interest in this study, we read in Interpreting Women's Lives edited by The Personal Narrative Group, the following:

Traditional explorations of social dynamics have tended to emphasize either the constraints of social structure or the power of individual agency. Only recently have social theorists begun to
undermine this polarity. Our reading of women's personal narratives suggests the need to understand the dynamic interaction between the two. (1989:5)

This research hopes to call into high relief precisely this dual impact in how we learn about ourselves within the multiplicity of diverse skills we acquire, as a result of mutual influences emerging from both the family and the wider community, and with all their accompanying constraints.

Due to the specific culture that characterizes this study, its own unquestionable nuances and direct effects will also be addressed appropriately throughout our work together. Some interviews manifest these influences in gender roles and social expectations.

At the outset of this study, I would like to state that I am of the opinion that empowerment is a word that is used, and perhaps distorted here in the United states. When CEO's began using it, I became somewhat wary. What had happened to the original, more radical understanding of this word among educators practicing a critical pedagogy among the poor? How had it gotten so blantly co-opted by big business? Or was I becoming so classist and/or protective of the concept that I could not envision its assimilation within the broader sector of the community?

Then I discovered further on in my reading that maybe my critique was not totally unfounded. In Donaldo Macedo's *Literacies of Power* we read:

> The position of many liberals in the United States is similar to that of the leftist colonialists who, in not wanting to destroy their cultural privileges, found themselves in an ever-present contradiction. This contradiction surfaces often when liberals feel threatened by the legitimacy of a subordinate group's struggle—a struggle that not only may not include them but also may demand that their liberal treatment of oppression as an abstract idea must be translated into concrete political action. (1994:179)
How many CEO's, managers, supervisors, and indeed, academicians and community workers really want their workers, students, or neighborhood people to freely identify and express demands which lead them to effective organization and vindication of their rights? How many would relinquish privileged positions, property, and power in the interest of authentic justice and human rights?

It is important for me to underscore what empowerment is not, as we embark upon this research with these women, and discover what it is for them. With them, we will examine the resources and life influences that they bring to, and invest in, an empowerment process that gradually leads them to autonomy, a fuller sense of self-directedness and healthy interdependence.

There may or may not be political overtones to what is unearthed in this process. But then Paulo Friere tells us that all education is political. I would also add, interdisciplinary, as it indeed involves the whole person. Psychology and adult learning processes integrate themselves throughout this study.

When I think of a more poetic title for this project, "A Touch of Sage" comes to mind. A little bit of wisdom in each of our lives helps to season the totality of everyone's. Mary Catherine Bateson says it well in her book, Composing a Life.

Women today, trying to compose lives that will honor all their commitments and still express all their potentials with a certain unitary grace, do not have an easy task. It is important, however, to see that, in finding a personal path among the discontinuities and moral ambiguities they face, they are performing a creative synthesis with a value that goes beyond the merely personal. (1990:232)

The creative synthesis is such an appropriate concept for the dignity of the task that
continually calls us throughout our lives. These five women range in age from thirty-five to fifty-two years old. There is still so much in their futures. My fundamental concern in undertaking this study is the fiber of the lives that interlace in the weaving of personal, family and community dynamics. Mutual, educative formation is inevitable. To measure, balance, discriminate and assume conscious, intentional positions is vital to the effectiveness of this formation. When our own personal life reflection is missing, or when those of us who are a part of team work, do not attend to the individual within a social process, then the disintegration of either or both processes becomes manifest.

It is not only the social agenda that is to be addressed and around which we organize, but also how the person is growing both in social consciousness and personal awareness that characterizes the elements of enduring social change. The investment of time, energy and risk-taking can be self-defeating if both aspects of growth are not accompanied. This has become the non-negotiable in which this research is rooted.

The format for this paper consists in seven sections which highlight the empowering characteristics of this process and the integrating elements of the content:

Section I. which is this Introduction presents a personal reflection on empowerment and the format of this study which unfolds in the following fashion:

Section II, Research: Synthesis of Life's Stories will treat the life journey of the five women as the core of the study, including my motivating questions and major concerns.

Section III, Methodology and Process: Inquiry that Empowers offers the model I used to gather
my data, the women's participation in this process, my coding schemes, and my role throughout this study.

Section IV are the Women's Narratives: Personal and Mutual Empowerment where excerpts from individual interviews and the women's listening experiences with their own interview tapes are contained. In this chapter we enter into the personal, spontaneous story telling that surfaces at two of the eight meetings that were processed more in depth. From the totality of this collective experience we come to the...

Findings: Empowerment Themes in Section V where we reflect upon liberating images and themes that the women identified from their life stories, and their personal definitions of empowerment, all of which contribute to its on-going analysis.

Section VI leads us into the Implications: New Threads of Empowerment. We will examine new indicators that emerged for exploring empowerment processes from the women's life experiences as well as a look into the spiritual and cultural influences that impacted their growth experiences. The implications for Adult Education and community based work with women's groups, and work with Refugee and Immigrants are also explored in this section.

My Personal Reflections in Section VII constitute my personal, diverse, and on-going discoveries throughout this project. New questions that arose due to this experience and the impact of the literature on my new learnings. With regard to references, excerpts from relevant literature are integrated throughout this study either to highlight insights from interviewees, to further enhance a life moment, underscore a discovery, or indeed provoke additional reflections and analysis. My reading was catalyzed significantly with discoveries about power that have
broadened and enriched my perceptions as a community educator.

II. RESEARCH FOCUS: SYNTHESIS OF LIFE STORIES

In thinking about women's educational experiences, both formal and informal, I am challenged and fascinated by the myriad of impacting experiences on women's lives and the responses that are elicited. There is an intrinsic mutuality in growth experiences for all persons. We are not only touched, but we respond as well to other people, problems, circumstances, and mutually formative moments are born. As has been articulated ever so eloquently before, we are always teachers and learners, in spite of ourselves.

Motivating Questions

How do these moments happen? Do we miss them? Are we at a loss to identify them when they occur? Are we learning all day long, and have not paused long enough to reflect upon how we are growing? Does the greatness of our lives unfold almost perfunctorily, mechanically, and the depth, richness, and insight merely overlooked for lack of mindfulness and awareness of what evolves around and in us?

As a practitioner for many years in community education with people from various cultures, I wanted to explore the concept of mutuality in the learning process. The influence of the community process on the person, and the person on the community, always appeared so inextricably intertwined to me that an indepth approach to exploring the mutual impact was inviting and challenging.
Once someone became involved in the community in a more intensive way, for some, the process almost seemed irreversible. Did they realize what was happening to them as persons, and were they prepared for what the collective commitment would demand along the way? Obviously, the responses would be different depending on the personal resources and background that each person brought to the community experience, nevertheless, challenges for balanced responses would always be present.

The fact that the women in this project are Hispanic is intentional. A specific cultural study would be rich, and women's growth and empowerment experiences have been an area of acute interest to me for several years. Women from diverse cultures have formed me through the decades, and I grow in a vital way with them.

**Major Concerns**

My major concerns are:

- the further development of women's ability to **assess and critique** their own learning process;
- **consciousness-raising** as to what empowers them; will they generate new indicators of empowerment?
- evaluate what personal resources they bring as to how they learn;
- **identify** the characteristics of **mutually formative** experiences
- Reflect upon the cultural influences in their processes

Carol Gilligan tells us in her publication of *In a Different Voice*:

> Among the most pressing items on the agenda for research on adult development is the need to delineate in women's **own terms** the experience of their adult life. (1982: 173)
It is important to me that they approach their lives in a non-censoring manner. I am discovering that self-judging and condemnation is a mode to which we descend in such a facile manner. Observing that in oneself is a vital part of the learning process, and an accurate reading of when it is happening is the first step in a consciousness-raising experience.

Again Gilligan invites us into this experience in the Introduction of her above-cited book, when she says,

...the way people talk about their lives is of significance, that the language they use and the connections they make reveal the world they see and in which they act. (1982: 2)

III. METHODS AND PROCESS: INQUIRY THAT EMPOWERS

We engaged in individual, one hour interviews, eight two hour group meetings for reflection and journaling, and six hours of work site observation of two of these women.

Literature

This project does not contain a chapter dedicated to review of the literature. Excerpts of pertinent references are integrated throughout the study. I totally underestimated how much I would gain from reading these profound and personally transformative publications.

Co-constructing the Process

Participants in this project also listened to their own interviews and shared their insights about what they perceived of their own lives. This research hopes to present these women's perceptions of how family and community influenced their empowerment process.
Their motivation, how they learn, what influences and inspires them, their challenges, what constitutes their happiness, and most of all their perceptions of their strengths and gifts, as well as their aspirations for their futures, serve to ignite in me a deep realization of the precious gift life is for each of us. The more intentional and growth conscious we become as persons, the more effective we are in our dedication to the wider community.

Ownership of the Process

As I progressed through the experience I became increasingly aware of how important it became for me that these women own more of the process. How could I engage them in an interactive way among each other, as well as with me, so that they too could hear their own voices, generate their own perceptions, and ask their own questions?

At the outset of the research all five women met with me and agreed to the individual interviews and monthly group meetings at my apartment from September to December, 1996. Slowly, as our work developed together and I perceived the mutual impact and positive energy among us, I risked asking a little more with each woman.

Would they listen to their own interviews and record their impressions of what touched them most? After that experience was processed, would they be willing to ask at least one question of any woman in the group? To both of these requests they replied in the affirmative.

Mutual Empowerment

These modest participatory steps in the process shifted energy in such an empowering way for all of us. A growing feeling of "safety" in the group, and the increasing desire to share more
intimately was palpable. The process of mutual empowerment became a lived reality.

When some scheduling conflicts arose, it was notable how the women who could not come were concerned about missing a meeting. It became increasingly more obvious to me that they were gaining something substantial by being together and "telling their stories" which is probably becoming for some community educators a rather overworked expression. The good news is that really is the growing edge for so many women and other oppressed groups everywhere.

**Story Telling**

Joanne E. Cooper in her chapter, "Telling Our Own Stories" in Witherall and Noddings' *Stories Lives Tell* underscores this importance in the reflection process of one's life:

> Telling our own stories is a way to impose form upon our often chaotic experiences (Grumet, 1988) and, in the process, to develop our own voice. Listening to our own stories is a way for us to nourish, encourage, and sustain ourselves (Howe, 1984), to enter into a caring relationship with all the parts of ourself. (Noddings, 1984). (1991:97).

The quilt work that emerged from the story telling of these five great women served to warmly envelop these pages with their abundant generosity. Their trust was a blessing, their lives, enduring gifts. I join with Daphne Patai who states in her chapter in *Women's Words*:

> I became convinced that not enough people are listening, and that the opportunity to talk about one's life, to reflect on its shapes and patterns, to make sense of it to oneself and to another human being, was an intrinsically valuable experience. (1991:142)

This "...intrinsically valuable experience." continues, for story telling never really ends...

Because I wanted to reflect with Hispanic women on their perspectives of the mutual influences
of families and communities on their empowerment processes, it was important for me to focus on women who were mothers, and who were engaged in community-based experiences, either at their regular employment or as volunteers.

As was stated earlier, I selected one woman each from Ecuador (Anita), Colombia (Ella), El Salvador (Hazel), and two from Puerto Rico (Yolly and Maria). Such a configuration accesses us a little to the Continent of South America, Central America, and the Caribbean.

For purposes to observe women in their workplace, I chose Yolly from Puerto Rico, and Hazel from El Salvador based on their exposure to wider community influences, each in different ways, and also the accessibility to their work sites. Yolly has a Day Care Center in her home, and Hazel works with WIC, a Women's Infants and Children's Nutritional Program.

It was important to me that all these women felt as comfortable as possible throughout the process, and that the research not be disruptive within their already very busy lives. How natural, conversational, interactive, free-flowing could this be for them? I was concerned about the artificiality and contrived nature of some intellectual, academic pursuits that imposed some "laboratory", "observational" experiences onto people. How could I prevent an exploitative, isolating, "episode" that would have nothing to do with their lives on any level? How congruent could the design be with who I am, and who they are, and who we are to each other?

In qualitative inquiry, the problem of design poses a "paradox". The term design suggests a very specific blueprint, but "design in the naturalistic sense...means planning for certain broad contingencies without, however, indicating exactly what will be done in relation to each." (Lincoln and Guba, 1985:226) (Patton, 1990:196)

I felt it incumbent to insert myself into their lives, on their terms, in respectful ways,
that conveyed the message that this could be a potential gift to each other. The results of this exchange had to have enduring effects for them, as well as for myself. The uncomfortability of walking away with an academic product for me, and merely the termination of the experience for them, was professionally and personally unacceptable.

The need to generate a collective process of mutuality, and the creation of some tools for continuity in the reflection of their lives after the project, highlighted my steps in the development of this design. An on-going concern was the fact that I already knew how busy they were. However, since I had been a part of their calendar activities in the past, negotiating the best times and places for convening either for meetings or interviews, was fairly easy.

What would perhaps be more difficult would be the conditions to observe Hazel at her work place at the agency, than to observe Yolly at her Day Care Center at home. With my projected ideas as to how to best gather data considering my purpose for this study, and above-cited fears and concerns, I was reminded by Patton:

"A qualitative design needs to remain sufficiently open and flexible to permit exploration of whatever the phenomenon under study offers for inquiry. Qualitative designs continue to be emergent even after data collection begins. The degree of flexibility and openness is, however, also a matter of great variation among designs. (1990:196)"

In an attempt to undertake this task in as open and flexible a manner as possible, I decided upon the following:

- one hour interviews with each women at a convenient place for them
- six hours (three hours each) of observation at the work sites of two women
- at least seven two hour meetings with all of us together in my apartment
- journaling would be a part of the meetings, with optional sharing.
- women's listening to their own interviews followed by reflection
- fifteen to twenty minute mini-interviews of one woman of another (intra-group interviews)

Meetings

The meetings would provide opportunity to ask follow-up questions to interviews, and additional reflective ones. I intentionally planned for meetings as I wanted to break the possible isolation that could set in among all the women as we engaged in individual interviews. It was important to me that they felt somewhat of a collective experience in this journey together. They are all women of faith, so an opportunity to ritualize this faith in solidarity with all women everywhere, was a key element for me in this design, as well.

Journaling

Equally important is the fact that this would be the indicated moment for them to write their own personal observations and learnings about themselves. In a very real sense, this modest journal becomes their tool to hold their personal discoveries and private thoughts.

Hopefully, this would become the external reminder to pay attention to self; to become growth conscious. Could this emerge as a possible tool of continuity in their reflective process after the project was completed?

Interview Content

Actual interviewing time with all five women comes to about seven hours, and there were also eight meetings in my apartment, when we engaged in dialogue in which additional questions for
reflection arose.

The nature of the questions for interviewing initially would revolve around their family of origin, the geographical location of their births, number of siblings, and the order in which they were born, their level of education, the influence of both parents on their lives, special talents and skills, cultural expectations, enduring personal memories either positive and negative that have impacted them, their own parenting experiences, professional and community moments from which they can extricate learning experiences about themselves or their contributions to the community, will characterize the priority areas of study and frame the content for personal interviews.

What will also assume an importance is how they define empowerment and what they learn from others in their respective workplaces and families. Of equal influence is how they define their most significant growth moments.

All of the above was subject to modification depending on the direction that unfolded. Whole new areas were explored, or expanded upon, while others did not assume nearly as much importance as I might have initially thought. In some ways, the unpredictability of responses created an ongoing adventure.

**Observation**

Observation of two of the five women in their work sites is a small part of this research, but I did manage to provide for those moments in Yolly's Day Care Center, and eventually with Hazel at the Women Infant and Children's Nutritional program. That observation not be
disruptive and that it actually be for everyone involved in the experience was a source of concern especially with Hazel's worksite.

**Research Characteristics**

In reading Patton, it appears to me that the purpose, content, and design of this study has elements of action-research. However, narratives through interviews, group interaction at meetings, and brief observation are the major sources of inquiry. It was important to me that the women own as much of this process as possible. However, I realize that the initiative is mine. I attempted to provide interactive experiences whereby they would listen to their own interviews, and collectively reflect around the content, interview each other, and participate in as dynamic a manner as possible in all of our group meetings.

I feel a bit tentative as I declare this in the actual writing of this project. The section on research design is crucial to the further development of this study. Ownership of this work had to be shared by all of us for the integrity of my objectives. However, even as I say that, Patton gently reminds me:

> Purposes, strategies, and trade-offs---these themes go together. A discussion of design strategies and trade-offs is necessitated by the fact that there are no perfect research designs. There are always trade-offs. These trade-offs are necessitated by limited resources, limited time, and limits on the human ability to grasp the complex nature of social reality. (1990:162)

Because of the intense interest of these women in this experience, I ask myself, however, if this isn't going to be very much action research, even with the initiative being mine.
Coding Schemes

As I was reflecting on the content of the interviews and field notes, I was intentionally looking for themes, concepts or repeated behavior that presented themselves for each woman. I had different colored cards for each woman and jotted down key words like: responsibility, teaching, example, support. How often did they arise? In meeting annotations as well. Is this what would flesh out my search? What were motivating realities for each of these women? How did they define terms?

When Hazel spoke of helping her siblings in El Salvador, she became very emotional and cried. When Yolly spoke of the mother-centeredness of her life, she laughed playfully, but became very serious when she spoke about boundaries.

Was I to code emotions as well? They comprise a powerful ingredient in the final analysis of perceptions and facts. They did, indeed, engrave themselves rather heavily on my mind as well. It became increasingly more difficult to practice this Epoche that was cited earlier as a step in this phenomenological analysis that was slowly, if tentatively, unfolding! I will now proceed with the steps of the design as they actually unfolded throughout this study.

IV. WOMEN'S NARRATIVES: PERSONAL AND MUTUAL EMPOWERMENT

Yolly

Yolly is a Springfield born thirty-five year old woman of Puerto Rican descent who is a mother of two girls, ages 11 and 17. Her husband runs a bakery, and she directs a Day Care Center in her home. Both of these work situations are demanding for each of them. Pablo rises at two every morning and works to about 10 A.M. Yolly starts receiving children at about 7:30 A.M.
until about 9:00 P.M. Some of the children are her own nieces whose father works with her husband.

I was able to interview Yolly at her home for an hour, observe her at the Day Care Center for about three hours, and interview her again at my home for about forty-five minutes more. Even during the observation period at the Center, we were able to discuss some issues that arose while we were with the four children who were there during the time that I was. Yolly also came to four more than one hour meetings. Due to her long work hour even on week-ends, Yolly struggled to participate and contribute significantly.

When I was with Yolly in her very active day care center in her home, we carried on simultaneous conversations as the children were also calling for our attention. One of my Peruvian friends said that Latin people were very polychromatic. They could maintain many conversations simultaneously with more than one person, and keep them all straight! I witnessed that in Brazil, and again in these very high powered situations with the children. The multifaceted dimensions of motherhood were much highlighted at these moments. Yolly herself refers to this in her interviews.

R: Why don’t you do that right now? List all the words that Mother is for you. Mother as teacher...

Y: Mother as teacher, Mother as doctor, Mother as everything. (Laughing) Like I’m always saying,  (to the girls) you’re always saying, Mommy, Mommy, Mommy. How come you never say, "Poppy, Poppy, Poppy". You’re always calling me! (laughing)

The interviews were comfortable, intimate and private. There was an easy flow to the exchanges between us. In this case, I actually saw Yolly living out the reality to which she referred at this moment. Yolly happens to love the mothering role, and in a special way, Mother
as teacher. This playful exchange on this subject really contained so much more potential for data than I realized at the time.

Yolly left school at seventeen to marry, but made it a point to earn her GED. Our exchange over this topic appeared rather innocuous at the time, but Yolly says some things that later will have some influence in her future plans. The following exchange took place:

**R. What motivated you to want to get your GED?**

**Y:** Especially because I had Valerie. I wanted to have my GED because I wanted to show her an example. Even though I didn't pursue anything. But at least I wanted to have that. You know, maybe sometime in the future I will do something.

The concept of example or modeling surfaces again for Yolly when we talked about her own parenting skills, and how important her parents were for her throughout her life. She took what they said quite seriously.

Another significant factor in Yolly's memory of her parents was the equality with which they treated each child in the family. This remains a vital element in her parenting experience with her two daughters.

**Boundaries** are well defined for Yolly as well. There was a powerfully clear moment of this in one of our interviews.

**Y:** Sometimes, like Valerie, (17 year old) she wants me to be her friend. But a friend in another way, we can be friends, but you can't cross the line. I cannot be the friend that will let you do everything you want. I cannot be the friend that you want me to be.

**R:** How did you figure that out? ...There are teachers still today, who have not figured that out yet?

**Y:** Oh, God, that's a tough question. It's when they come to you and say, "I want you to be like the others.

**R:** Like so and so's mother?
Y: Yes, I'm not like the others. I'm different. I'm sorry, I'm not like that. If I let you do whatever you want, I don't love you. Deep down, they do want the authority figure.

A lengthy and reflective conversation ensued, in which Yolly speaks of how her parents were this way with her, and how we invariably repeat what we received from our parents. Modeling, mother as teacher, and boundaries— all three dimensions rise their lofty heads, in the unfolding of her life. These are themes that repeat themselves in a variety of ways, and still yet more as she used the image of the "open door" as to how she was feeling about her future.

In integrating these images and themes, I was asking myself how what all this had to do with empowerment. This question was asked initially at one of our meetings. In talking to Yolly more recently, she had this to say.

R: What does the word empowerment mean to you?

Y: Empowerment... what does it mean? Being in charge of the job they have given you. Being in charge of your home. Being in charge of your life.

R: How are you in charge of your life?

Y: Doing what I want. Try to do more for the future. Try to do much more academically. Try to do the things that you like most. Try to do better things everyday.

R: What are better things?

Y: One of the things I ask of God, to be more human, a better Christian, better mother. Everyday to be a little better.

It was interesting for me to note "mothering," "taking charge," in these responses, and how academics still rides on the "coat tails" of the future. It's a constant from the earliest interview. Yolly sees more formal schooling as a part of her future, and integral to her empowering process. The "open door" has not closed yet.
Hazel

Hazel is a forty-two year old married El Salvadoran mother of a twelve year old girl. Her parents were small land owners in EL Salvador. She has been here in the United States for about eight years, and still prefers to speak more Spanish than English. Hazel works in the WIC program in a low-income neighborhood of Springfield, and her husband works in an electronic firm in Connecticut.

I interviewed Hazel twice in my apartment for a total of two hours and forty minutes. I had a three hour observation at her work site, and she also participated in three meetings in my a apartment with the other women.

With both these women I was able to return to their roots in the interviews, manage a glimpse of how they were perceiving their own life development, and with their journaling enable them to reflect a little more deeply about these perceptions. The latter of which I may or may not have had access on a particular day, as sharing was optional.

The observations furnished some highly visual, sensate, material background to the verbal descriptions about what these women do, and how they do it, who are a part of their daily lives, and the mutual influences that occur.

As was mentioned earlier, Hazel is employed as an intake worker in the WIC Program in Springfield with predominantly single mothers of diverse cultural backgrounds, but especially with Hispanics and African-Americans. My observation time with Hazel revealed a very warm, and sensitive woman, who loved being professional, organized and gracious with the steady stream of young mothers, babies, toddlers, and co-workers. Hazel evokes positive responses
because of her cheerful countenance, and impeccably groomed and stylish appearance.

Through this experience, I could see some connections with content from interviews where Hazel referred to being the caretaker of her five younger siblings when she was seventeen, and working in the city in El Salvador. They all moved in with her as did as her parents, and two older brothers and their wives. The household totaled twelve persons. Hazel refers to herself as another mother to her siblings during this time. **In fact, she actually states that this was the most growth-filled moment in her life.**

Seeing her this past December 12 with these younger mothers was truly moving. All her sensitivity and joy with them was quite evident. She especially liked talking to them in the privacy of the office, more than at the front desk. Her solicitude was sincere and dignified.

Hazel is also a catechist with whom I worked in the past. Her style of communication was essentially the same with the children and the parents with whom she works still today in that program. Hazel maintains apparent serenity and self-confidence in the midst of activity that demands an enormous amount of patience.

In El Salvador, in the midst of her care-taking, Hazel rendered special attention to her youngest sister with cerebral palsy. In her twenty year marriage, her husband has had a chronic drinking problem. What is interesting is that she married in order to share the responsibilities of life.

From one of our interviews in my apartment, Hazel shares the following:

**H:** I married someone I could delegate responsibility to. That appears selfish, but it is the reality...

**R:** What did you like most about him?
H: He is very attentive...always treats me like a queen, even until today...he was the support and back-up I was looking for. I have that now.

R: Back-up and support. Those are strong words.

H: Yes, they are. At times we have difficulties. He drinks alcohol, and at times, he doesn't control it...When he does that, I do not have pleasure to be close to him...he has to manage to take at least one or two...

R: Treats you well...but drinks too much.

H: Every time he drinks, he hurts his body, spends, and we argue. It is not everyday, but there are periods and occasions...

R: Is there the same necessity to feel this support and back-up after twenty years?

H: Yes, I became accustomed to his attention and his help...with my parents also.

R: How are you a support for your husband?

H: I give him personal attention. His own family is not very expressive...We talk a lot. He feels good about our relationship...We complement each other...

The themes that I perceived emerging here around sharing responsibility, seeking and giving support, are like threads that run through the tapestry of Hazel's life. The absolute bewildering piece of datum that totally perplexed me was how to weave her husband's drinking odyssey through her life's fabric.

I will return to this a little later, but what was helpful to me as I was attempting to analyze the fruits of interviews and observation with both these women was Patton's intervention one more time as I journeyed through this research. It is important for me to declare the obvious, here.

Of all the literature, his was the most clear for me.

The first step in phenomenological analysis is that of Epoche.
During this phase the researcher looks inside to become aware of personal bias and to eliminate personal involvement with the subject material.

Epoche is a process that the researcher engages in to remove, or at least become aware of prejudices, viewpoints or assumptions regarding the phenomenon under investigation. Epoche helps enable the researcher to investigate the phenomenon from a fresh and open viewpoint without prejudgment or imposing meaning too soon. (Katz, 1987:36-37) (Patton, 1990:407)

I surmised from reading this chapter, that my analysis of these data was a phenomenological analysis. Patton raised a red flag for me, so as not to precipitate some conclusions as to how each woman was perceiving her life, and also for me not to begin a comparative analysis between the two. This is especially difficult to refrain from doing, as I receive Hazel's following responses.

**R: What does empowerment mean to you?**

**H:** It's education, knowledge about something, and manage it in the right way.

**R: What do you mean by the right way?**

**H:** The right way is when I do something for others and myself, and there are good benefits.

**R: What are these good benefits?**

**H:** Feel good about something I did. Pleasing one another. Offer to someone, something. I am empowered when I am open to give and to receive from someone.

This last response brings us full circle to Hazel's seeking and giving support. Jean Baker-Miller could have been present at this interview when she writes in her article, *The Development of Women's Sense of Self.*

McClelland (1979) finds that women tend to define power as having the strength to care for and give to others, which is very different from the way men have defined power. (1991:25)
Anita

Anita came to my apartment one evening in early September. We shared some refreshments in my kitchen as we sat around the table and slowly entered into our interview which lasted about an hour. Anita is Ecuadorean and spoke Spanish. I spoke some English, but mostly "Portunol" some mixed Spanish and Portuguese that the people in this Parish have mercifully accepted in our mode of communication. Surprisingly enough, it works! Needless to say, we've shared much laughter over this arrangement that has served to bond us through our diverse experiences together! Even nuances of words are understood, as the Spanish and Portuguese are so similar.

Anita is Parish Secretary at the predominantly Hispanic Parish where I was Director of the Religious Education Program. She has been in the United States since 1970, and is a fifty-two year old single parent of two sons, one of whom is a teen-ager who still is at home with herself and two aging parents. Though the elders are receiving small financial support, through the father's pension and the mother's short term baby-sitting, Anita remains the sole, full-time wage earner for the household.

She was born in La Libertad a farming area outside of a large city in Ecuador, and was the oldest of nine children; three women, and six men. Her father was very strict, and though Anita always wanted to study, her father never encouraged her in these pursuits. Anita tells us,

A. He would say that if he spent all that money on the girls, it will all go to another family. He would do everything possible for the girls to become seamstresses, but not for the University.

It was opposite for the boys. For the boys, yes. He supports them to go to the school. My father would say that when they marry they have to support a family. They become the heads of household.
R. This was the justification to educate the men.

A. Yes.

R. Did your two sisters feel as much sadness about the school as you did?

A. Yes, but I was most affected because I wanted to study math. I went to the city and worked very hard, and I studied only two years.

I wanted to complete the Accountant course but I couldn't. In 1970 there was a revolt and they closed the University. There was no hope that it would open...

I was advised by a friend, "Anita, you have to leave here. You have to continue." I also had too many problems with my brother... I had serious conflicts with my father...

Anita was invited by an aunt to go to the United States and live with her. She left Ecuador in November 1970 and arrived in Washington where she became a personal attendant to a Cuban woman.

Patricia Arredondo, a Mexican psychologist referring to Hispanic women in her chapter on Multi-Cultural Counseling Theory and Latina(o) - American Populations in Sue, Ivey, Pedersen's publication, A Theory of Multicultural Counseling and Therapy illuminates for us in part what Anita experienced in her conflictual relationships with her brother and father. Strong cultural constraints cast an overarching form of control from which Anita attempts to free herself.

The reverence for motherhood presents many paradoxes for women who are portrayed as submissive caretakers and who learn how to aguantarse (endure and repress personal wants).

For women of post-World War II generations, employed and professionals, the norms for saintly and silent behavior do not necessarily work well. Awareness of one's sense of self, one's
rights and access to different forms of expression (education, writing), and societal changes with regard to women have upset the dynamic in many personal relationships. (1996:226)

It was moving to hear the sadness and frustration at not being able to study, and simultaneously to be inspired by the efforts that Anita exerted to modestly fulfill a little of her dream, even overcoming obstacles in Ecuador in order to study.

As we proceeded, we relived the challenging moments of when Anita first arrived in the United States. After the personal attendant position in Washington where she lived with her very strict aunt, Anita moved to New York where she began work packaging tablecloths in a factory --- a task she really disdained.

A. I had the last job. Sixty dollars a week. I never forget how they treated me.

R. That was like a push?

A. Yes, it was!

Anita left that job and resolved to study in order to get a better position. In 1978, Anita had already moved to Springfield, after having married in New York. She enrolled in Springfield Technical College for English and business training. When I asked what was one of her greatest growth moments Anita responds:

A. To me, I can say that my two years in College here in the United States in 1978. When it was over, I was so happy to know that I finished because it was something I really wanted. I was so happy that I made it!

R. Was it growing just academically?

A. I grew in every way. I thought after I finished, I thought I could buy a car, drive. To finish that study gave me confidence to do all those other things.
And Anita did get her license and a car! What becomes increasingly clear is the incremental strength to continue to free herself from that which holds her back. Her father's and brother's control, even her strict aunt, an exploitative job... all this she kept on leaving behind.

Upon reflecting with Anita about her journey, which by this time had also included a serious health problem, I asked:

R. What held you together in your greatest challenges?

A. My faith in the Lord. In spite of the fact that I had so much difficulty with my health problems, I always felt surrounded by help of the Lord.

R. Would you say that is your greatest gift, your greatest quality?

A. Without God we have nothing.

Anita's challenges had not ended. Her decision to end her fifteen year marriage was yet another leap toward freedom from a relationship in which she felt profoundly disrespected.

R. When did you become aware of how strong your faith is?

A. When I started to work in the Church. I did not have this faith in 1978. During all these years it kept on growing.

R. What do you think helped your faith to grow?

A. I don't know what I would have done without even this little faith... to do this separation... This problem with Paul was going on for a long time. I asked the Lord to give me this value to separate... to say enough...

R. The value of respect? To respect oneself?

A. Yes, the value of self-respect...

R. This was a triumph---self-respect, it's a great moment.

A. It took me so much time to recognize this value...

R. Is there anything more profound that God could want us
to learn about ourselves?

A. God doesn't want us to be unhappy. And I was unhappy...
I was praying all my time to have courage to separate
from him. I could not accept so many things he was doing...

When I first learned that Anita was born in La Libertad "Liberty" I asked myself if it wasn't
going to be significant. We traveled from the place of La Libertad to the spirit of what it
means. When I raised this to Anita she agreed with me. Was God calling her all through the
years to seek freedom? Anita responded with a yes and a quiet smile of contentment.

A. ... sometimes it was like a dream...I cannot believe
that I went through all these things...

R. What did you learn about yourself as you were going
through all these things?

A. I learned courage. I still have a dream about my studies.
I am thinking when Carlos finishes high school...
I am going to try to do something for myself.

One day I read in the paper that a woman who was
ninety-six years old finished the University.
I thought to myself, why not me?

Ann Oakley introduces her chapter, Education for Womanhood in her book, Subject Woman
with a poignant quote from Wollstonecraft's 1929 publication that captures some what of
Anita's unfolding quest.

"Educate women like men, says Rousseau, 'and the more
they resemble our sex the less power will they have over us.'
This is the very point I am at. I do not wish them to have
power over men; but over themselves. (1981:113)

Maria

Maria is a forty-five year old Puerto Rican mother of three children, two girls and a boy.
Maria has been married for twenty years and is currently employed as a secretary in a social
service agency in the North End of Springfield, whose clientele is also Puerto Rican.

Born and raised in Puerto Rico, Maria loves her homeland, as does her family. They all think about returning in the not too distant future. She vacillates sometimes about returning, however, due to her son's interest in completing High School in the United States. However, her love for her homeland is obvious, especially since her parents still live there along with numerous relatives.

Maria remains in a discerning mode about much of her life, especially her current employment and how that relates to her personal growth and future directions. Her weighing back and forth leads to an unfolding articulation of an evolving sense of self. Questions, aspirations and sometimes lack of clarity simultaneously manifest themselves as Maria initiates a search that appears to be irreversible. It seemed as if she was listening to herself talk about these issues for the first time. Our interview took place in my apartment on a cold Sunday evening over a hot bowl of soup.

R: When you were studying at the Elms, you were studying the computer?

M: First, I took English as a Second Language, and from there, to get Computer Science.

R: What do you hope to do with the computer?

M: Get a better job.

R: Of all the things you are doing—or that you know how to do in work... what would be your preferred job to do? Like you took the computer you said to get a better job. But is that really...what's your dream work?

M: I don't know. Right now, I'm confused. Because I'd really like to work with children. I like to teach. I like to work with computer. I'd really like to change job.

R: Do you want to talk a little more about that—about changing jobs?
M: (Long pause) Sometime I feel like I want to do something like work in a hospital and sometime I’d like to work in a school. Like sometime I’m feeling tired of working in an office.

R: In each case, whether school or hospital work with children. Did you say you wanted to work with children?

M: Yes.

R: How do you describe that work? What kind of work in contrast to the work that you are doing?

M: I'm thinking of working in a hospital, in a school. I would be, have more contact, or more direct contact with the people. Me—-I'm working with people like walk-ins. They come to the office. We would try to help to share their problems or to refer them to whatever could help them. But now I'm doing just my secretary work. Sometimes, I go beyond that, but it's now not part of my duties.

R: What did you do before that to go beyond that? But what would that have been?

M: Because sometimes when I get to the front there's um... people waiting um.... it's not the time. Because we have some hours to do that. I mean sometimes I do it. My supervisor asked me to do it. But that's just once in a while.

But sometimes, like last week, I came to the front to give something to the receptionist, and this lady came to me and said, "Can you help me do this because...It was a card. It was an employment form that needs to be filled out and she needs to answer some questions...

Sometimes, some people come to the office looking for an Open Pantry and it's after two o'clock um. They (other secretaries) don't want to do it because it's after two o'clock. If I can do it, I do it.

Maria continues to explain how she assumes some risk-taking with the supervisor as she helps out folks who come in after the deadline. She states that this worries her. There appears to be an on-going tension as Maria fulfills preferred tasks outside her job description.

R: When I listen...it appears like it's a Direct Service Role. Not a clerical role...

M: Um...

R: ...that you would prefer to do.

M: Yes, that's exactly what I mean.
R: ...In what way do you think those people touch in you a desire to want to serve more in the community? What ways does that happen?

M: When some people come to the office looking for help. I would like to serve them...and sometime I feel like I have some limitation that I can't help them. Because sometime people come to the office and can't speak English well, and they need to make a phone call and sometime they need to fill out a form. Sometime there are things I don't understand. I ask the other co-workers because I want to do it well. And sometime I look up on the dictionary. I have learned the same time I help the person.

R: So what you like best is...

M: ...work with the people...

R: They come and you can assist them.

M: ...and serve the people.

R: So that feeds into this desire to want to have more direct contact.

M: Well now that we have the secretary pool, it's like we are tied to that.

Maria surfaced a dormant desire to work in a different way with the community. Their needs called her. Her frustration towards the way some co-workers treat each other in the office, was clearly articulated also. Maria is thinking her way through a network of circumstances that confine her, and do not necessarily correspond to her values.

She was raised with a father who didn't even ask for payment of work that was owed him as an electrician. Consequently, for the quiet Maria to begin to express the stirrings of new desires becomes a major step in her journey, as is her acknowledgment that her current employment no longer fulfills her.

Jean Baker Miller shares an observation about this inner shift in Toward a New Psychology of Women.
Personal creativity is a continuous process of bringing forth a changing vision of oneself, and of oneself in relation to the world. Out of this creation each person determines her/his next step and is motivated to take that next step. This vision must undergo repeated change and re-creation. (1976:111)

Maria was deeply influenced by very courteous and controlled parents. Really saying what she feels is difficult. Her sensitivity on many levels is highly developed, but sometimes this impedes her energy to move forward on her deeply felt values. This was seen at our meetings, and in other conversations as well.

M: Sometimes, the co-worker ask me. Do you like to be a social worker? And I say no.

R: Why?

M: I don't know.

R: How do you explain that? ...it doesn't always have to be in the capacity of a social worker.

M: Maybe that's the answer.

R: Since you have been at New North, it sounds as if the people have had an effect on you.

M: Yes, it has because I think that desire to serve has grown.

In spite of her reserve, Maria has initiated a search for a new position without even leaving her chair. She has unlocked some personal queries that could map out a whole new path for her. On one level the conservative family influences shaped her, and years later the community draws her out of herself. Maria is beginning to experience what Carol Heilburn refers to in her Writing a Woman's Life:

Power is the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter.

(1988:18)

Maria shares with us later at our meetings how her part begins to matter.
Ella

Ella is a very gifted and sensitive forty-eight year old Colombian born mother of two young adult children, one boy still in college, and a young woman who graduated about two years ago. Ella is the oldest of four children. She went on to the University of Bogata and earned her degree in Architecture, and became employed with a British firm where she worked for about a year.

In 1986, Ella arrived in Florida with her family, and three years later, settled in West Springfield. She came to my apartment for our interview during which she spoke Spanish the whole time, and was very enthusiastic and willing to share. We explored the influences of her parents on her early life and proceeded to examine more closely Ella's present life moment where she still struggles with English after eleven years in the United States.

R: ...can you speak about your early childhood education through High School?

E: Surely. In my first years, I attended the Sisters' school until fourth grade. After, I moved and I went to another school, Carmel School... We changed addresses many times. When I was at Our Lady of Pity School, the last year, my mother offered that we go to the Public School. It was a tremendous change because I was accustomed to the Sisters' school. It was impacting... before everything was middle class, very courteous. When I entered the University I was very well prepared.

R: What did you like to study most?

E: I liked the sciences. I liked geography...I liked the sciences, botany, all these things fascinated me... I liked chemistry. As Alex (her daughter) got to like to study it too. If it were not for my parents, I could not have done this. They paid for all four children to go to school. It was very hard for them.

R: I observe, and so many other people observe in you, Ella, that you are very artistic, very creative, and at the same time, you are very scientific. After, we will speak about your experience as a professional architect. How do you combine these great talents? One, scientific, the other artistic? How do you combine that?
E: I don't know, because I have facility to draw... I like all that is natural, plants, animals. It's another material I like... I like contact with nature.

R: You were raised in the city, not in the countryside, but acquired a great love for creation. What was your experience as a child for example? When a person is raised in the country one has access to the trees, fish, water, rivers. You were raised in the city but have this great love for plants, trees, flowers, and creation. How do you observe this? How was this great love born for all of this?

E: I believe that happened through my mother. My mother is very romantic. My mother is very sensitive. My mother has a way of taking everything into herself... She was raised in the city, but always went to the farms to spend time with her family. I believe that this helped. She told stories of her beautiful experiences on the different farms.

R: ...How did you decide to study architecture?

E: I wanted to study Chemical Engineering, but this career in the University was very expensive... I couldn't do this because my parents couldn't. I took the exam and I passed... I had to choose one thing or another, so I chose this...(architecture) this was always something I liked.

Ella proceeded to explain how difficult it is to get employed when you do not a University Education. Here, she tells us, we can get employed in a variety of ways, and still manage financially, even without a college education. In Colombia, she would have gone to the factory perhaps, and her mother would have suffered greatly, as this work is so difficult there. The irony is at Ella is currently in the factory here, as her lack of English skills prevents her from a position commensurate with her professional formation. It is here that her transformational challenge resides. Not only with language, but with cultural (even within the Spanish speaking culture) and class issues. Ella's acutely felt lack of English skills is interwoven with her perception of her father's protective presence; one with which she cannot always identify due to this language deficiency.

R: We talked about the impact and influence of your mother... what would be the influence of your father?
E: My father...incredible...always working...With him there was tenderness. It was my mother who was responsible for discipline in the house. It was she who scolded, prohibited to go to certain places. My father felt all this was correct. So my father supported, gave security, a place that was protected.

R: ...always felt protected by your father.

E: Yes.

R: Do you feel the same things regarding your family...that with Alex and Danny, that they felt the same protection also?

E: Yes, because when you come from other countries the changes are great... There are a quantity of things that you have to do... Alex supported us immensely... Because with the language I had problems. In the beginning, I felt terror, I didn't even want to go out. If someone spoke to me, I couldn't understand, Sister. Oh my God!

R: You suffered very much.

E: Oh yes, when I went to the Bank, when I left the apartment, I always called her to assist me. And all the time I felt badly, because I who wanted to protect them. They were protecting me.

It is so painfully obvious how such an intelligent and talented woman could feel when she could not manage even the most simple daily tasks. Unable to protect and advocate for her own family, she became dependent on them.

Ella explains that even though she was studying English, she couldn't make progress because her co-workers were all Spanish-speaking.

E: ...everyone with whom I work for eight hours are Spanish, they are Spanish, Puerto Ricans. Even though I study, I can't practice it. This is my problem.

Yet in another conversation with Ella, she explains how she slowly overcame her fears.

Though she is only speaking English about five and a half hours a week in an additional part-time job as a monitor in a public school cafeteria three days a week, she is feeling so much more independent.

R: How do you like that job?
E: I love it!

R: Why?

E: I don't know. I feel good because I practice my English.

R: What was the strongest moment to help overcome your fears?

E: When I went to the school I had to speak English.

Ella's sister called to inform her of this opening at the school, encouraging her to take the position so she could practice her English more. This, she said, was the motivating step to want to improve. It was interesting to note in our conversation however, Ella's admission as to how difficult it was to speak English in front of other Spanish speakers. The uncomfortability of being publicly assessed by one's peers is an on-going tension. Ella also referred to the fact that some women in the cafeteria could explain to others what Ella was saying. We talked about how this happens sometimes with people with whom we relate more easily. They become attuned to our mode of communication on a level different from others. The relational is so culture specific here.

Communication and interpersonal relationships would definitely characterize effective learning for any persons of Spanish speaking persons.

Patricia Arredondo in her chapter in _A Theory of Multicultural Counseling and Therapy_ reiterates this when she says:

...research studies report that simpatia is likely to influence an individual's behavior according to marin and marin(1991) simpatia "emphasizes the need for behaviors that promote smooth and pleasant social relationships, and help avoid interpersonal conflicts. (1996:230)

Simpatia appeared to be present among the cafeteria women who "translated" Ella's attempts at
English. Ella affirmed the fact that others motivate her to go beyond her perceptions of what she can do. Her friends encouraging her, as in the above cited example, the people in her Church work, and her sister explaining how she "... could practice her English". They became catalytic forces in her learning process; most significantly, on the motivational level.

After these moments of self-confidence, Ella felt that all the other moments were a step by step process. She felt it was difficult to explain. However, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule in reference to an essay by E.B. White contained in *Women's Ways of Knowing* seem to understand what appears to be incommunicable for Ella:

> You know, it's not a battle between the gods that concerns women. Women are concerned with how you get through life from minute to minute. What each little teeny incident-how it can affect everything else you do... (1986:199)

In our meetings we will see how Ella integrates her discoveries of the cultural and class issues that were alluded to earlier. Her lived experience concretizes what she expresses about empowerment, and she also is genuinely surprised at how she was influenced by her own mother.

**Mutual Empowerment: Women's Listening Experiences**

We met eight times over a nine month period attempting to honor everyone's schedule and with a fair amount of success in attendance. Unpredictabilities of family and job demands, still arose, but we manged to stay cohesive through the unexpected. I chose to highlight the following meeting due to the fact that it was a shift in the ownership of this process whereby the women would feed back their perceptions of their own words about their lives.
Each woman accepted to listen to her own individual interview that was done with me. They were asked to listen and take notes about what they were perceiving about themselves. When we gathered for our next group meeting January 26, four women had completed the task.

After our opening prayer ritual for personal concerns and for women all over the world, and before I entered into more substantial content with them, I asked in a playful tone, "What was it like to hear your voice? How do you think you sounded?" Laughter filled the room, and spontaneously they offered light-hearted comments about how they heard themselves. Ella offered in amazement, "I had no idea of how much I talked! My voice sounded like my mother's." "I took so long to answer." chimed in Hazel. "I answered so slowly like an older person who couldn't think fast." With all due respect to older persons, we did laugh heartily.

They were so surprised at how differently they sounded, yet could poke fun at themselves. it was such a light moment. But a more serious discussion did arise from this as well. I noted at how we approve of quick responses from ourselves and others, and asked, "If we pause to think first doesn't that indicate something positive"? They all conveyed in a variety of ways that what was expected was the immediate response right on target. Pausing was less impressive. They referred to beauty pageants, and other public settings where the participants who answered immediately were, in their estimation, more highly valued by the viewer, and most certainly by this particular group. We concluded this part of our sharing with at least a little more openness to the fact that reflecting before answering was not a total negative. It was seen as a value to respond in a prepared way.

This casual discussion alerted me as to how different our perspectives were about this topic.
was rather impressed that some of them communicated more slowly in order to think more carefully. But I was being stretched yet another time to understand their point of departure.

We moved on to consider the question regarding their interview, "How did you perceive the influence of your family, either positively or negatively, in your process?" There was considerable comfort within the group so even questions like this were well received and responded to in a very natural style. Hazel, from El Salvador, said that the love of her family and their guidance as to her behavior was mentoring for her as she was caring for her siblings. "I taught my siblings the way I was taught. They also influenced me with the food, music. All the love they gave me. In all difficulties, good can come from it. "It's interesting how each women really claimed that last comment. They all shook their heads, and their faces manifested the lived experience of these words. I was moved in silence by the collective ownership of this conviction.

Anita, from Ecuador, referred to two moments in the interview. It was with some strong feelings of resentment that Anita remember her story of how her brother called her to accountability about the hour of her return from school. It was almost artful how Anita narrated the episode half playfully, half with indignation. It was at this point, Anita states, that she firmly declared to her mother, "The first opportunity I have to go, I'm leaving!" And leaving she did.

Anita continues remembering that when she arrived here, she went to live with a very strict aunt who reminded her of the rigidity of her father and her brother. Anita was articulate at expressing how clear the similarity of living experiences was for her. Each step radically increased her yearning for independence. Another strong moment in the interview came for Anita with the
following exchange.

Our group was spellbound as Anita referred to the day she told her unfaithful husband, "That's it! Out of this room! Out of this house! No more!" With that, Hazel strongly interjected with a very strong voice, "You have character!" It was such an all-engaging moment of women in solidarity with each other. Unquestionably, peer affirmation at its best! What could have been merely a sad recall of loss and pain was transformed into an open declaration of Anita's strength. She smiled, and quietly owned the glory of that moment. I was so deeply happy to be there.

I had also posed the question, "What was the part of the interview that touched you most and why?" Ella, from Colombia, chose this one to answer. She currently works in a factory where three radios are blaring simultaneously. Ella's academic formation is that of an architect, but upon arriving here without the English, she had to assume this position which initially, she virtually disdained. This part of the interview penetrated her very soul. Emphatically, she stated, "It was there, in the work, where I met God because I was so desparate."

Anita entered at this moment, re-enforcing a point. "The pain she feels was because she didn't want to be there. I know because I felt the same thing." Anita had worked in a factory folding tablecloths when she first arrived, and was very unhappy also.

The obvious identification that is apparent among the women is succinctly underscored by Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz and Yolanda Tranago in their chapter in rosemary Reuther's and Rosemary Skinner Keller's In Our Own Voices with the following:

...the need for economic and cultural survival has led Latinas to begin to understand themselves as one, to find similarities among themselves and capitalize on them; to see differences not as dangerous and divisive, but as an enriching factor. (1995:451)
There is definitely something intrinsic to identification among women in their challenges, but the above sustantiates a specific cultural need which strengthens this dynamic.

Maria, from Puerto Rico, who is usually reserved, but always shares, touched lightly on the first question about family influences. But where Maria really wanted to share was about the part where she states that she's always worried about people's feelings. When she wanted to converse with her supervisor about a sensitive subject she would get a lump in her throat. She felt the only way she could prepare for this encounter was with prayer.

When she eventually met with her boss, she was amazed at how confident she felt. Maria says to us at the end, "You know, I think it was she who was nervous!" At that moment, a full roar of laughter shot through the room."Wow, I really did it! It was the help of God." she concluded.

Yolly, who was helping her husband at the bakery besides running a Day Care Center simply did not have the time this week to do this.

**Spiritual Influence**

It is interesting to note the **force of faith and spirituality** and their impact on the strong moments of growth in these women's lives. In addressing the emergence of Hispanic Women's Liberation Movements in the United States, Isasi--Diaz and Tarango refer to Mujerista Theology—Womanist Theology. They tell us:

> From the beginning, the description of the term mujerista has had a strong religious component due to the centrality of the sacred to Hispanic/Latino culture. (1995:448)

We will discover throughout this study how this factor is intrinsic to their definition of empowerment.
Intra-Group Interview Outcomes

An additional meeting that I felt of great significance was the one when we were able to gather Maria, Anita and Ella of the five women to share their interviewing experiences among themselves. On February 23, we convened at my apartment, and after our usual greetings, refreshments and ritual of remembrance of women including our own absent group members, we delved into their experience of interviewing each other. I asked, "Did you have time to ask a question of another woman?" Ella and Maria had interviewed each other over the phone. What followed was a sharing of that experience and also some spontaneous questioning and exchange among all of us. Anita was not able to interview anyone prior to the meeting. Consequently, she made her inquiries at this time. I also had the opportunity to add some of my own.

Ella had asked Maria "How did the community influence you?" Maria's response: "In my work I have to attend to the public. I see their needs. It made me more sensitive. At Catechism I saw the sincerity and fervor of the children, and each year I went deeper."

Maria had asked the same question of Ella. She responded, "It was a very positive experience. The children helped me very much. In the beginning, I did not understand. The parents did not greet me. They did not smile very much. I came to understand that they had problems with money and other things. It's not against me, it's because of these other problems." Ella at this point went on to say that coming to understand the parents more at the Parish, she came to understand the people better at work.

This was a major leap! One reality informed the other. At this point it was very difficult for me to contain myself as I was so moved by this association. Ella expressed the heart of what
mutual formation is, and not only that, had integrated the apparently two separate experiences. Her work and faith communities on a certain human level had become one.

Maria further questioned Ella: "How did your participation in this project help you?" Ella responded: My experience was very good. I got to know this group more intimately. Your problems appeared so much like mine. I don't know, we got to meet with a lot of time...I'm happy.

I turned to Anita and asked, "Anita, ...maybe you're curious to ask a question of Maria or Ella?" Anita responded, "The question that Maria just finished asking was what I was thinking. In what way has this sharing helped you?" I was thinking this myself. As a family, we got to know each other more. It deepened our friendship. Maria shared her problem...as for me, it helped me greatly...Ella and I were already friends, then I got to know more Maria, Hazel and Yolly. It broadened our friendship..."

To ensure everyone's responses to this question I turned to Maria, and asked, "Maria, would you like to respond to the same question?" "As Ella and Anita said, it has helped us to get closer. It has helped me learn a new form of learning. I learned a skill...to understand myself...the people. It has helped me greatly. I was so happy to have this opportunity."

I asked, "Did you have any surprises? Any discoveries about yourself while participating in this project?" Anita responded: "In different steps...when you ask that question I see how the steps go in my life..." Anita moves her hands like a ladder in upward direction. "...this helped me greatly."
Ella said, "I discovered the extent to which my mother influenced my life..." I entered here because in addition to this personal discovery, I didn't want to lose another key moment of growth Ella had owned earlier. "You have come so far from that moment of not liking the job you had... I didn't know if this was a surprise for you...that you could move from that moment of unhappiness to this...I didn't know if this was a surprise." "Just now, I discovered that!" Ella exclaimed. And with that, Anita chimed in excitedly, "Oh, just now!" I also simultaneously discovered with Ella why she corrected herself when she defined empowerment using a word to connote the transitory instead of the definitive "fall." I exclaimed myself, "This substantiates the word you used, "passar" (to pass through) to pass through a phase." Ella's definition of empowerment is: when you know that difficulties are not what make you fall, but what you go through.

Further Reflection on the Meeting

Though not all women were present, and not all had interviewed each other, there were some rich moments of discovery together. By her own admission, Maria had learned the skill of self-reflection, Anita, the awareness of different life steps she's taken, and Ella, the integrative experiences of the mutual formation of the people in her life. Resulting from that she gained a recognition of how much she had grown emotionally towards the people in her community and at work.

Schedules did not permit for the intra-group interviewing experience that I had hoped would happen for everyone. When I did ask Maria, however, what it was like to be interviewed by Ella on the phone, she said that she was surprised by her question, because she didn't expect
to be interviewed at the same time. They both said that having the conversation was positive. The exchange that took place at this meeting surpassed what I had anticipated. Their clear identification of what was happening to them throughout the experience elated me. However modest the discoveries, they were authentic.

Hearing what they had gained from the experience I am inspired by Mary Catherine Bateson's words from *Composing a Life* which remind me of the calibre of women with whom I am

> These are not lives without commitment, but rather lives in which commitments are continually refocused and redefined. (1990:9)

As each of these women referred to their learnings, be it reflection as a skill, consciousness of life steps, the emotional connection made about people, or an assessment of their personal growth, these women’s commitment to further development and growth remains a constant.

Even though the mutual interviewing did not occur as I had planned, why do I still feel like ownership in the process has not totally died?

**My Role: My Story Within Their Stories**

In the development of this research project, I am a personal friend to these women. They also know each other from the Parish. I see myself within this experience as a catalytic agent in the discovery process. My own personal and professional appraisal is on-going within this experience, as I monitor the risks of precipitous conclusions. I am honored by the trust and openness of these women.

This experience is presenting them with the opportunity to pause and identify growth moments
at varying points along their journey. Their power of naming them has offered affirming and liberating moments. In so doing, I am never allowed to forget the vulnerability of my own process, and also the illuminating breakthroughs of strength and self-advocacy that I also proudly claim.

In referring to my role, I am also reminded of a small, but uncomfortable moment that arose for me as I was doing some observation with Hazel at the WIC Center which was a very inviting environment. The brightly illuminated lobby was decorated for Christmas, with Santa faces, children's posters, large, safe, stuffed toys in plain view, and best of all for me, total accessibility right from the street. It was a popular, hospitable setting, and very well organized. The mothers and children appeared very comfortable and at ease, as did the staff.

I was sitting in the lobby taking notes, when Hazel motioned for me to go with her into an office right off the lobby. I followed her in, sat down, and immediately asked if this was going to be okey with the mothers who would subsequently be coming in to talk with Hazel. She assured me that she would introduce me to the mothers, and explain what I was doing.

As each mother entered, Hazel introduced me, ands I asked the first woman if she preferred that I leave, I would. She was very casual and said she didn't mind at all. After that, in the ease of the routine, Hazel explained who I was, but I stopped giving them a choice about my presence. I held their babies, laughed, chatted, talked with hazel in interim moments, and had a good time for myself!

Everyone seemed fine, until a very young African-American woman came in with a toddler. She never smiled, and looked at me with large, searching eyes, almost furtively at times. No one else had appeared as questioning, though each of them had a clear right to be. Hazel never said
anything to her about me, and neither did I. To this day, I don’t know why. Had I begun to feel entitled? I have since explored that feeling inside of me. Was I intimidated by her? Was I afraid rejection? Had I generalized that my welcome was equal by every woman? I was embarrassed by such presumption. It was my only difficult moment in this research, and I created it for myself.

V. FINDINGS: EMPOWERMENT THEMES

This project examined Hispanic women's perspectives of how the family and community influences their empowerment processes. Five women were chosen to be interviewed, two were observed at their work sites, all joined together for a total of nine meetings at which time the fruit of their listening experiences to their interviews was shared, and further questions and reflections were exchanged. Because of the force of their spirituality, it was relatively easy to engage in women's prayer ritual as we remembered women all over the globe who were in struggle in diverse ways.

This project was a rewarding experience on a personal, academic, cultural and spiritual level. The collective process was intrinsically empowering for all of us. There remained sustained motivation to explore with these women the richness of their life's journeys, how they overcame obstacles, and what treasures they discovered deep within themselves that without this experience might otherwise have remained hidden.

Some themes emerged that provide a foundation for each woman throughout her life. An ongoing sense of growth and freedom reveal to us a clearer sense of the participants' empowerment process.
Themes for Yolly

Yolly refers to her future growth in terms of schooling. She earned a GED long ago for two reasons: to give an example to her oldest daughter, and to safeguard the opportunity to return to school for herself. Yolly loves being a mother and to teach in the Day Care Center. **Mother as teacher speaks eloquently to Yolly.**

The concept of modeling and giving example was first done by her parents. Yolly's parenting skills find their origin in what she experienced from them. The **conviction of role definition** evolves from her soundness in boundaries with her daughters. This clear sense of identity holds her in good stead. Yolly uses the image of "open door" to express her inner feeling of potential and anticipation for what is yet to come. There is still more she wants to do for herself both academically and professionally.

Themes for Hazel

Hazel could list in a facile manner all the skills she had accumulated at an early age in El Salvador, cooking, sewing, managing a large household. She used the **image of a safe** where all that she had learned was guarded there. **This was her resource center.** She cried when she referred to this. Any skill she needed was there for her to draw upon.

When asked how she learned best, she said with her **whole being.** It was not just visual or in the doing. Hazel says, in Spanish, "...with all of my feelings." It appeared so integrated to her. Her body coiled at the shoulders when she said that. Her **whole self** was caught up in that response.
Hazel saw her future contingent upon her able use of already developed skills to lead her to new opportunities. There was a confidence about that, and she treasured what she had already accomplished in life.

In reflecting upon her co-existence with her husband's drinking problem, the need to not make public, or "rock the boat" within her family is as much cultural as it is to be perceived in any other way. Within the social class from which Hazel has come, personal family problems are private. Patricia Arredondo, a Mexican psychologist tells us:

In fact, the family is the primary source of self-definition and self-esteem, the structure and support of the individual. (Sue, Ivey, Pedersen, 1996: 224)

Given the consistent economic providing that her husband still manages to do, and the attention he still bestows upon Hazel, she feels no need to magnify the problem more than it is. However, though this is a cultural treatment of this issue, it does not neutralize the challenge that it inherently is. Eventually, Hazel will have to appeal to the safe of guarded resources for self-advocacy and challenge to her husband.

Several weeks after writing this, Hazel chose to share her husband's drinking problem with our group at one of our meetings. It was impressive to observe how each woman reached out to Hazel with hugs, words of encouragement, prayers and a telephone number to seek out a Spanish speaking Ala-Anon group. Hazel was radiant with gratitude and said, "Not everyone has the privilege to share like this!" Her trust and obvious feeling of safety was spontaneous and sincere. What is deeply significant here is how the process of sharing one's life, even to the intimacy of
a spouse's drinking problem became an empowering experience in and of itself. Janet L. Surrey in her chapter from *Women's Growth In Connection*, re-enforces this concept when she states

> Personal empowerment can be viewed only through the larger lens of power through connection, that is, through the establishment of mutually empathic and mutually empowering relationships. Thus personal empowerment and the relational context through which this emerges must always be considered simultaneously.

*(1986: 164)*

**Themes for Maria**

Shortly before one our meetings, Maria quietly said, "You know when you asked me after I spoke to my supervisor, if I still felt that way? Or was it only then at that time? **Well, I'm still thinking about that**" This was in reference to the self-confidence that Maria felt when she confronted her supervisor. Maria's sensitivity which is a great human gift is simultaneously an on-going concern. Her *discerning skills are highly developed* and she doesn't relinquish a deliberative mode easily. This tenacious quality is ideal for reflection, a skill that Maria tells us she learned to effectively use throughout her life.

However, by Maria's own admission in her interview, fear of hurting other people's feelings restricts her potential for effectively building on her victorious exchange with her supervisor. Hence, **Maria revisits that moment**, as she did with me, for **she knows that becomes her yardstick for measuring future empowering moments**. Maria's reliance on her faith life is consistent while she processes how she is growing and it indeed will be the accompanying strength as she responds to other challenges for self-advocacy.
Themes for Anita

Anita was deeply impressed with her experience in this project and with what she learned about her life passages. As was presented in her interview and at the meetings, her courage to live out what her definition of empowerment declares is clearly manifest in the multiple decisions she made to remain pro-active about her life when preceding events would have appeared to have extinguished any flame of hope. Anita systematically constructed on preceding events to journey toward a growing sense of freedom.

Themes for Ella

Ella's indomitable spirit releases contagious energy as she refuses to allow a new and challenging job, a strange language, and aloof behavior, alienate her. Ella said that she was surprised how much her sensitive mother had influenced her. This fact eventually became one of her tools as she struggled to learn the language that would liberate her from dependency on others. It would call her to look deeper into a people that she could not initially understand, and allow all of that to catalyze a happier life for her in the workplace. Ella allowed both her family and her community contribute to a healthy interdependence.

Themes for Myself Within This Project

This is unexpected for me to account for myself as well, but on principle, it appears congruent with the commonality of our journey. My motivating questions were generated from an on-going concern for integration between the personal and the social process to which we dedicate ourselves. As we progressed, my companions opened up the spiritual to the degree that I began to feel like I might be accused of contriving the data, or "stacking the deck" as it were.
Spirituality As Integrating Force

Though I was deeply impressed with the depth of their faith commitments, I slowly became concerned that academia would not duly recognize the value of these convictions in an educational endeavor. Until one day when I was sharing this, someone asked, "What is all that saying about the learning process?" Upon reflecting on that question, I am led to conclude these women were saying that they learn in an integrated way when the spiritual is central to their process. That has to be taken seriously. I don't know if this is a theme for me or not. In articulating my concern, I received some feedback, got unstuck, and felt affirmed in claiming a substantial piece of data to be processed in these findings.

Accompanying Cultural Influences

For all these women, since they are Hispanic, and we are reflecting with them within the family context, as well as in the community, gender role socialization is an inevitable influence in their growth process. It is the culturally expected factor that is impossible to avoid. In Sue Ivey and Pedersen, we read,

...women are referenced in terms of marianismo, "the cult of female spiritual superiority which teaches that women are semi-divine, morally superior to and spiritually stronger than men" (Stevens, 1973:315)

The prominent role of mothering and care-taking is clearly articulated by these women. Though it is cherished, they are working professionally as well. Initially, this was difficult for Yolly to do, but eventually her husband conceded. Yolly says he was "immature" at the time. Actually, he was doing what he felt was expected of him.

It is also about demonstrating the capacity to provide for and having firm control of one's family. In some communities, it would be an affront to a man if his wife had to seek employment, because her
behavior would intimate that he cannot provide sufficiently. (Sue, Ivey, Pedersen, 1996:226)

These are some cultural constraints that sometimes are operating within the Hispanic women's efforts towards empowerment, and which can on occasion have its negative impact. But as was stated earlier, it is precisely in struggle, that their strength lies. Their family obligations and their professional competencies are equally valid, and for these women an integration, not a fragmentation. Jean Baker-Miller in The Development of Self is truly articulate on this point.

This means, in effect, giving primary attention to participating in and fostering the development of other people—and even direct concentration on sustaining of the sheer physical life of others. Simultaneously, these realms delegated to women have been granted inferior value. They have not been incorporated into our perceptions as sources of growth, satisfaction, and empowerment. It then becomes difficult to conceive of them as the wellsprings of true inner motivation and development. But they are. (1991: 26)

**Power in relation, in connection** appears so culture specific here as the Hispanic reality is so other centered. All these women speak of their growth patterns in relation to family, community, how others call them forth to give, to serve, to be. What is important here, is that reality of service not be exclusively perceived as subservience, but one in which the relationships are empowered, for as this study steadily reveals to me, the power to give, to nurture, is intrinsically empowering, creative, generative for women.

**Women's Definitions of Empowerment**

At the January 26 meeting, after reflecting on the moving and encouraging revelations from their interviews, we moved on to discussing their definition of empowerment. It is important to note, that I emphasized the fact that there is no right or wrong answer within this reflection. After listening to the play-back of significant moments in their lives, what does empowerment
mean to them? **From the living, comes the naming.** How can we ever assume what it is empowering, or disempowering in the life of another? It would be the most blatant oxymoron in liberation reflection and experience if the agency of that identification was appropriated by someone else. The authentic source is the person in the process. With that plainly stated, we proceed.

**Anita**

Anita said it was, "To be able to do something." I asked, "What is this something?" "To be able to make decisions." "Decisions about what?". I asked. Anita paused, "To change your life." "Your definition then, Anita, is: the ability to be able to make decisions that will change your life." "Is that right?" "Yes," she said. Given all the candor of Anita's sharing, it was not necessary for us to pursue where such a definition came from.

We reverently held the depth of her journey that evening, and could fully embrace the quality of these words and had no doubt about their origin. Anita had courageously left her country, a job where she felt denigrated, and a husband who failed to respect her. At fifty-two, she had already fought back twice from cancer. The inimitable strength of this woman was consistent, faith-filled, and inspired by the certainty that she deserved better: further development and the freedom to be most fully her best self.

Carol Gilligan highlights this very well in, *In a Different Voice*, when she refers to a 1978 publication of Daniel Levinson's "The Seasons of a Man's Life." Though it was a predominantly male study at the time, this passage reflects somewhat of Anita's process.

If in the course of "Becoming One's Own Man," (woman) this
structure is discovered to be flawed and threatens the great expectations of the Dream, then in order to avert "serious failure or decline," the man (woman) must "break out" to salvage his (her) Dream. This act of breaking out is consummated by a "marker event" of separation, such as "leaving his wife, (leaving her husband) quitting his (her) job, or moving to another region". Thus the road to mid-life salvation runs through either achievement or separation. (82:152)

Self-fulfillment is an evolving process to be sure, consequently the chapters of Anita's life, (like our own), continue on with significantly greater self-direction. In closing our reflections of Anita's definition of empowerment it is interesting to note how Jean Baker Miller in her chapter, Women and Power from Women's Growth In Connection, echoes Anita's contributions to this step in our reflective journey together:

My own working definition of power is the capacity to produce a change---that is, to move anything from point A or state A to point B or state B. This can even include moving one's own thoughts or emotions, sometimes a very powerful act. Also there is the question: "Power for what?" One may think of gaining power for oneself... (1991:198)

**Ella**

Ella responded to this inquiry saying that empowerment "...is to overcome difficulties, great obstacles, that when you think you fall, you will get up." "That when we fall, we will get up?" I ask. "No, not fall really. Like I fell, no. It is not a fall. It is something that we go through. Not a fall." Ella felt that she experienced an attitude change toward her job. She discovered that she could do it successfully. She also won the respect and affection of her co-workers. Her desire to improve English has not waned, but she feels she can better manage daily responsibilities in the wider English speaking community.

What was significant for me is that Ella retracted the term "fall". In Spanish she said, "passar",
to pass. Fall is definitive. Pass through is transitory. She could not envision herself as down. Walking with difficulty perhaps, but not down. Why does indomitable come to my mind? That's not Ella's word. She, as so many other immigrant women, struggling to adapt and produce in this fast-paced society, refuse to not rise to the occasion.

I remember Ella saying in this meeting, and also in an earlier interview, how "useless" she felt without the English. She said, "I was so embarrassed. My children had to settle things. I am the mother. I should be protecting them, and they were protecting me. I felt useless."

Ella pursued English classes and made some modest improvement which has brought her to a different inner space. The "uselessness" she felt in the past, has been significantly minimized. "I don't feel like that today." Ella tells us. She admits that getting involved in Church work also helped her feel more affirmed in her talents as an artist. It is observable how her self-confidence has dramatically increased. This is undeniably the powerful contribution of the community to Ella's process.

In reflecting upon this, Mary Catherine Bateson in, Composing a Life, appears to be affirming Ella in all her efforts at not "staying down".

Those who move beyond discouragement are those who start out with a core of confidence and strength and who are lucky enough to continue to grow through environments that do not exploit the residual vulnerabilities everyone brings from childhood. (1990:37)

Maria

Empowerment for Maria from Puerto Rico meant, "To be able to do something that you were not able to do before." Flowing right from her most recent example of her encounter with her
boss, Maria was able to connect with the power she felt in that exchange. In speaking with Maria about this moment. She said, "It made me feel very confident." "Did you start feeling more confident about everything?" "I've been feeling more confident about myself." I reminded Maria about an earlier interview where she said that having her first child as a memorable moment of growth. "One of my most important moments of growth was when I had my first daughter." "Why?" "I changed because I think of my children. I am the last one."

I asked Maria if she could see a connection between these two moments...her conversation with her boss, and having her first child. She said, "Yes." "How?" "God, everytime I feel afraid to do something, I pray. He must be tired of hearing me."

I must admit that I was expecting a more layered kind of answer. Maybe something linked with imagery or symbolism. Birthing a child, birthing a new self. Not so. Her response was very much Maria. Simple and sincere. And once again, the spiritual anchors in the energy.

Consuelo del Prado from Peru, in a chapter from Through Her Eyes, edited by Elsa Tamez captures a little of this spiritual energy of the Hispanic woman's faith when she shares the following with us:

She must fight against the little voice inside of her that says "I'm not worth anything. I can't. I don't know ... What allows us to overcome fear is the spirit of love... (1989:43)

Voice is a symbol that is referred to again in the same book in a different chapter in the same publication by Alida Verhoeven when she presents the compelling voice of change.

We need only to take the time to stop and listen to the spiritual voice deep inside ourselves in order to begin the transformation, and from there to extend it to growing circles until it reaches all women... (1989:55)
Our two and half hour meeting that night was a modest but real expression of one of these "growing circles..." Our discussion began with answers to questions about family influences and impacting moments that they heard in their life narratives on the interview tapes. Understandings of empowerment and unforgettable story telling of their challenging lives, all lead us to solid moments of safety, trust and bonding. Even Hazel could entrust her husband's drinking problem to everyone's prayers, and knew she could call on any one of these women for help while she sought the appropriate support group for families of alcoholics. She hadn't even shared this crisis with her family or her in-laws.

**Hazel**

Hazel had explained that she saw it as the ability to give and to receive. Tonight she wanted to expand her definition of this term. "I think it is a combination of things. Yes, to give and to receive, and also the ability to analyze a situation, and make decisions."

**Yolly**

Yolly had interjected earlier when Hazel was initially opening up the issue of her husband's drinking, by referring to her own husband's temporary bout with depression, was physically moved when she recalled how sad and desperate a time it was for herself and her family. She had also offered her definition of empowerment as "taking charge of one's life." By the time we reached Yolly she was the last to speak. Yolly began by saying that she was a little ashamed to say that for a while she was on welfare a long time ago. And continued to say that she heard stories that the social workers would come and visit your home as a surprise check on you. She said, "I was so afraid that at any minute someone would come to the door", and she faked
a scream and look of horror. Everyone laughed. But then composing herself, Yolanda went on to say that she felt very humiliated to be on welfare. With a great deal of firmness and determination she declared, "I'll do what it takes to get off. Whatever I have to do."

She explained how living in that fear everyday was more than she could tolerate. "No one should have to live like that." Yolanda went out and filled applications for whatever she could get. Finally, she was accepted as a Teacher's Aide. To take charge of one's life held very clear meaning for us after Yolly's enfleshment of these words.

When Hazel had referred to analyzing a situation I didn't have time to explore that word more at the meeting, but the thought has since occurred to me if in the very process of sharing her husband's issue, she didn't begin a deeper analysis of her own situation. This was the second time she publicly shared this problem, and this evening was an update. I observed a difference each time she talked with the group---more clarity and tremendous trust and affection for everyone listening to her. An air of expectancy fills the room when she opens up about this subject. Somehow we all feel a vested interest in the outcome.

I had asked at an earlier meeting if they would accept asking at least one question of one other woman in the group. They could call, visit, or meet each other for the exchange at a time convenient for them. Our next meeting would be to share our findings.

This particular meeting somehow or other unfurled like a seamless garment. To give and to receive, to take charge, to analyze, make decisions for change, to do things you did not know how to do before, to pass through and come out the other side, not fall; all their lived realities are woven into the wholeness of each of their lives. Throughout this research I have become so
appreciative of Mary Catherine Bateson's reflections on women's lives. In *Composing A Life*, she alludes to similar imagery:

> The health of that larger whole is essential to the health of the parts. Many women raised in male-dominated cultures have to struggle against the impulse to sacrifice their health for the health of the whole, to maintain complementarity without dependency.(1990:240)

This is the on-going struggle of so many women...to live in balance with new found self discoveries. For Hispanic women in a specific way, this challenge is reenforced because of cultural expectations that are still pervasive for so many women.

As we all embraced each other, departing with little messages, all speaking at the same time in Spanish, my aching feelings of the proximity of the last time that we would get together in this way, were already surfacing somewhere between my stomach and my heart.

**Further Reflection on This Meeting**

*Mutual empowerment* was so evident throughout this meeting as each woman became the positive energy for the other. The growing strength to share was actually visible in their faces as the meeting progressed. Yolly, who did not have the time to listen to her tape, spoke of her past situation because of Hazel's openness about her own. There was an interactive dynamic surfacing throughout the meeting whereby one woman's last word almost became the first word of the next woman to speak. Carolyn Heilbrun in her *Writing a Women's Life* expresses the fruits of such an exchange with the following:

> I suspect that female narratives will be found where women exchange stories, where they read and talk collectively of ambitions, and
possibilities, and accomplishments I do not believe that new stories will find their way into texts if they do not begin in oral exchanges among women in groups hearing and talking to one another. As long as women are isolated from the other, not allowed to offer other women the most personal accounts of their lives, they will not be part of any narrative of their own. (1988:46)

"narratives of their own" were what they were actually co-constructing in such a collective model.

VI. IMPLICATIONS: NEW THREADS OF EMPOWERMENT

The family and community influences on Hispanic women's empowerment processes implies the existence of the mutually formative experiences in their lives. They form and are formed. They are teachers and learners. Janet Surrey in her Chapter, "Relationship and Empowerment" in *Women's Growth In Connection* eloquently addresses the underlying concerns around empowerment and the lived realities that enflesh this concept.

Why has the concept of empowerment become so popular, and why have we been using it increasingly over the past few years to describe this essential aspect of women's development? First, the use of this concept has encouraged a redefinition of traditional power models... In our first colloquium, Jean Baker Miller (see Chapter 11, this volume) proposed a use of the word *power* as "the capacity to move or to produce change," to replace the notion of power as dominion, control, or mastery, implying "power over". She suggested that women would have difficulty embracing a power model that involves competition or winning over others...

An alternate concept of personal power as inner strength and self determination has appeared throughout the psychological literature (e.g. Rogers, 1975; Maslow, 1954), but this concept still evokes the image of the highly individuated self-actualizer. We have needed a different concept to suggest power with others, that is, power in connection or relational power. Thus we have talked about mutual empowerment (each person is empowered) through relational empowerment (the relationship is empowered). (1991:163)

These thoughts capture for me what is crucial to this definition and to some of my own
questions about empowerment. From my perspective, there are three factors to be considered in the above text:  
1. new reflection about power - not power over someone else  
2. alternate definition - inner strength - power over one  
3. emerging concept - power with others, in connection

What I observe is that each woman grew differently, and at different moments was feeling personal power and from there, had the resources to experience the power in connection with others. Concretely:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anita</td>
<td>the ability to make changes in your life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ella</td>
<td>knowing you can grow through difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazel</td>
<td>the capacity to give and to receive; to analyze</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>the ability to do something you never did before</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yolly</td>
<td>to take charge of your life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Four out of five define personal power, but their journeys reflect the eventual relational dimension. Hazel's definition and lived experience reveal the combined personal and relational dimension. Life experiences lead me to believe that personal power precedes the ability to connect in a healthy way. The relational demands energy that primarily needs a center from which to draw.

Yolly's need for boundaries comes from this center, as does Anita's strength to separate from what was de-energizing in her life. Maria's struggle for greater self-confidence, and Hazel's growing capacity to analyze her current situation with her husband, right to Ella's move towards more openness to the people, all imply a center. I realize that life isn't so well
ordered. First, we have this, then we gain that. People call us to grow. We are always in relation but the concept of inner, individual strength persists as an issue for me.

Life is dynamic and it is not my intention to contrive, but perhaps personal power and relational power in the final analysis are inextricably intertwine.

**Major Concerns Revisited**

Finally, we return to my *initial concerns* stated on page 7 of this project:

- the further development of women's ability to **assess and critique their own learning process**;
- consciousness-raising as to what **empowers** them;
- evaluate what **personal resources** they bring as to **how** they learn;
- identify the characteristics of **mutually formative experiences**
- reflect upon the **cultural influences** in their processes

It appears that all of these concerns were addressed in varying degrees by everyone in the group. Examining this more closely we reflect upon the following.

**Learning Process**

Upon revisiting some of our conversations we recall that Ella discovered how her mother had sensitized her to nature and beauty, and how this accompanied Ella throughout her more scientific career. Ella learned how to integrate art and science in an aesthetically pleasing and balanced fashion. This invariably characterizes everything Ella quite literally “touches”.
Ella also addresses this concern when she explains how others motivate her and call her to go beyond herself. As her sister did when she called her to apply for the cafeteria job so could practice her English.

Hazel and Yolanda learn with their "whole being". On page 62, we read, "What she (Yolanda) was doing was what Hazel was feeling when she said she learned with all her being."

Integrative experiences characterize so much of how they learn.

For Anita achievement generated more confidence that called her to grow in other ways. After finishing a course in college here, she was energized to do more. Drive a car and continue studying, as we read on page 27.

Maria tells us that her most significant growth moment was when she had her first child. Responsibility for another opened up horizons for assuming the nurturing role which as we also discovered was key to empowering relationships.

**What Empowers Them**

Though each woman owns a different definition of empowerment what is the underlying source that was repeatedly shared throughout was their faith life. They were clear as to what this term means intellectually, but the soul behind it resides in the diversity of ways they talked about their spirituality. As was stated earlier in the findings, it is central to how they learn and develop throughout their lives.

As in Ella in the workplace," ...that was where I found God because I was so desparate." Anita saying, "I prayed for courage". Yolanda responding, "One of the things I ask of God...to be
more Christian." From having a baby to confronting her supervisor, Maria tells us, "When I am afraid I pray".

**Personal Resources and Mutual Formation**

I am joining these two areas because in the women's sharing it appears to me that that is what they did so many times. Ella most especially did this when we hear her tell us how she began to better understand the people in the parish. She brought her openness to be formed by them and consequently by her co-workers at the factory as well.

Anita brought an enormous amount of determination and courage to all the challenging moments that her own family and first American factory employment overwhelmed her into defying. Her formative moments sometimes were almost of an adversarial nature with the exception of the college course she successfully completed. Each time she assumed the weight of the demand, she got stronger. She herself, says, 'Sometimes, it was like a dream...I cannot believe that I went through all these things." (p.27).

Yolly brings such goal-directedness to her experiences. When she discusses limits with her teen-age daughter, the justice of her own parents with her comes through in her own discourse. Yolly's formation from her parents was transparent, as was her openness to her own daughter now. The latter's persistent appeals for her mother to yield call forth with increasing clarity Yolly's own philosophy as a parent. As is shown on page 18 with "If I let you do what you want, I don't love you."

Hazel brings to her learning process highly developed organizational skills that she learned at a very young age when she was care taking so many young siblings. It was evident at her worksite,
and even in her first response to empowerment, "It's education, knowledge about something, and manage it in the right way." (p.22) From these ideas, she goes on to develop the ability to give and to receive. Her early family needs formed her in these skills which have come to define much of who Hazel is today.

Maria's outstanding reflective abilities accompany her throughout her life, as her parents, especially her Dad, were very much the same way. Maria came to recognize this also in our conversations. Sometimes it can work against her when she lingers in a decision-making process. It also creates the inner environment to listen intently to others and penetrate the reality of what is being said. Hence, all the people who come into the agency where she works begin to influence her for more direct involvement.

**Cultural Influences--Women's Reflections**

All five women could critique the cultural influences that enhanced their lives as in the strong relational gifts, extended families, and faith development within their cultures. And they could claim what challenged their development as well.

Anita felt restricted by both her father and her husband. Hazel felt social constraints in openly discussing her husband's drinking problem. Yolanda recognized the need for her husband to change regarding her employment. Though many women from a diversity of cultures could probably identify with these same problems, these women would definitely perceive what was very Hispanic in male control, respecting privacy of family issues, and the man's need to provide for his own family without his wife's financial collaboration. Though
much of this is changing, some control is still present.

When I initiated this project it was to examine and illuminate the Hispanic women's perceptions of the family and community influences in their empowerment processes. In the actual reporting of these findings, it was effectively brought to my attention that what challenges this process must also be considered. Cultural and spiritual influences must also be factored in given their intrinsic value for these particular women.

My motivating concerns were that not only social change processes demand attention, but the individual who is engaged within the processes as well. If these individuals could become growth-conscious, reflective, and aware of the need for balance, and cognizant of how they learn through life, would they feel more empowered and discriminating of their contributions and their needs? At the inception of this project I also asked myself if these women would furnish a new indicator for the empowerment process. The following hopes to address these questions.

Spirituality: Integrating Thread for Empowerment Process

All five women in this research project related their life narratives with their spirituality as a point of reference or as central to their lives. Spirituality presents itself as an undeniable force in their empowerment process. As they encountered challenges, setbacks, intimidation, life threatening disease, they saw their spirituality as the integrating element in their growth process.

This new indicator does not appear like radical new information. But I ask myself if it doesn't challenge our expectations about everyone's empowerment process. Do we perceive
empowerment in limiting ways? Have we ever thought about the spiritual dimension as motivation for an integrating growth process that does not isolate or fragment liberating moments? Could the spiritual dimension actually affect the way we could potentially teach and learn throughout life? How we can affirm the cultural influence of the learner in his/her learning process?

It is interesting to note that both the physical and mental health fields have publicly acknowledged the influence of spirituality on the healing process. What does this have to sat to the world of education?

Implications for Community-Based Education/Women's Groups

The above cited questions generate:

- Examples of community based education where we create space and time for effective sharing of participants' lives as they interface with the learning of new material. Sample questions: When in their lives were they exposed to the subject matter being introduced? By whom? What was it like? What do you remember most about that experience?

- Could the meetings that were held model moments in Women's Study Groups where mutually life giving moments could be facilitated? Could women enable each other to remember and count on the accumulated knowledge they already acquired in life's experience around a given topic?

- Work with Refugee and Immigrant groups could benefit from the cultural impact of this research. How can we integrate the learner's natural ways of learning and interacting in groups
so personal power and relational power are mutually enhanced? For example, Hispanic culture responds well to the interactive. Do we design classes or facilitate meetings where sufficient group work calls on that strength? But above all, the synhesis of the lives of newcomers transitioning into this country is the richest resource of all in an educational experiences.

VII. PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

The wonderful women in this project, through their shared life experiences generated the above new questions for me. The literature by which I felt equally impacted created yet further questioning. Is personal power intrinsic to relational power? Is one generative of the other? Do we place enough value on the vital contribution of life synthesis in a learning environment? At the outset of this study, I did not have these questions. So many of my newly gained insights have been veritable surprises and have become new educational tools for me. I did not expect the spiritual to arise as often as it did. Neither was I anticipating what impedes or challenges someone's process. The discrimination in the kinds of power was intellectually stimulating. This experience was as much an inner jolt for me as it was for my companions in the story telling.

Insight into Struggle

At one point when I was deliberating upon the family and community influences in Hispanic's Hispanic women's empowerment process, and was perplexed as to what to do with Hazel's acceptance of the drinking problem, my friend called from Boston. Maria is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, and Adjunct Faculty at Salem State College. She has a myriad of
experiences working clinically, cross-culturally, and now teaching. When I explained the topic of my study, and how family and community influences ... she inserted "or impedes" ... the empowerment process. It was like a lightening rod! Of course! How could I surmise that all that would come into their lives would have a positive impact? That is not an accurate picture. It is precisely these challenges that provide the substance for the growth process as much as anything else that arises in their lives. That indeed is an indispensable factor in this study. This dramatically influenced the direction for this project. It created the space for the totality of the women's lives to be examined honestly.

**Impact of Literature**

Another personal insight for me was how much I was learning about the term empowerment. Women scholars, writers, psychologists, organizers, theologians, educators and indeed, the very women in this project define empowerment differently from the conventional, perhaps original, dare I say male perspective? Have I personally come to own a feminist perspective of empowerment? Not just say or write the words, but do I now deeply feel them, live the experience and intellectually claim them?

It has always been my position that the people with whom I journey have been my greatest educators. This project integrated my concrete experiences with those of these women. However, the added unexpected richness has been what the literature called me to consider. It deeply affected my reflective process throughout this study. I had to intellectually deal with what I was reading. The women who thought through and produced these publications have equally gifted my journey in the struggle with women everywhere.


**Feminist Perspective of Empowerment?**

Early in my Graduate School experience I was asked by a professor if during my Brazilian experience with the rural communities I had perceived consciousness-raising as **power over** something or **power through** an experience. Initially, I'm not so sure I really understood the question. I know I answered **power over** because the intensity of the experience was so economic/political as it was directly linked to land struggles. The people clearly wanted to vindicate their right to the land. Surely, it was an issue of domination and mastery.

At the risk of sounding sexist that sounds so "masculine" to me now after all the literature that I've been reading, yet that is the truth of the experience. I have more finely honed down my discrimination of the nuances of power. Further reflections about this will better contextualize these points as a result of our joint experience.

The saliency of this discovery is in the fact that this was precisely my issue in exploring how Hispanic women grow. Are we to concern ourselves only with the political ramifications of empowerment or to examine this concept in all of its dimensions; power of mastery, personal power, relational power. Exposure to the literature impassioned me! In addition to what this project could potentially do for the women, these personal discoveries also serve to legitimize all the time, energy, and concern that was invested. I learned shoulder to shoulder with the participants!

**Challenge: Maintaining Objectivity**

Lastly, because I am a Roman Catholic Sister, there were times when I felt some awkwardness
in balancing my treatment of this subject. Isn't that what Epoche was demanding of the researcher? Vigilence as to biases, prejudices. I exercised an admirable amount of discipline, even to the way I framed my questions. Their initial responses to practically anything personal is pretty Theocentric. Could I construct the study so it wouldn't become an Apologia for Spirituality in Everyone's Life? I posed this question respectfully because I was already aware of the potency of faith in their lived realities. Yet as I mentioned earlier, I was still surprised at much the spiritual surfaced in their narratives.

For life-long learners, stories that elicit laughter, applause, tears, anger, and joy become midwives to unexpected and new questions that invite us to further growth. As Hazel said at one of our meetings, "Not everyone has this privilege." We pause in our story telling here in the hope that this privilege unfolds for all who are open to its potential. It was a veritable privilege for me as well to have had such access to the sacredness of these lives, and to have been educated once again by great women who have been gifted with apparent invincibility.
Appendix A: General Interview Questions

(Diverse questions emerged from conversations unique to each interviewee)

1. Could you tell me where and when you were born, your parents' names, how many siblings do you have?
2. What kind of work did your parents do?
3. How do you think they influenced you?
4. Would you talk about how it was to grow up in the countryside (or city?)
5. When did you arrive in the United States? What was that like for you?
6. What did you enjoy studying? Why?
7. What was your most important moment of growth? Why?
8. What do you think is your greatest strength?
9. What did you learn about yourself after experiencing...?
10. How does the community influence you?
11. What gifts or talents do you think you bring to your present work?
12. What does the word empowerment mean to you?
Appendix B: Overview of Meetings

1. August 18, 1996

There was a presentation of the project and inquiry as to their acceptance of participation. Clarification of what their participation would entail was also given. There was time for their questions. Signatures were given and scheduling of interviews took place.

2. September 22

We initiated with a Women's Ritual of Prayer for women in struggle over the globe. There were symbols of women's work from diverse cultures arranged carefully on the floor around a candle and a globe beside it. We then prayed in Spanish for all women everywhere, and for the success of our work together.

Some journaling questions that we reflected upon were the following:

What was it like for you after having this interview? Did anything stay with you longer in your thoughts? Did you discover anything new about yourself? Or about your family?

Write some words that stay with you to describe you as you were growing up? Or making decisions for change.

Discussion arose spontaneously also. Some women felt nostalgia about their lives. They liked remembering their families. There was a general feeling that the interviews were provocative. Most of the women had never been asked those questions before.

3. October 6

We began with our usual Ritual. We continued talking about the interviews and what remained with them. What was significant for Hazel was how the environment of El Salvador had deeply touched her as she was growing up. She was very moved by this memory. The planting of the land mines from the war changed everyone's relationship to the earth. This exchange was very emotional. Hazel felt that her freedom as a child in this country could never be repeated. The countryside was no longer safe for anyone to enjoy.

There was also an exchange between Hazel and the group about a Couples' Retreat which she helped facilitate in the Parish. It was obvious how her work at that time with an Hispanic Social Service Agency had helped her in the work she was doing in the Church. The women in this group learned from Hazel in a special way safe.
felt safe to ask her questions concerning difficulties with spouses and the best ways to negotiate certain moments.

4. November 24

Our ritual invited us to continue on in our work together. Today we discussed growth moments. When you hear the word growth, how do you understand it? Growth in parts of us or as a whole? There were varying answers to this. Maria felt that it was in parts. You can grow academically, but perhaps not emotionally.

For Anita, in the example she gave about finishing school, she felt she grew in every way. "As a mother with children, it was a triumph for me." She says, "I grew in every way." Anita also referred to leaving the job where she felt so exploited.

Maria said that becoming a mother was her greatest growth moment. She said, "My kids make me stronger." The women were forthcoming about this topic as they referred to some of the more challenging moments in their lives.

5. December 29

Christmas Dinner together! We enjoyed a social whereby they all received a small gift, and I had prepared dinner for them. It was a festive evening where we all could chat, laugh, tell stories and pray. It was a wonderful opportunity for me to extend my appreciation to each of them for their generous cooperation. I did refer to the possibility of extending our time-line for meetings. They accepted to attend additional meetings. This extension was not in my plans.

6. January 17

This was a short meeting to review what would potentially deepen the quality of our experience together in terms of ownership and participation. Two more steps were discussed among us. Listening to own interview and possibly do a mini-interview of another person in the group. Some energy needed to be directed to the influence of the community in our lives.

7. January 26

This is the meeting that was processed on pages 37-41 of this project. Feedback on their listening experience with their own tapes shifted critical energy here among the group and within the project experience as a whole.
8. February 23

Feedback from the "mini-interviews" - This meeting was also processed on pages 42-45 of this project. Not all were able to do this prior to this meeting. An informative exchange took place, however. What did you gain from your participation in this project?" was a question that Maria raised to others.

9. April 20

Unfortunately, our last meeting had to be postponed before the submission of this project. We will be discussing this experience in light of what it calls us to do in the future to maintain a an ongoing reflective position in life. Does it in fact do that? What is one thing it calls you to do?

We will close with a Women's Ritual during which each woman will be presented with her interview tape and journal by another participant expressing to her what she learned from her during these meetings.

Each woman will give a blessing to each other as the circle closes.

N.B. Another participatory step could have been different women every week taking notes from these meetings. This may or may not have impeded her participation, depending on her experience.
Appendix C: Observation of Yolly at her Worksite

On the cool, comfortable Friday morning of October 11 at 9:20 a.m., I arrived at Yolly's home where she directs a daycare center. Yolly is a thirty-five year old Hispanic, married woman, mother of two girls, ages twelve and sixteen. She has graciously accepted my visit this morning for some observation at her center, as Yolly, besides being my friend, is also a part of my research project.

Upon arrival, an Hispanic little boy greeted me at the door carrying a green stuffed dragon toy. We smiled at each other, and I greeted him, immediately inquiring as to the name of his little "friend." He still just smiled.

Scurrying in at this point was another little boy about the same age, but white Caucasian, and he, too, as carrying a similar green colored, stuffed toy dragon. I remarked that "Wow! it looks like we all have the same toys here. They look pretty special, do they have names?" That question was still put on hold, as Yolly entered smiling, carrying a baby boy who looked not quite a year old.

Yolly introduced me to the children as "the visitor I told you about." I was then given the names of the children--Jason, Jamie and Raul, the baby. Jamie was the only non-Hispanic child, was blonde, blue-eyed and small framed. Jason and the baby were energetic and bright-eyed. All appeared very comfortable with Yolly who is not effusive, but appropriately welcoming and always smiling. I could feel some heightened energy when I arrived. I learned only then that they had been together since seven o'clock that morning. While the children were settling themselves in the playroom, I inquired into Yolly's work schedule which was essentially a fourteen hour day, as she also received children after school as well. They were her nieces who stayed with her until their father picked them up after work at nine o'clock at night.
I was impressed with the volume of work that characterizes Yolly's day, so filled with children's needs, and so demanding as she attempts to reach out to her own daughters and husband who rises daily at two o'clock to open the bakery and begin baking. I asked myself how she managed the multi-faceted nature of her life as wife, mother, day-care provider. I reflected, "Does she ever have time for herself? When does she see her family?" Somehow or other, I became instantly exhausted imagining filling her shoes.

All of a sudden the doorbell rang, and an Hispanic woman entered with a beautiful little girl. We learned right away that this was Princess. She had dark hair and eyes, was petite, shy, and it was easy to see why she bore this name. Princess arrives about this time every morning as her mother continues on to work. Princess entered the play room immediately and appeared to be quite at home.

Entering this same room which was directly off the kitchen, I was greeted by a colorful array of wall prints, cardboard paper plates with the alphabet printed on them tacked up around the upper wall, and a calendar with a spot waiting for the date of the month to be inserted. Diverse boxes of toys and table games, miniature stove, toy telephone, a table in the middle and surrounding, movable, chairs occupied the rest of the floor space. A television with a VCR was also to the left of the room as I entered. It was adequate space that was made child safe, with the radiator covered, and the room was not so overcrowded that you felt suffocated. It was definitively "their space," and they claimed it gleefully! WSettling in with them, my questions about establishing the center with all the insurance and legal procedures and requirements were answered efficiently, with enough facts to conclude that there is a litany of things to do in order to pass inspection. It appeared that Yolly was quite satisfied that she had measured up to their standards. She is laid back, but with such a willing nature, disposed and cooperative. It doesn't surprise me that she would comply with all the details of this business venture as well.
It occurred to me how much information I was already gathering while simultaneously tending to
the children. Chatting with them, "Oh, what a nice room!" to "Was there a lot of work to getting
this together?" directed to Yolly. And she, "We had to do a lot to get this place ready." Quite
frankly, I think simultaneous conversations flow on all the time like this wherever there are
children. That's why it felt so natural!

I sat down at the table and began interacting with the children. IT was fun to sit in small chairs
at a tiny table. Just the physical lowering of oneself into the small chair gives one a whole other
perspective! For a fleeting moment, I returned to my own child's kingdom of "eons" ago. Yolly
sat down with us and we all felt pretty comfortable--like "playing house!" I repeated everyone's
names, Jason and Jamie, who were both four years old. Princess was three, and Raul was about
nine months. Before playing, I asked if the children would like to pray for their families. Yolly
had been a catechist, so I knew that she would appreciate this experience with the children. We
prayed in silence, and I invited the children to remember out loud names of persons they wanted
to pray for. Jamie said, "My father. I go places with him." And so we prayed.

As we were chatting, still at the table, Yolly's husband arrived from working since before dawn.
This was about 10:15 a.m. I already knew Pablo, and I rose to give him an embrace and
remained talking with him. Yolly rose from the table with the children and engaged in a lively
song about friendship in which they all spontaneously and joyously participated.

From my vantage point with Pablo, I observed Yolly turn to the calendar on the wall and enter
into an exchange with the children:

Yolly:  What day is today, children?
Children:  Friday!
Yolly:  Right! If yesterday was ten, today is...
Children:  Eleven!
Yolly: Right! And tomorrow will be twelve, the day Columbus discovered America. Columbus traveled in the boats names the "Nina," "Pina," and the "Santa Maria."

At this point, the children were chiming in simultaneously with Yolly as she names these ever so famous vessels. She then directed them to the table and gave them paper designs of the three boats to be colored and cut-out. Pablo left and I joined everyone at the table.

It was obvious that the two boys were more skilled in coloring within the lines and holding the scissors correctly. Princess scribbled much more wildly all over the design. After all, the boys were one year ahead in motor coordination! It showed! Yolly told me that she usually cut the paper for Princess because she couldn't manage even the baby size scissors. I attempted to show Princess the two fingers that would secure the scissors for her. She used the right fingers, but somehow the scissors ended up looking like a helicopter that turned upside down! Yolly was right. I quietly cut the paper for Princess who was still quite pleased with herself, however!

The children pasted their boats together and placed them on the top of the TV for display. Princess only had two boats as her final product, given the fact that scissor experimentation had led to somewhat of a shipwreck!

It was snack time, at this point, so we all sat again and all the children received a paper plate with half a sugar doughnut on it, and a glass of orange juice and a napkin. I received half a sugar doughnut, and a cheese pastry with a cup of coffee. The children were satisfied with just the half doughnut, much to my surprise. No one complained, and everything was eaten. Yolly apparently knew the amount for each child.

After the table was cleared, Princess went to a doll, and the boys pulled out the box of leggos. Raul was crying, and Yolly put him to nap. When she returned, the boys began to scramble for the same piece. The following ensued:
Yolly: Give it back to Jamie, Jason.
Jason: No, I want it now.
Yolly: Say please, Jason.
Jason: (resisting and grabbing)
Yolly: Jason, I said to say please.
Jason: Please.

Jamie releases the piece. All continue to play with leggos. After awhile, Princess leaves the doll, sits at the table and takes a green piece that Jason wants. They carried on in the same fashion as the previous dual with Jamie. Yolly repeats her commands in a firm manner, and Princess is free to play with her chosen piece. Jason, however, is not pleased with these episodes and begins to cry and make demands.

Yolly takes him from the playroom into the kitchen where she converses with him. As he continues his tantrum, she returns to all of us at the table while we play. After a short while of his continued whining, I say: "Jason, we miss you." Jamie immediately offers, "No, I don't." Yolly says to Jason, "Are you ready to come back?" I thought her question was more educative because it gave him the power to decide. It was not emotionally manipulative. He slowly moved back into the group. Yolly left the room to check on the baby, and while I was with the children, Princess had a doll in her hand again. Jamie passed by and kicked it. The following exchange developed:

Rita: Why did you kick the doll?
Jamie: If I had a baby, I would throw it into the fire of the fireplace.
Rita: Why would you do that?
Jamie: (only smiles)

This incident concerned me, and before leaving I returned to it in my conversation with Yolly. Jamie had referred to other stories in the earlier part of the day where graphic violence was evident. Interestingly enough, Jason acted out more with the children, but Jamie's conversations were more troublesome.
As noon time approached, I knew I had to leave, but really didn't want to. It was shortly after this last occurrence with Jamie that I related to Yolly that I had another commitment that I had to meet. "I thought you were going to have lunch with us," were invitational words of always the most welcome kind, but I reluctantly gathered my things for departure.

As we slowly approached the door, I referred to the last incident and encouraged Yolly to be aware of Jamie's conversations, not in an alarmist fashion, but in a discretely vigilant one. THis observation provoked Yolly to say that she too had observed some behavior and what should she do. I supported her in her efforts to converse with parents about repeated inappropriate behavior. We summarized our reflections about Yolly's journaling and logging her experiences. I thanked her for her time (it was 12:20 p.m.) and concluded this observation in the only way a home visit to an Hispanic family could be terminated--with an affectionate embrace.
Bibliography


