I Never Had a Mentor: Reflections of a Chicano Sociologist

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By tracing the career path of a senior Chicano sociologist, this article attempts to gain insights into the problems and dilemmas faced by minority scholars in earlier stages of their careers. Tensions between the demands of a professional identity as a sociologist, on the one hand, and a personal identity as a Chicano, on the other, are isolated and discussed. It is suggested that this dynamic tension between professional and personal demands, coupled with expanding career opportunities and the emergence of Chicano Studies as an academic discipline, gave impetus to the development of an indigenous Chicano sociology that challenged traditional sociological paradigms and was grounded in Chicano culture and world view.

This article addresses the theme of this special issue from the perspective not of a new or recent Ph.D. but of a more established Chicano sociologist. I believe that a critical, retrospective, examination of various career paths can yield valuable insights into the problems and issues encountered by minority scholars in earlier stages of their careers. Because the path has been a rocky one, at times, I hope not only to help younger scholars avoid unnecessary pitfalls but to enhance our understanding of the various forces that shape the experiences of minorities in sociology. Finally, by comparing these experiences with those of persons who have only recently entered the field, one can begin to assess the extent to which conditions have changed over time. While each person’s biography is unique, I am convinced that minority scholars trained in sociology share a number of critical experiences in common, regardless of social or biographical background.

Over the past decade or so I have written several books and a number of articles on the Chicano experience (Alfredo Mirandé 1985; 1981; 1979; 1978). Because these works are published, I will not dwell on them, except to say that the overriding thrust of my work, I believe, has been to develop a Chicano sociology

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that emanates from within the Chicano experience and is consistent with a Chicano world view. It is a sociology which holds that the tenets of scientism—objectivity, value neutrality, and universalism—are not only antithetical to the Chicano experience but are used to neutralize minority scholars politically and to perpetuate existing patterns of social inequality. In retrospect, however, it is clear that the decision to develop a Chicano sociology was not made a priori and came, instead, in response to social and political conditions. In other words, I started as a sociologist and only in mid-career began to shift my focus to the development of a Chicano perspective on the discipline.

There was a time when the number of Chicano sociologists could be counted on one hand. When I earned a doctorate in 1967 from the University of Nebraska, I believe that I was only the fourth Chicano to receive a Ph.D. in sociology. Dr. Julian Samora may have the distinction of being the first Chicano Ph.D. in sociology (Washington University-Saint Louis, 1953), followed by Fernando Peñalosa (University of Southern California, 1963), and Rudolfo Alvarez (University of Washington, 1966).

I contend that one of the most important factors shaping the career paths of sociologists is the time when they entered graduate school and received the doctorate. Chicanos who came into sociology before 1968 had very different experiences from subsequent generations. They were pioneers in being the first and only members of this racial/ethnic group to enter the field. They differed also in being treated as individuals who “happened to be” of Mexican background, rather than as representatives of a special, underrepresented, and economically oppressed group. This early generation, in other words, basically predates the gains made by the civil rights movement, the Chicano movement, affirmative action, and Chicano studies centers. Because I entered graduate school in 1963 and earned the Ph.D. in 1967, I believe my career is unique in the sense that it spans these two critical periods.

**Background**

I was born in Mexico and came to the United States at the age of nine as my father moved from Mexico City and settled in the Chicago area. My interest in sociology was first sparked by a sociology class which I took as a junior in high school, although I was to learn, subsequently, that, like many others, I had entered sociology for all of the “wrong” reasons. My initial conception of the discipline was that it entailed the study of society with the aim of alleviating societal ills, social inequality, and racism. In graduate school, however, I learned that what I had thought was sociology was social work and/or political activism, not sociology. Sociology, according to my mentors, was the detached scientific study of society; objective, value neutral, and universal.

My family returned to Mexico the year I graduated from high school and entered the University of Illinois at Navy Pier. I was not a “scholarship boy,” but worked in various low paying jobs such as a caddy, bus-boy, and at a bank in the “loop”