

Borinquen, la tierra de Belen: Participatory Action Research and Transformational Theory in the Urban Chicago Puerto Rican Experience: A Critical Analysis

Elizabeth Das
Florida International University, USA

Abstract: This paper analyzes how José Lopéz's participatory action research and transformational learning theory addresses the oppressed Puerto Rican experience. The paper examines the historical experience of colonialism, explains these two theories, and explores Lopéz's adult education work in the Puerto Rican community using participatory action research and transformational learning.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze how José Lopéz, a Puerto Rican Chicago community activist and adult educator, uses participatory action research (PAR) and transformational learning to address the oppressed Puerto Rican experience. In this paper, I will examine the historical experience of colonialism in Puerto Rico, Lopéz's emancipatory work as an adult educator in the Puerto Rican Chicago community, and his use of PAR and transformational learning. I argue that his work is a direct result of and attempts to overcome the effects of colonialistic oppression Puerto Ricans have endured since colonialism and under the commonwealth.

Methods

In order to analyze José Lopéz's emancipatory adult education work, a topical qualitative interview with Lopéz and a systematic review of relevant literature were conducted. A topical qualitative interview focuses on a particular event or process (Rubin 1996), in this case, Lopéz's adult education activities. An interview guide of open-ended questions was administered. The open-ended questions allowed me to probe for additional information and to use the interview time with Lopéz effectively (Patton, 2002). I took notes during the interview and identified comments that related to Lopéz's work. These comments are included in the analysis.

A systematic review of the literature was conducted. The review included a web-based search using the key words "Puerto Rican Cultural Center in Chicago," "transformational learning," and "participatory action research." A total of 8,220,000 items were extracted with emphasis on using those most chronologically recent. The review also included scholarly journal articles, books, position papers, and periodicals. Lopéz provided a copy of his curriculum vitae and a short biography providing additional sources of data. This paper analyzes some of the recurrent themes that emerged from this review.

Historical Experience of Colonialism and Commonwealth Status

Spanish Conquest and Colonization

Columbus discovered Puerto Rico in 1493. The Spaniards colonized the island in 1493, and their first imposed leader was the Spanish conquistador Ponce de Leon (EPICA Task Force, 1976). Throughout the ensuing centuries, Puerto Ricans were brutally treated. Insurgencies were crushed. The Spaniards capitalized on the island's natural resources and slavery was imposed (Silén, 1971). It is estimated that by 1834, there were 30,000 slaves (Silén, 1971). This

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situation persisted until the Lares Revolution of 1868. This uprising demanded two things: the independence of Puerto Rico from Spain and the abolition of slavery. Independence was not won. Eventually, the Spaniards reluctantly granted abolition of slavery in 1873 (Silén, 1971).

Independence, albeit brief and limited, was not achieved until 1897. Spain established what was called an “autonomist government” (EPICA Task Force, 1976) on the island. These events were quickly followed, however, by the Spanish American War in 1898 and United States’ victory over the Spaniards.

United States’ Conquest and Colonization

With the American victory over the Spaniards came the ceding of Puerto Rico to the United States. The United States government quickly entrenched itself on the island nation. Under United States government rule, Puerto Rico became an island colony. Puerto Rico’s colonial structure was instituted and has remained the island’s political construct since the 1900’s (Melendez & Melendez, 1993). With this colonization came the degradation and economic deterioration of a nation. Puerto Rico’s annexation resulted in the United States increasing its interference in the island’s political, economic and social affairs (Melendez & Melendez, 1993). In fact, the nation’s increased economic dependency on the United States has resulted in a greater desire on the part of the United States to maintain its political and economic interests in the status quo (Lewis, 2004).

Commonwealth Status and the Diaspora

As stated above, the outstanding characteristic of the Puerto Rican economy is its dependence on the U. S. economy. Puerto Ricans virtually have no control of their economy (Melendez & Melendez, 1993). The resulting mismanagement of the economy has resulted in the emigration of Puerto Ricans to the United States. From 1950 to 1970, 615,000 Puerto Ricans came to the United States (EPICA Task Force, 1976). However, this immigration to achieve greater economic opportunity has not resulted in success. The Puerto Rican experience is characterized by worsened conditions. Puerto Ricans experience a higher rate of unemployment than other Hispanics and have the largest proportion of families living in poverty (Bonilla, 1993). This deterioration in the Puerto Rican’s economic status has impacted the Puerto Rican in sociological, educational, and health-related issues, prompting adult education liberatory initiatives by adult educators, such as José Lopéz.

José Lopéz

José Lopéz was born in Puerto Rico, and, as a child, his family immigrated to the United States in search of greater economic freedom. His family settled in Chicago, and he states, “I lived the experience of a Puerto Rican living in Chicago in the Diaspora” (personal communication, November 15, 2005). He views his entire life as consisting of part of “the life and fiber of the Puerto Rican community” (personal communication, November 15, 2005). Through his adolescence and young adulthood, he developed a political consciousness and the desire to help his people. His mission is to be a part of the “decolonizing process of the Puerto Rican mindset” (personal communication, November 15, 2005), and it is now reflected in his liberatory role of adult educator. He has instituted adult education facilities, lectures extensively on emancipatory transformational education and participatory action, has taught at National-Louis University, Northeastern Illinois University, and Columbia College, and is a member of the Latino Master’s Adult Education Program at National-Louis University.

I will now discuss the two adult education frameworks for this paper that will be used to analyze Lopéz’s adult education activities, i.e., participatory action research (PAR) and transformational learning.

Participatory Action Research

Participatory action research (PAR) recognizes that learning is a participatory and collaborative process. Because the learner participates in the decision-making strategies for determining social, educational, and political action in his or her community, the learner becomes a collaborator with the educator and the educator takes on the role of a learner (Cunningham, 2000). It becomes a symbiotic relationship and a collaborative process. Adult education impacts communities and social practices. Andragogy is principally associated with classroom, student-centered exercises. However, there are assumptions underlying community development, community action, and participatory research that are related to those inherent in andragogy (Brookfield, 1986).

Because knowledge is socially constructed (Curry & Cunningham, 2000), the use of participatory action research in adult education has the potential to initiate action. Not only does this enable the individual to make meaning of his or her life, but also PAR implies that the learner, by sharing in the lived experience, is the expert. Curry and Cunningham assert that PAR encourages and “builds on the concept of praxis, where learning and doing come together through communitarian action” (2000, p. 74). Learning is enforced through social action.

Because the learner is directly involved in the problem and its solution, he/she is able to take greater responsibility for its outcome. McTaggart (1991, as cited in Peters, 2000) writes, “Authentic participation in research means sharing in the way research is conceptualized, practiced, and brought to bear on the life-world. It means ownership—a responsible agency in the production of knowledge and the improvement of practice” (p. 66-67). This responsibility enables the learner to be an active agent in his or her own destiny and not a vehicle for someone else’s actions (McTaggart, 1991).

The PAR process should have a facilitator as a guide. Through educational means the facilitator helps the collaborative group to frame the problem, focus on solutions, give feedback, and plan action (Waddill & Marquadt, 2003).

Transformational Learning

Mezirow (1991) defined transformational learning as a reevaluation of identity, self-image, values and opinions. “Transformational learning develops autonomous thinking” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). This autonomous thinking is an essential component for participation as a socially responsible thinker and for moral decision making (Mezirow, 1997).

Transformational learning can change frames of reference through critical reflection (Mezirow, 1997). This critical reflection enables the individual to learn how to solve problems and results in personal transformation (Mezirow, 1997). The individual changes perceptions of him or herself and others.

This ability to think critically has several benefits. The individual can evaluate and challenge assumptions; the individual perceives different frames of reference and can envision alternative frames of reference; and the individual, as a more responsible thinker, can effectively collaborate and work collectively with others (Mezirow, 1997). In doing this, the learner can transform his or her frame of reference.

Because the process involves changing frames of reference through critical reflection, the individual can critically assess and take action on the insights learned, thereby resisting the “social and cultural forces that distort and delimit adult learning” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 11).

An Analysis of José Lopéz’s Adult Education Work

This section will examine Lopez’s liberatory initiatives using participatory action research and transformational learning. These initiatives are the following: (a) the Juan Antonio

Corretjer Puerto Rican Cultural Center, (b) Roberto Clemente High School, (c) the Community as Intellectual Space symposium, and (d) Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School.

Juan Antonio Corretjer Puerto Rican Cultural Center

The Juan Antonio Corretjer Puerto Rican Cultural Center in Chicago (PRCC), a grass-roots activist organization established in 1973, is Lopez's focal point for the Chicago Puerto Rican community to engage in participatory action initiatives and to further the educational and learning needs of the community. Among its many functions, it houses a library and technology lab. Lack of technological expertise, especially in the urban setting with minorities, keeps the individual from attaining increased economic achievements. This creates a "digital divide" denying the poor access to the technology that can transform their lives (Norris & Conceição, 2004). A PRCC PAR outcome is the center's computer learning lab, producing opportunities for lower-income families in the neighborhood to develop an understanding of and have access to necessary computer-based educational programs. The library provides an additional educational avenue. Both provide the means to enable the learners to help change their communities and transform their lives.

Roberto Clemente High School

Another example of participatory action research at work is the Roberto Clemente High School curriculum. Lopez's efforts resulted in the high school's Puerto Rican educational leaders banding together with the community to determine what its educational and sociological needs were. Based upon their collaborative research efforts, the data from their research was incorporated into the school's curricula and need-based instruction.

Community as Intellectual Space Symposium

Lopez's Puerto Rican Cultural Center (PRCC) recently held a symposium titled "Community as Intellectual Space." The symposium consisted of participatory action research projects and community-based educational initiatives.

Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School

The Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School (PACHS) is another attempt by Lopez to confront the unequal opportunities resulting from the poor economic status of the Chicago Puerto Rican community. It provides education to both secondary students and adult learners. The school's programs were developed based on analysis of the community's needs.

José López's Transformational Learning Projects

I will now discuss Lopez's transformational learning projects. These consist of (a) the gentrification process currently taking place in his community, (b) the Family Learning Center and the Centro Infantil Pre-school, and (c) Vida Sida.

Gentrification

Gentrification is "the process by which higher income households displace lower income residents of a neighborhood, changing the essential character and flavor of the neighborhood (Kennedy & Leonard, 2001, p. 14). It often has racial overtones because it is white, higher-income urbanites that replace the lower-income households. This urban phenomenon is rapidly encroaching on the Chicago Puerto Rican community.

José López (and his PRCC compatriots who, along with him, have worked to build up and empower their community and its constituents) has aligned himself with other grassroots activist organizations in an attempt to end the gentrification of their "barrio" (neighborhood). They developed workshops for the local youth and university students. The workshops equipped these people with knowledge to be disseminated throughout the neighborhood in order to educate, unite, and enervate the community to action.

The Family Learning Center and The Centro Infantil Pre-school

As argued above, the learner must recognize a need for change in order to experience transformational learning. Lopéz and the PRCC instituted The Family Learning Center, a GED program for female dropouts. In order to facilitate the learning process, the Centro Infantil Pre-school was established. By advancing feminist learning and trying to meet the learner's complex needs, the learner can confront her needs and transform her life experiences.

Vida Sida (Life with AIDS)

One of the many problems facing low-income urban populations is HIV/AIDS. AIDS has become one of the top five killers of our nation's youth, and it especially impacts minority youth (Blum, 2005). It is also becoming rapidly prevalent in the Hispanic population. To combat this problem, Lopéz and the PRCC instituted the Vida Sida program. The program offers educational programs, counseling, medical options, discussion and peer support groups, and a plethora of services to afford the learner an opportunity to develop transformational lifestyle changes and behaviors. Vida Sida has also developed a program aimed at young men and women in gangs and explores the ramifications HIV/AIDS has for them.

Implication for Adult Education

I argue that participatory action research and transformational learning can be dynamic and effective in reaching solutions to society's complex issues. Mezirow's theories have been criticized as not having social/cultural implications (Kappel & Daley, 2004; Taylor, 1997 as cited in Kappel & Daley, 2004). However, Lopez's initiatives in Chicago are an example of how participatory action research and the critical reflection and subsequent action inherent in transformation learning can merge with a social focus to effect change. Dykstra and Law (1994, as cited in Cunningham, 2001) stated, "Social movements are also educative forces in the . . . sense that they try to influence the way other people learn to interpret the world and to develop the skills to amend its meanings and realities" (p. 582). Lopez achieves this through the éconceptualization and implementation of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center and the many subunits operating under it. Knowledge is socially constructed and social forces are dynamic and changeable. Participatory action research and transformational learning provide constructs within adult education learning to participate in an ever-changing society.

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