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LULAC: Mexican-American Adult Learning, Collectivism, and Social Movement

Brian W. Rook

Abstract

The development of the League of United Latino American Citizens (LULAC) is often viewed as a method of cultural assimilation through adult education. However, LULAC can be viewed through a collectivist's lens wherein the members established a shared philosophy, teaching adults to mobilize and expand their cause quickly and effectively. The social movement that followed the collectivist expansion employed campaign tactics, variable of performance, and displays of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment. The combination of a collectivist philosophical paradigm and calculated social movements contributed to the long-term establishment and success of the organization.

Introduction

The acceptance of Mexican-Americans and the established presence of their culture in the United States have evolved through times of increased risks for deportation, resentment from Americans experiencing economic struggles, and a lack of distinction between Mexican-Americans and Mexican immigrants (Gutierrez, 1995). Gutierrez (1995) summarized the struggles faced by Mexican-Americans through the 1920s and 1930s, particularly associating the common struggles as leading factors to the development of organizations such as El Orden Hijos de America, El Orden Caballeros de America, the League of Latin American Citizens, and the unification of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). LULAC was founded in Corpus Christi, Texas, in 1929, when a constitution and principles called "The LULAC Code" was drafted.

The LULAC Code called on its members to "defend the rights and duties vested in every American citizen by the letter and the spirit of the law of the land" (Garza, 1951, p. 20). LULAC was formed through the merging of organizations: El Orden Hijos de America, El Orden Caballeros de America, and the League of Latin American Citizens. The members of LULAC were middle to upper class Mexican-American citizens with an interest in furthering the development and opportunities for Mexican-Americans in work and school. Most members were doctors, lawyers, and other Spanish elitists who had lived in the U.S. since the Mexican Revolution and held capitalist and conservative values (Marquez, 1987). Furthermore, the members provided services to Chicanos and acted as liaison between Mexican and Anglo communities, particularly within the educational system. Chicano was a term used by the Nahuatl Native American tribe to describe Mexicans raised in the United States (Simmen

& Bauerle, 1969).

The U.S. educational system during the 1930s required that all students speak English; however, Spanish was the primary language used in Mexican-American family homes. LULAC required its members to adopt English as their primary language to eliminate barriers and common associations between Mexican-Americans and Mexican immigrants (Gomez-Quinones, 1994). Although the American educational system and LULAC required its members to adopt English as the primary language for Mexican-Americans, the purpose for the American political system was to identify individuals in a way to deny Jim Crow relief practices to Latinos (Gross, 2003). The American political paradigm appeared supportive of the LULAC agenda; however, the support from the American political perspective was to limit financial and legal obligations to people of color while the support from the LULAC perspective was to be accepted as equals in a nation riddled with racism.

Although Mexican-American youth enrolled in schools experienced cultural and identity oppression during the 1920s and 1930s, Mexican-American adults also struggled in the workplace for acceptance, learning, and equality. Cordova (1993) reported: "Forty-one percent of all Chicanos and Mexican men worked in agriculture; 88% worked in low status or what sociologists call 'secondary sector jobs,' that is jobs that require less skill, pay poorly, and provide little opportunity for promotion" (p. 31). The Mexican-American working experience in the United States was tumultuous in that during periods of economic growth, Mexican-Americans were welcome and accepted in their role as laborers or the secondary sector; however, during periods of economic distress, Mexican-Americans were the focus of racism and frustrated Anglo workers in search of employment. Migrant workers, during periods of distress, were often removed from their jobs and deported to Mexico leaving families and loved ones behind (Heidenreich, 2006).

While some Mexican migrants were deported, remaining Mexican-Americans and LULAC members attempted to disassociate themselves with migrants in hopes of improving the American image of Mexican-Americans and their opportunities. Gutierrez (1995) noted, "Although most of these native-born Texas Mexicans harbored no ill will toward their immigrant neighbors, worsening economic conditions and the intensification of the anti-Mexican sentiment caused many of them to wonder whether the new immigrants were undermining their already tenuous position" (p. 400). Additionally, Guitierrez (1995) reported LULAC's perspective as leaving Mexicans to solve their own problems and focusing Mexican-American attentions on adopting American cultures to prevent association, racism, and deportation.

The fear of deportation, constant exposure to racism, and below average work conditions were contributing factors to the LULAC paradigmatic approach to separating American views of Mexicans to further establish Mexican-Americans as equal Americans. While many Mexican-Americans feared the LULAC agenda was to assimilate Mexican-Americans into the white American system, LULAC's intentions were to establish Mexican-Americans as both "Mexican and American, without being cursed and spit upon by [their] fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in [their] face" (Koslow, 2010, p. 466). LULAC's philosophical approach to establishing equality for Mexican-Americans while maintaining the Mexican culture portrays a collectivist paradigmatic social movement.

A collectivist paradigm is a societal framework in which common goals and values are established where-

by societal groups possessing those commonalities are politically centralized (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). LULAC portrayed the establishment of a collectivist paradigm through the printing of LULAC codes and declared expectations for its members. The power in the organization was centralized among influential members containing a level of perceived status, thereby collectively portraying the organization as a pillar of similarities to Anglo-Americans.

LULAC promulgated Mexican-American's similarities to Anglo-Americans to longitudinally shift Anglo-American perspectives in recognizing differences in Mexican and Mexican-American cultures. The separation and emphasis on differences between Mexicans and Mexican-Americans is a feature of collectivism whereby LULAC fostered interdependence among Mexican-Americans for group success (Trumbull & Greenfield, 2000). In fact, many Mexican-American organizations went as far as identifying themselves as "other-white" to employ a legal strategy of avoiding being associated or lumped in with African-Americans and Mexicans (Kalpowitz, 2003).

Collectivism in LULAC

Collectivist societies are hierarchical in nature in which status, age, and gender colonize the structure of conversation and decision making in groups (Trumbull & Greenfield, 2003). LULAC was no exception. Marquez (1987) emphasized this hierarchy noting the early leaders of LULAC as influential, prominent, and successful men placed in leadership roles to leverage and promote political and structural changes. Structural changes were necessary for Mexican-Americans due to insufficient resources in jobs and education. The collectivist approach by LULAC to resolving the lack of resources, particularly in education, was through means of expanding cultural discontinuity to be reinforced in homes thus leading to a complete discontinuation of Mexican-Americans' "Mexican" culture (Tyler et al., 2008). Tyler et al. (2008) defined cultural discontinuity as a discontinuation of an ethnic minority groups' cultural value in a given location and noted that nonmainstream cultural values were discouraged in schools; however, LULAC expanded and implemented similar expectations among its members to be enforced in home and among social groups to collectively align Mexican-American cultural values with those of the mainstream culture.

Although LULAC employed a collectivist paradigmatic approach in shifting young educational practices to mimic those of Anglo-American cultures, LULAC also encouraged and developed educational resources for adults. Adult laborers were often influenced by their employers when determining political decisions, such as voting, whereby employers were reported to have used a Mexican-American's pay as a means of influencing their vote (Gross, 2003). Gross (2003) noted that while Mexican-American laborers experienced pressure from employers on political decisions, LULAC offered adult education programs for its members on political choices and what was best for the organization. Moreover, Gross reported LULAC further developed its program throughout the 1930s from establishing collectivism as a shared Mexican-American paradigm to campaigning and educating its members across many states in the western U.S.

Social Movement in LULAC

The shift from establishing a collectivist paradigm to campaigning transformed LULAC from a subjectivist ideology to a social movement group advocating for the equal rights of Mexican-American citizens. Social

movement emerges from the synthesizing of three dimensions: campaigning, variable of performance, and WUNC displays (Tilly & Wood, 2009). Tilly and Wood (2009) further defined the three dimensions recording that a campaign extends longer than a single occurrence and requires regularly organizing against a group that significantly affects the welfare of another group. A variable of performances can be vigils, rallies, demonstrations or petition drives. WUNC is an acronym meaning *Worthiness, Unity, Numbers, and Commitment*, whereby organized displays of these factors help sculpt the distinctiveness of a group's identity.

Gutierrez (1995) commented LULAC's social movement process as "a three-pronged plan of attack in the 1930s and 1940s that strongly emphasized desegregated public education for Mexican-American children; encouraged Mexican-American citizens to register, pay their poll taxes, and vote; and supported aggressive local legal campaigns" (p. 403). While Mexican-American adult citizens were encouraged to register, pay taxes, and vote; Mexican-American women were campaigning to educate junior LULAC members and prepare them for future roles in LULAC (Orosco, 1988). Moreover, LULAC members and supporting activists focused campaigns on educating other members of the community, particularly veterans to expand the influence of their agenda.

For example, LULAC members in Tempe, Arizona called on veterans for support in changing a city rule that prohibited Mexicans or Mexican-Americans from swimming in a new publicly funded swimming pool (Marin, 2001). Marin (2001) reported that campaigns were organized, rallies held, and a unified group with help of veterans successfully implemented changes to desegregate the public swimming pool. The social movement would expand throughout the 20th century to further impact change for Mexican-American citizens and members of LULAC.

Conclusion

Although the social movement of LULAC immediately impacted American mainstream cultural values, the establishment of a collectivist paradigm among Mexican-Americans provided the worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment (WUNC) to fuel the social movement vehicle. The non-formal adult learning practices employed by LULAC provided an effective method for disseminating the knowledge and education to establish the foundations of collectivism. Moreover, under the paradigmatic umbrella of collectivism, the acceleration of colonizing multiple ontologies becomes more practical, thereby instilling common purposes necessary to inspire mobilization. Furthermore, during lulls in social justice achievements, the foundational establishment of a collectivist philosophy maintains the organizational or cultural goals while acting as a catalyst for future movements.

LULAC's strategic approach has been classified as a cultural assimilation process, particularly from younger members; however, cultural assimilation is a more superficial byproduct of the LULAC agenda. The recognition of the cultural assimilation occurring among Mexican-American citizens arguably signifies the success in LULAC's social movement. Additionally, the cultural assimilation was indicative of the underlying collectivism spreading through Mexican-American citizens wishing to be viewed not as Mexicans but as equals to Anglo-Americans.

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Brian W. Rook is a doctoral student in the Education Doctoral Program for Occupational and Adult Education, North Dakota State University, Fargo, ND.
