

Understanding Women's Work Experiences in Humboldt Park Through the Confluence of Gender, Race and Social Class

Slide 1

I would like to thank the LA&S Faculty Research and Development Committee for providing me the opportunity to share my research interests

Slide 2

I have been studying women's work experiences in Croatia, Chicago and Mexico

I have mostly been interested in how women in particular places and at particular times negotiate:

- work, leisure and consumption practices

I have examined how political economies, and deeply seated gender norms help produce their experiences

My HP research study is a case study in a larger intellectual project about gender equality in the workplace

In this particular project, I sought to:

- better understand women's work in a particular place:
- namely in HP

A little about HP:

Slide 3

HP is an instructive site for the investigation of women's lived experiences because:

- it's a culturally diverse place (race, class, nationality)
- shrinking labor market in that part of the city
- HP enjoyed thriving labor market in manufacturing industry

This changed due to:

- overseas outsourcing (1970s -1990s)
- enabled in the 1990s by NAFTA
- which reduced jobs by 70 %

HP was also transformed in the new millennium by:

- redevelopment efforts

Which brought:

- middle c. pop to predominantly working c. neighborhood

<1950s HP:

- mostly housed immigrants from Eastern Europe

Today:

- documented and undocumented immigrants
- blacks, Latinos, some whites
- working class women
- middle class women

The last are:

- beneficiaries of city-subsidized redevelopment efforts
 - and
- a deflated housing market

Despite its multicultural composition, HP maintains a strong:

- Puerto Rican identity

Slide 4

Business district:

- on Division between Western and California
- known as *Paseo Boricua* (Taino)
 - or Puerto Rican passageway

Other markers PR identity:

- housing projects in the style of Old San Juan
- Puerto Rican food at restaurants like *Borinquen*
- murals depicting the struggles of Puerto Rican heroes

Slide 5

HP also has:

- 207-acre park
- the neighborhood's namesake
- it was added to national register of historic places in the 1990s

Developers originally promoted the park as:

- symbolizing a transition from gang-related violence
 - to:
- cultural heritage and recreation

The reality, however is that the park has:

- different identities
- is differently perceived by different groups

By day, the park is a bustling nexus of:

- food vendors

- joggers
- dog play groups
- families

At dusk, the park continues to provide an operations base for:

- Gangs:
- Young Lords, Latin Kings and Latin Disciples

For this project I set out to collect:

- life narratives of ordinary women who live or work in HP
- I wanted to learn more about their lived experiences
- I also wanted to know how neighborhood changes effected women's lives

What I found from the women I spoke with was a variety of different experiences

Let me share two quotations that relate directly to their experiences of HP:

Slide 6 & 7

As the title of my presentation suggests, I was interested in the confluence of:

- race
- gender
- class

So, I employed the **intersectional approach** to make sense of women's experiences

I was mainly interested in how:

- the **intersectional approach** would play out ethnographically

So, I asked the following related questions: **Slide 8**

- How do HP women experience the neighborhood? Do they take advantage of local services and amenities?
- How do they women balance the demands of household labor with their participation in the labor market?
- What does intersectional analysis reveal about women's lived experiences in a particular place and time?

A little about the intersectional approach:

Slide 9:

An intersectional approach theorizes women's oppression as a function not just of gender, but also race, class, and, above all, the multivalent interplay of these forces. The intersectional approach, recognizing that no system of oppression is more primary than any other, situates women's lives at the center of a matrix of mutually reliant systems of oppression.

Intersectional approach:

- rooted in feminist scholarship
- aims to disclose hierarchical power structures
- seeks to overcome deficiencies of "single identity" movements

Single-identity movements:

- = misleadingly isolate one form of oppression over another
- = misleadingly analyze one form of oppression in isolation from other forms

Second wave feminism (1960s and early 1970s):

- often prioritized the struggles of Caucasian, middle c. women
- at times working c. women from relatively stable economies

Second wave feminism:

- narrowly conceptualized oppression as solely a function of gender
- failing to see **class and race** as equally important contributing causes of oppression

While second wave critiqued one form of oppression:

- it tacitly supporting other forms

The literature that employs intersectional analyses:

- offers insights to the structural inequalities in the lives of women based on different forms of oppression

However:

- literature lacks detailed empirical data
- most of the literature on intersectionality is theoretical
- has paid scant attention to how inequalities are mirrored in the everyday lives of women who share overlapping commitments to a shared neighborhood.

My research seeks to fill that gap by examining the:

- uneven career prospects of women living and working in HP
 - and
- their different ideas about the meaning of work and locality

Methodology:

I designed the interview questions to highlight a variety of topics, including:

- accessing the labor market
- educational and employment histories
- finding work
- support systems and potential impediments to success
- aspirations for the future
- reasons for living, working or relocating to, HP

15 study Participants were included

SP were adult women who:

- live and work in HP

Most SP were recruited from an adult GED program at Association House:

- AH = served economically disadvantaged populations in HP for more than 100 years

The interviewees were:

- African American
- Caucasian
- Latina women (Puerto Rican and Mexican)
- between the ages of 28 - 71
- 1 staff person AH
- 2 teachers AH
- 9 were GED students
- 3 participants not associated w/ AH
- 11 were working class
- 4 were lower/middle class

Women I spoke with work in a variety of industries, including:

- homecare
- food service
- human resources and retail

They are:

- janitors
- bank clerks
- orthodontist assistants
- accountants
- salespeople
- work in neighborhood schools
- accounting
- financial advising

Interviewees also work in the informal sector, including:

- daycare
- housecleaning (usually for relatives)
- food vending (usually in the neighborhood's park or in a bodega: a grocery corner store)

The older generation worked as :

- quality control inspectors, assemblers and packers

But those manufacturing jobs dried up in the 1990s

Some were able to find similar manufacturing jobs outside the neighborhood =

Others, were in the process of re-educating themselves

The majority of my interviewees were in the process of working toward their GED.

- some had weak reading and writing skills
- oldest student: illiterate when she began GED program

Slide 10 I like to highlight a couple of themes today that surfaced from the interviews:

- the cultural meanings of work and education
- responses to neighborhood changes
- obstacles and aspirations for the future

The cultural meanings of work and education:

GED women employment:

- less fulfilling
- more physically and emotionally challenging
- a way of making money
- sustaining one's household and loved ones

- jobs = not career choices
- jobs = not expressions of one's social identity

For a single mother of three in her 40s, work =

- an extension of being human
- not working: would be like not living
- work was fundamentally connected to life, not separate from it

These women:

- emphasized that housework was their second job
- they wanted to know what it was like to have a vacation
- to have career choices

The most common reasons for wanting to obtain a GED diploma:

- self-improvement
- having career choices
- obtaining employment
- or more fulfilling employment

Not surprisingly, all women felt that earning a GED would fortify:

- their job prospects
- save them from the low-wage, dead end job cycles
- bolster their self worth

One participant explained that:

- when working in a bakery (a job she loved) she had trouble spelling the words she had to put on birthday cakes
- she quit her job because she was too embarrassed to admit she had trouble spelling

Another participant:

- works in an orthodontist's office
- felt uncomfortable explaining the treatments to patients

MP: Both women lacked basic reading and writing skills

They felt that not completing their education had:

- affected their whole lives
- felt stuck in their predicament and wanted to change their lives

Interestingly, the most important aspects of work for **all** women was:

- job flexibility

However flexibility had different meaning for the women

Flexibility (for GED women) related to =

- flexible working hours and location
- a good working atmosphere

As one woman put it:

- first the location; second the type of job it is; third the pay

Flexibility (for middle class women) related to =

- not having to be “micromanaged” by their superiors
- the ability to learn from their jobs
- wanted intellectual fulfillment personal growth from her job
- a working environment free from sexual harassment
- camaraderie

Responses to neighborhood changes:

Gentrification, redevelopment efforts, and labor outsourcing changed the working lives of women in HP

For those who relied on local factory jobs, redevelopment meant:

- having to re-educate to obtain more marketable skills
 - or
- look for work elsewhere

This in turn caused:

- longer commutes
- rising childcare costs
- and a more rushed lifestyle

Some GED women were able to take advantage of services offered in the neighborhood:

- Participating in Puerto Rican cultural events
- Attend AH
- Visit clinics etc.

The newly arrived middle class women:

- did not visit neighborhood places
- except for restaurants on the Paseo
- they drove from work to their parking spaces

They viewed HP as a:

- a more affordable place to rent or buy
- a more culturally diverse and less yuppie place
- the park was absolutely gorgeous

In general, they had:

- a more romantic notion of the neighborhood

One woman said:

- she loved the neighborhood but not the trash

Her view about trash could be understood as:

- race and class differences between herself and working c. residents of color in the neighborhood

She and her husband took turns organizing cleaning groups in the community:

- every couple of months they gathered a group of people and picked up trash from the park and the sidewalk grassy areas

They were also involved with the **Friends of the Bloomingdale Trail**:

- an organization that promotes the conversion of the Bloomingdale railroad to an elevated park

These women viewed HP in a positive light:

- **as a cultural resource and a place to “invest in”**

The GED women had:

- more mixed feelings about the neighborhood

They tended to view HP:

- as a dangerous place
- plagued with gang violence
- an unsafe place to walk by yourself

Obstacles and aspirations:

I asked interviewees about some of the obstacles they faced in meeting their employment goals

What I learned was stories about:

- abusive and jealous partners
- lack of support systems including childcare

- a lack of jobs in the neighborhood
- long commutes and fear about walking around

I also asked about future aspirations

A recurring theme in my interviews expressed across race and social class was:

- a desire for independence
- wanting to be one's own boss
- wanting to have greater authority over one's labor

To rap this up: Slide 11

As you will recall, I set out to explore:

- HP women experiences of the neighborhood
- important aspects of their labor participation

My overarching goal was:

- to highlight what intersectional analysis reveal about women's lived experiences in a particular place and time

Experience of the neighborhood:

Women's work, living arrangements and perceptions of the neighborhood are metaphors for:

- differential access to resources
- class and race relations
- ongoing struggles with encroaching developers

Working class women:

- fear of being robbed or assaulted =
- central to their experience of HP

Middle class women:

- were largely insulated from fearing the neighborhood
- they could drive to work and feel safe
- opportunity to increase their symbolic capital
- living in HP = opportunity for material investment
- proudly foreswear "yuppie" or "cookie-cutter" neighborhoods
- enjoy lower housing costs which allowed them to spent more on consumer goods and services (e.g. housecleaners)

Balancing household labor and paid labor:

Most important aspects of their employment:

- flexibility
- a cultural value linked to self-reliance and independence
- this value was overarching for both groups

However, there were vast differences as well

Working class women:

- exp. disappearance of industrial jobs as additional obstacles
- loss of employment close to home precluded their full participation in the labor market
- those who worked in different parts of the city had long commutes
- many did not have washers/dryer in their homes
- they noted an absence of affordable daycare
- placed additional stress on their housework responsibilities
- flexibility = negotiating flexible working hours and desirable location

Middle class women:

- were largely insulated from such troubles fear of neighborhood
- afford housecleaners
- enjoyed more autonomy in their jobs and at home
- flexibility = intellectual fulfillment and personal growth

Working class women have not been mere bystanders in this process. As the study has shown, the majority of our interviewees were in the process of changing their lives by obtaining marketable skills and thereby expanding their social capital.