

REAL WOMEN HAVE CURVES: A LOOK AT THE CHALLENGES FACED BY YOUNG LATINA IMMIGRANTS TO THE UNITED STATES

REAL WOMEN HAVE CURVES: MULHERES VERDADEIRAS TÊM CURVAS: UM OLHAR NOS DESAFIOS ENFRENTADOS POR JOVENS IMIGRANTES LATINAS NOS ESTADOS UNIDOS

Jeanne T. Guerrero¹

RESUMEN: El presente trabajo examina la película *Real Women Have Curves* (*Las mujeres de verdad tiene curvas*) de Patricia Cardoso (2002) para proponer que las experiencias de las jóvenes latinas de los Estados Unidos continúan siendo diferentes y presentando retos únicos, al compararlas con jóvenes de otros grupos étnicos. Se argumenta que las jóvenes latinas de los Estados Unidos se enfrentan a desafíos tales como las siguientes: el mantenimiento de relaciones colectivistas de la familia en una sociedad individualista; el negociar los roles tradicionales de la familia hispana en una cultura que abarca diversas funciones de las relaciones, el sexo y el matrimonio, y el luchar con su propia imagen cuando se sienten obligadas a ver la forma de su cuerpo a través del lente estrecho de su nueva cultura dominante.

Palabras-clave: hispanos; latinas; la imagen corporal; el machismo y la inmigración; *Real Women Have Curves*; Patricia Cardoso; cine us latino.

ABSTRACT: This article examines the 2002 film *Real Women Have Curves*, as a case study in the life of a young Mexican American and the challenges she faces living with her family in the United States. The case study can serve as a microcosmic view of the universal issues facing other young Latinas who immigrate to the United States. Many Hispanics come to the United States each year. In fact, Hispanics are the fastest growing minorities and expected to become 15 percent of the population by 2020. The large groups of Latino immigrants in the United States have created greater acceptance in mainstream culture. However, the experiences of Latinas are different and have unique challenges such as the following: maintaining collectivist family relationships in an individualistic society, negotiating the traditional roles of the Hispanic family in a culture that embraces different ideas about relationships, sex and marriage, and struggling with their own self-image when they are forced to see their body shape through the narrow lens of their new dominant culture.

Keywords: Hispanic; Latino; Latina; body image; sexism and immigration; *Real women Have Curves*; US Latino Film; Patricia Cardoso.

¹ The University of Louisville, KY, USA.

INTRODUCTION

Current research shows that Latinos are expected to make up 15 percent of the U.S. population by 2020, thereby becoming the nation's largest minority. By far, the largest source of immigration in recent years has been Mexico. For instance, from 1991 to 2000, 24.7 percent (2.25 million) of the 9.095 million immigrants to the United States came from Mexico, with the next largest source, the Philippines, sending only 5.5 percent (504,000) of the total (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000). These immigrants come to the United States for many different reasons: to seek economic opportunities, to reunite their families, to escape political or religious persecution, and more. Yet, the challenges facing young Mexican American girls who are newly immigrated to the United States can be particularly daunting. For example, some Latinas struggle with what they see as an American culture that values individuality and singular achievement over their Latino values that emphasize collective family member responsibilities and obligations to one another.

Latin American cultures with a collectivistic orientation emphasize the goals and interests of the group over those of individual members. A critical aspect of a collectivistic ideology is a strong concern for the fate and well-being of one's kin and family members within collectivistic cultures often are expected to support each other and assist in the maintenance of the household (KAGITCIBASI, p. 135-200; LEE, p. 208-228; TRIANDIS, p. 41-133). The needs of the family usually have priority, and individual members often are asked to downplay their own needs and desires if they conflict with those of the larger family (HUANG, p. 21-31). For Latino families, the significant roles of the grandparents or "abuelita/abuelos," the uncles and aunts or "tios/tias," and other siblings and caregivers define a family as they confront the social stress of acculturation in American neighborhoods often plagued by poverty, gang violence and inferior educational systems. In contrast, individualist cultures, such as those of the United States, emphasize personal achievement at the expense of group goals. For the young Latina, she must delicately balance being a collectivist within her Hispanic family, but also become an individualist within her America society. One way many Latinos try to assist their families and also seek their own personal success is through higher education. Higher education is perceived as extremely important, and for most people, a college education has become the necessary admission ticket to good jobs and a middle-class lifestyle. Despite strong belief in the value of a college diploma, Hispanics more often than not fall short of that goal. Some of their roadblocks include: Latinos do not have enough money, yet many are reluctant to borrow; Family obligations intervene; and parents and teachers provide only lukewarm support.

An additional conflict for the young Mexican American girl is the culture of machismo in Latin American society. A predominant pattern in Mexican American culture is that of elders' ordering young men and women to establish obedience and male dominance. Traditional Latin cultures are marked by strong gender role divisions where the husband represents authority and the wife-mother maintains a role of complete devotion to her husband and children. This concept is taught implicitly and explicitly from birth. The ide-

alized traditional feminine gender role involves being submissive, chaste, and dependent, whereas the masculine gender role involves being dominant, virile, and independent. Some scholars have criticized this depiction of traditional gender roles as stereotypical and invalid; however, there is empirical support for the notion that traditional values regulate the sexual behavior of many Latinos and Latinas. For example, among Mexican American adolescents, partner preferences reflect the cultural values of respeto and familismo as well as traditional hierarchical gender roles. This view is in stark contrast to their adopted American society that regularly embraces sex and other potentially negative forms of behavior as viewed in the form of mass media. Among Hispanics, this acculturation - a process of adaptation in which immigrants alter their attitudes and behaviors to more closely resemble those of the host society - is an important predictor of many health-related behaviors, including cigarette smoking, alcohol use, and early sexual initiation. Being once again torn between two opposing worlds, the young Latina must decide which value is most relevant to their life - the Hispanic, familial view or those images that appear prominently in their new American home.

Therefore, this paper will examine the 2002 film, *Real Women Have Curves*, as a case study into the life of one Mexican American young girl and the challenges she faces living with her family in the United States. In the first part, an analysis is made of the historical context of factors affecting family and gender roles as it relates to the pursuit of higher education. Next, it will examine the social tensions in the family regarding relationships, sex, and marriage. Last, it will discuss the struggle of Latinas who are forced to define themselves through the lens of body image. Finally, it will show that the challenges faced by the family portrayed in *Real Women Have Curves* universally illustrate the conflicts often faced by other young Latinas who newly immigrate to the United States.

THE HISPANIC VIEW OF EDUCATION

Real Women Have Curves (2002) portrays the story of Ana, the youngest daughter of Latino working class immigrants from Mexico, Carmen and Raul. Ana's family, along with her older sister, live in a Hispanic community in East Los Angeles. Set in the year 1987, the audience receives the story from Ana's point of view and follows her as she faces coming of age as a Latina in an American society.

The pursuit of education is a reoccurring theme in this film. Ana is a self-motivated and determined young student. She takes a combination of city buses to get to school every day. Her high school is known for its high quality education and is very selective. It is never clearly stated in the film that her neighborhood high school is inadequate, but one must assume this is the case since Ana takes such measures to arrive at school each day.

Even though seeking educational opportunities is obviously important to Ana, it does not appear as if it is as important to her mother. Throughout the film, Ana's mother, Car-

men, tries to manipulate and deter Ana from pursuing her education. For instance, the beginning of the story shows Ana getting ready for her last day of school. Her mother fakes a sickness only to get Ana to stay at home and care for her and her family. Ana does not believe that her mother's sickness is real and goes to school anyway. In this scene, Carmen seems to stand in the way of Ana's educational goals. However, we must look at education in the view of Carmen's historical background. According to Fuligni, Tseng, and Lam, Latin American families in the United States have often been characterized as placing a greater importance upon familial duty and obligations than their counterparts with European backgrounds (1030-1040). Likewise, a devotion and loyalty to family is often an imperative for individuals within Latin American cultures. For example, it is not uncommon for children to be asked to perform chores such as shopping for food, cooking meals, and assisting with the care of other family members (CAPLAN; CHOY & WHITMORE, p. 36-42).

In addition to her strong motivation for doing well in high school, Ana is also motivated to pursue a college education. With the encouragement of her instructor, Mr. Guzman, Ana completes her college applications and is accepted to Columbia University. Mr. Guzman (also a Latin American), tries hard to help Ana achieve her educational goals. When Ana tells him that she cannot go to Columbia because of her family obligations, he makes a special visit to Ana's home and pleads with her parents to let her go to college. He tells them that they do not have to worry about money because Ana has been offered a full scholarship to attend Columbia. Despite this news, her parents (mostly her mother) refuse to let Ana go. Carmen, once again uses Ana's emotional ties to her family, particularly helping in her sister's factory and providing support for her grandfather to compel Ana to stay. Ana's father, Raul, finally agrees with her mother and contends that he does not want to see his family separated with the distance between Los Angeles and New York. After hearing these arguments, Ana grudgingly begins working at the sewing factory for her sister Estella to help provide family support.

Although the film portrays Ana's parents as relatively unconcerned with their daughter's education, the concerns and expectations that Ana's parents hold for their daughter are not uncommon within the Latino community. Researchers and scholars urge that in order to have a more educated and diverse society, there must be an understanding to the cultural logic of the parent's decision making process (AUERBACH, p. 275-292). Self-employment among Hispanic immigrants is affected by family composition and human capital/class resources as well as the socio-economic status of the individual immigrant groups. Accordingly, "Facing limited employment opportunities, many immigrants view self-employment as a route to upward mobility" (VALDEZ, p. 955-973). In the eyes of Ana's mother, a college education is not the top priority and working in the factory to help her sister is of utmost importance; therefore, she feels it should also be of utmost importance to Ana.

Later scenes in the film show that Carmen does express a true concern for the well-being of her children, but her behavior is often viewed as controlling and overbearing. Carmen wants to control every aspect of her daughter's lives, including their choices in re-

relationships. Regardless of the fact that both her daughter's show a strong independence and self-motivation without husbands, Carmen wants to see both of her daughter's married. In her own experience, she feels this is the best situation for her children. Women are meant to care for the home and family, and her concern for her daughters is an expression of her fulfilling her expected role as a woman and a mother. Mothers are expected to raise good daughters that will make good wives. A college education is secondary, and not necessary to the mindset of Ana's mother. According to Carmen, educated women struggle to find husbands. If a woman desires to marry, she must be a virgin, uneducated, fit the beauty standard, and most importantly, listen to the words of her mother.

Early research often regarded familial ties or collectivism as an impediment to socio-economic advancement for Mexican Americans in urban industrial societies because such societies emphasize individualism, competition, and geographic mobility (VALENSUELA; DORNBUSH, p. 18-36). More recently, however, this view has changed and familism is generally viewed as a protective factor. Studies of a variety of outcomes (e.g., physical and mental health, education) among Hispanics propose that extended family networks, family cohesion, and high levels of social support reduce the adverse consequences of poverty (LANDALE; OROPESA, p. 166-183). Thus, recent literature regards familism as a positive attribute of Hispanic families that may decline with acculturation to U.S. family norms and adaptation to life in the United States.

GENDER AND SOCIETAL ISSUES

While going away to college is one of the issues Ana must resolve with her family, exploring sex and defining sexual roles in an American relationship is another issue of conflict. For example, Ana has a high-school love interest named Jimmy who seems genuinely interested in wanting a relationship with Ana. Ana does not want her mother to know she is seeing Jimmy so her grandfather helps her to meet Jimmy in secret. From the film, it is not clear why Ana wants to keep her relationship with Jimmy a secret. Whatever her reasons, Ana and Jimmy meet several times over the course of the summer and grow closer. Although Jimmy does not push for a sexual relationship with Ana, it is Ana who feels ready to go further. She buys condoms and brings them with her on a night at Jimmy's home when his parents are away. In this instance, it is Ana, and not Jimmy, who takes off her own shirt and insists that Jimmy look at her with the lights on: "See, this is what I look like," Ana replies to Jimmy. In response, Jimmy tells Ana: "What a beauty." Later, Ana tells Jimmy not to bother writing or phoning her once he leaves for college because he will probably be busy and meet a "skinny girl anyway." Jimmy does not address her challenge and simply says "I will really miss you." This scene shows on the one hand that Ana is becoming more confident by becoming sexually active on her own terms. On the other hand, it shows that Ana is still insecure because of her weight. It is this insecurity that Ana attempts to overcome through the rest of the film.

Sex and the pressure to be sexually active has become a daily presence in American pop culture. Mass media in the form of mainstream television, magazines, and music videos with their often exaggerated views of sexual permissiveness are the primary ways in which Latina girls learn about the cultural norms of American society. More than half (56 percent) of all television shows contain sexual content — averaging more than three scenes with sex per hour. For shows with sexual content, just nine percent include any mention of the possible risks of sexual activity, or any reference to contraception, protection, or safer sex (Kaiser Family Foundation 20). This image from the mainstream culture is at odds with the sexual abstinence ideal Latina adolescents receive from their families, communities, and culture.

The historical roots of Hispanic views on sex are firmly rooted in Catholicism. A young Hispanic woman must be virgin-like before marriage and if she is not, then she is a whore; no middle ground remains, and there is no room for compromise so one is either completely pure or completely disgraced. This places into context an understanding of Ana's mother when she calls her daughter a "whore" for having lost her virginity before her wedding. However, Ana shows no sign of regretting her decision. In fact, Ana finds the courage to stand up to her mother and tells her: "A man should appreciate a woman for what's in her mind and not what's between her legs." Ana's actions reiterate the opinion among some that, "younger women insisted that...liberating themselves sexually was their generation's way of resisting patriarchal culture" (SIEGEL, p. 192). In addition, Carmen's opinions serve to reflect the always present tension in blending her first generation immigrant culture with that of American society and expectations of her daughter's second generation immigrant experience. Thus, some may see Ana's first sexual experiences as a reflection of a confused culture. However, others may see that Ana's decision to become sexually active is a symbol of reclaiming her own power.

Research shows that, "second- and third-generation descendants of immigrants will join in the retreat from marriage as a result of their exposure to the cultural and economic environment of the United States, as well as changes in the countries from which their immigrant parents originate" (LANDALE; OROPESA, p. 901-920). Ana embodies this second generation mindset despite the fact that it is in clear contrast to the advice and lessons of her mother. Some research has suggested that the Latino parenting style, often characterized as domineering, conservative, and differentiated in how male and female children are socialized, does not allow for open parent — child discussions of topics such as sexuality (LEFKOWITZ; ROMO; CORONA; AU; SIGMAN, p. 315-325). Furthermore, additional research indicates that Latina mothers may be reluctant to discuss sex with their children and may maintain a silence about sex or convey a sense of shame and need for self-restraint concerning sexual behavior, particularly with their daughters (O'SULLIVAN, MEYER-BAHLBURG; WATKINS, p. 269-292). As a result, Carmen's advice only serves to promote the continuance of the established system of patriarchy and discrimination that Ana desperately wants to escape. In her cultural traditions, Ana has committed a horrible sin - she lost her virginity before her wedding night. With her second-generation mindset, Ana's decision to become sexually active is her own choice and an act of reclaiming her sexual freedom in a positive light.

BODY IMAGE AND SELF-IDENTITY

As each scene in the film shows a young Ana becoming more and more confident in her own abilities, the one area she constantly battles to overcome is the negative view about her weight. Although Ana appears to have a basically positive view about her size, Carmen constantly insults Ana about her weight. Several times throughout the film Ana is confronted by her mother with damaging and self-limiting phrases of “If you just lost some weight...”, or “You’re so pretty but...” At no time in the film does Carmen ever appear to empathize with her daughter and her feelings about weight even though Carmen is overweight herself. Once again, it is Carmen’s traditional beliefs that shape her responses to her daughter. Carmen thinks that Ana’s weight will prevent her from finding a husband. Even though Carmen is also overweight, she believes it is acceptable because she has a husband.

As an attempt to exert even more control over Ana and her life choices, Carmen pressures Ana to work in her sister Estella’s sewing factory with three other women: Pancha, Rosala, and Carmen. Each of these women describe themselves as more or less overweight and also struggle with their own problems. On a daily basis, these women must create beautiful dresses that they themselves can never hope to wear. They make dresses for Bloomingdales getting \$18 a dress when the store sells them for \$600. This infuriates Ana as well as the fact that they never make dresses bigger than a size seven. Ana imagines that the woman who buys the dress at Bloomingdale’s is very different from her. This imaginary woman is both affluent and thin with class privilege that allows her to be oblivious to the material conditions under which the dress was made. In effect, this woman embodies the American cultural ideal of both wealth and slenderness; a concept none of the women working in the dress shop believe they can ever hope to attain.

Hispanic household wealth is extremely low, reveals Collins, Leondar-Wright, and Sklar. While the typical white household had \$18,000 in financial wealth (net worth minus equity in owner-occupied housing) in 1995 (the latest year for which complete figures are available), the typical black household had just \$200 and the typical Hispanic household had zero (21-29). It is this constant negative view of the lack of class privilege and not adhering to an American standard of beauty that Latina girls must face on a regular basis:

Contextualizing Latina girls’ body image development requires an appreciation of these two sets of values and an understanding of the process by which Latina girls traverse the borders between them. Girls who are more acculturated into mainstream American culture may be more likely to endorse the dominant thin ideal; because this ideal is unattainable to nearly all girls, regardless of ethnicity, these girls may feel worse about their own bodies than girls who are less acculturated and who endorse a Latino/a body ideal. (SCHOOLER, p. 132-153)

Though evidence does not necessarily support the presence of larger body ideal image in Latino culture (CACHELIN; REBECK; CHUNG; PELAYO, p. 158-166), young Latina women have articulated a body ideal that has more “feminine curves” than the dominant

White ideal (CASANOVA, p. 287). Instead of a thin ideal, Latino culture, like African American culture, may value a “thick” ideal comprising a slender but curvy body, with a thin waist, big breasts and hips, and a round behind (CASANOVA, p. 293). Furthermore, Latino and African American cultures may place more emphasis on movement and style compared to body size (CASANOVA, p. 308).

The final scenes of the film show that there is hope for these women to ultimately achieve their dreams. After the women have worked sewing dresses for over twenty-four hours straight on a rush order, Estela counts the dresses and realizes that they have only fourteen more to make. The women quickly realize that they are going to make their deadline and finish making their dresses. Fed up with the heat, Ana strips off her blouse and continues to iron and dance to music in her bra and panties. Carmen yells at Ana, telling her that she is too fat to show that much of her body in public. In reaction to Carmen’s protests at Ana’s undressing, the other women begin to shed their clothes and display their hips, stomachs, stretch marks, and scars in a kind of one-up game of whose body is fatter. Successfully completing the order of dresses by their deadline changes the women as they see what they can do when they work hard together. In overcoming their shame and beginning to feel pride about their bodies and the work that the women have done, the women also become empowered in their new life in America. In contrast to the other women in the factory, though, Carmen walks out after seeing more women taking off their clothes. This final scene further represents the conflict between first generation immigrants and second-generation immigrants. The women in the factory represent second-generational immigrants who see America as a land of opportunity, growth, self-expression and freedom. Carmen with her first-generational views, however, sees America as pulling her daughters in a negative path against family values. Carmen has the chance to bond with her daughters and the other women in the factory but chooses not to do so. Unfortunately, Carmen stays trapped in her own bitterness and insecurities.

CONCLUSION

In essence, *Real Women Have Curves* is a film about a young Latina girl who successfully triumphs in negotiating the two worlds of her collectivistic Latino cultural as well as her individualistic American culture. Ana manages to respect her elders by adhering to family obligations and working for her sister, yet she also transcends the confines of traditional Latino gender roles by defining her own sexual freedom and then pursuing her college education. Even though Ana appeared intent on creating her own pathway despite the desires or negative comments from her mother, there were several scenes in which she did struggle with the emotional pull of her family obligations and sense of duty. Because Ana managed to receive the blessings of most of her family members to pursue her dreams in the final scenes of the film, she catapults herself to almost mythical status. Despite the many challenges she faces, Ana creates her own options, which results in her working for and creating her

own equality. Ana shows a young Latina woman who claims her body in the family, in sex, and in identity. In this manner, Ana ultimately claims her own destiny. It is for this reason that this many women, not only Latinas, can identify with Ana's struggle. Instead of just a singular Latina girl coming to age in America, she now represents the model for how many other Latinas would hope to attain – approval from their family and also permission to go after their dreams.

The concluding scene of this film, shows Ana leaving her family without the blessings of her mother but also walking confidently down a New York street. It is in this view that Ana transcends her family roots to take a new challenge in American society that exemplifies one of the myriad complexities in the lives of working-class Mexican-American women who also struggle with their culture and identity. Thus, *Real Women Have Curves* serves as a consciousness raising effort for young Latina women looking to find a new identity as they faces the different experiences that come with living in America.

WORKS CITED

- AUERBACH, Susan. "If the Student is Good, Let Him Fly; Moral Support for College among Latino Immigrant Parents." *Journal of Latinos and Education* v. 5 n. 4 (2006): 275-292. Print.
- CAPLAN, N., CHOY, M., and WHITMORE, J. K. "Indochinese Refugee Families and Academic Achievement." *Scientific American* (1992): 36-42. Print.
- CACHELIN, F. M., Rebeck, R. M., Chung G. H., & Pelayo, E. "Does Ethnicity Influence Body-size Preference? A Comparison of Body Image and Body Size." *Obesity Research* 10 (2002): 158–166. Print.
- COLLINS, Chuck, Leondar-Wright, Betsy, and Sklar, Holly. *Shifting Fortunes: The Perils of the Growing American Wealth Gap*. *United for a Fair Economy* 37 (2002): 21-29. Print.
- CASANOVA, E. M. "No Ugly Woman." *Concepts of Race and Beauty among Adolescent Women in Ecuador*. *Gender & Society* 18 (2004): 287, 293, 308. Print.
- FULIGNI, Andrew J., Tseng, Vivian, and Lam, Mary. "Attitudes toward Family Obligations among American Adolescents with Asian, Latin American, and European Backgrounds." *Child Development* 70.4 (1999): 1030-1040. Print.
- HUANG, L. N. "An Integrative Approach to Clinical Assessment and Intervention with Asian-American Adolescents." *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 23.1 (1994): 21-31. Print.
- KAGITCIBASI, C. "Family and Socialism in Cross-cultural Perspective: A Model of Change." *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation* 37 (1990):135-200. Print.
- KAISER Family Foundation. "Sex on TV: A Biennial Report to the Kaiser Family Foundation." *Spec. report to Kaiser Family Foundation* (2005): 20. Print.

LANDALE, N. S., Oropesa R. S. "Migration, Social Support and Perinatal Health: An Origin-Destination Analysis of Puerto Rican Women." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 42.2 (2001): 166-183. Print.

LEE, E. "A Social Systems Approach to Assessment and Treatment for Chinese American Families." *Ethnicity and Family Therapy* (1983): 208-228. Print.

LEFKOWITZ, E. S., Romo, L. F., Corona, R., Au, T. K., and Sigman, M. "How Latino American and European American Adolescents Discuss Conflicts, Sexuality, and AIDS with their Mothers." *Developmental Psychology* 36.3 (2000): 315-325. Print.

Real Women Have Curves. Dir. Patricia Caroso. Perf. America Ferrera. HBO Films, 2002.

OROPESA, R. S., and Landale N. S. "The Future of Marriage and Hispanics." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66.4 (2004): 901-920. Print.

O'SULLIVAN, L. F., Meyer-Bahlburg, F. L., and Watkins, B. X. "Mother-Daughter Communication about Sex among Urban African American and Latino Families." *Journal of Adolescent Research* 16.3 (2001): 269-292. Print.

SCHOOLER, Deborah. "Real Women Have Curves: A Longitudinal Investigation of TV and the Body Image Development of Latina Adolescents." *Journal of Adolescent Research* 23.2 (2008): 132-153. Print.

SIEGEL, Harvey. "Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking, and Education." (1988): 192. Print.

TRIANDIS, H. C. "Cross-Cultural Studies of Individualism and Collectivism." *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation* 37 (1990): 41-133. Print.

United States Census Bureau. "Income and Poverty in 1999." *Census.gov*. 7 September 2000. Web. 20 April 2012.

< <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/incpovhlth/1999/briefing.html> >

VALDEZ, Zuelma. "The Effect of Social Capital on White, Korean, Mexican and Black Business Owners' Earnings in the US." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 34.6 (2008): 955-973.

VALENZUELA, A. and Dornbusch, S. M. "Familism and Social Capital in the Academic Achievement of Mexican Origin and Anglo Adolescents." *Social Science Quarterly* 75 (1994): 18-36. Print.