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Social Research Design

Qualitative Paper

Stigmatized Workers & Identity Formation: Spiritual Healers of Botánicas in San Antonio

Botánicas and Spiritual Healers

Botánicas are stores that sell herbs, natural remedies, candles, and other goods that are used in Latin American folk healing practices. Located in U.S. cities with large Latino populations, these stores can be described as “the visible door to the invisible world of folk healing” (Viladrich 2006:409). In addition to selling goods for folk healing, botánicas also employ spiritual healers that offer services such as healings, cleansings, and card-readings, among others. These healers identify themselves in diverse ways, but many are called *curanderos, Santeros,* or *espiritistas.* While the practices vary among these different types of healers, most Latino healers combine religious prayer and herbs to heal their customers in a holistic sense that combines physical, mental, and spiritual conceptions of health. Several studies have analyzed how the use of these practices relates to the health care trends of this growing population in the United States (Gomez-Beloz, et al. 2001; Higginbotham et. al. 1990; Fernandes 2006; Trotter et. al. 2010; Andres-Hyman, 2006; Jones et. al. 2001). The research conducted by Gomez-Beloz and Chavez focused specifically on botánicas and suggested that they serve as a “culturally appropriate health care option for Latinos” (2001).

Our study was initially aimed at furthering knowledge on how botánicas function as a form of health care, however, we quickly learned that the relationship between botánicas and the Latino population in the U.S. has many complexities beyond health care. Botánicas are also deeply intertwined in the religion of their customers and the Latino population in the U.S. While a variety of religions are represented among the goods sold in these stores, the influence of Catholicism is the most prevalent. This is not surprising, considering that 68% of U.S. Latinos identify as Roman Catholic (Suro, et. al. 2007). However, traditional Roman Catholicism stands against the use of botánicas due to their associations with witchcraft and other occult practices (Gregory 1999; Beliso-De Jesus 2013; Pabón & Pérez 2007; Jacobson 2003). As a result, social stigma toward the use of botánicas is heavily present among the Latino population in the U.S. This paper will move beyond the initial aim of the study in an attempt to understand the complexities of the stigma that exists toward the "invisible world of folk healing" through the eyes of the healers themselves (Viladrich 2006:409). This paper will analyze the process by which spiritual healers of botánicas legitimize their identities in response to the stigma surrounding their practices.

Contextualizing the Study

There is a wide base of literature focused specifically on Latin American spiritual healers, including *curanderos, Santeros, espiritistas,* and other types of practitioners employed by botánicas (Press 1971; Mulcahy 2005; Koss 1977; Viladrich 2006; Ceja-Zamarripa 2007; Espin 1988). Additionally, several pieces of literature acknowledge that a stigma toward these practices exists in the United States (Gregory 1999; Beliso-De Jesus 2013; Pabón & Pérez 2007; Jacobson 2003). The Catholic Church is the primary source of this stigma within Latino communities, as it has historically "denounced [these practices] as heretics" (Romberg 1998:72).

This stigma causes people to perceive spiritual healing practices as primitive and dangerous due to their associations with witchcraft, sorcery, and other occult activities that are considered blasphemous. Although there are several existing studies on spiritual healers as well as literature that discuss the stigma toward their practices, this paper will connect these themes by discussing the impact of this stigma on the identity of healers.

The stigma that causes spiritual workers to be viewed as immoral and blasphemous ties into the social theory of "dirty work" developed by E.C. Hughes (1951). According to Hughes, an occupation can be stigmatized as "dirty work" because it is "physically disgusting" or "a symbol of degradation." Hughes also suggests that "it may be dirty work in that it in some way goes counter to the more heroic of our moral conceptions," (1951:314) and this particular concept of dirty work best describes the stigmatization of spiritual healers in botánicas. Ashforth and Kreiner, two scholars that have based their work on Hughes' theory, would describe the occupation of a spiritual healer as having "moral taint" (1999). These authors suggest that individuals that are involved in dirty work are able to maintain a positive identity through a variety of "defense mechanisms," such as occupational ideologies and social weighting (1999: 421). Ashforth and Kreiner suggest that the use of these defense mechanisms is augmented by "strong workgroup cultures" that emerge in response to stigma (1999:421). This study will recognize spiritual healers as dirty workers, according to Hughes' (1951) theory. Additionally, the analysis of this paper will be primarily based off of Ashforth and Kreiner's (1999) research on dirty work and identity formation in order to understand how these healers legitimize their identities within stigmatized practices (1999 pg 429).

Methodology

This study is based off of eight interviews with individuals that were employed at four different botánicas in the southern metropolitan area of San Antonio, Texas. Six of these individuals identified as spiritual healers and two of these individuals were managers of botánicas. Three individuals identified as *Santeros,* two identified as *curanderos,* and one identified as a *reiki* master. Of the eight interviewees, four were female and four were male. All of the interviewees were Latino and ranged in age from early twenties to mid-sixties. The interviews took place during October and November of 2013. As many of these individuals were connected through a social network, a snowball sampling method was used to set up interviews. Two of the interviews occurred in conjunction with researcher participation in one healing and one card-reading. Ethnographic fieldnotes were gathered based on these experiences of participant observation, which also contributed to our source of qualitative data. We found that individuals employed by botánicas are typically very busy, and this is especially true for the healers. This made it difficult to set up interviews, in addition to the fact that some individuals were hesitant to share information about their practice. One of the individuals refused to have the interview recorded. Therefore, our data would have been richer if had we been able to interview more of the healers themselves, but this would have required us to have more time to expand our social networks. However, considering the variety of gender, age, and type of healing practice among those interviewed, our data is fairly representative of spiritual healers employed by botánicas in San Antonio.

Prior to conducting this research, I had never heard of a botánica. The botánicas that we visited in San Antonio are located in a low-income region with a large Latino population, thus conducting this research forced me out of my comfort zone. As a white female from a relatively affluent background, I felt very much like an outsider in the world of botánicas and spiritual healing. Additionally, I had never participated in any form of traditional healing practice, therefore I carried certain biases regarding the legitimacy of these practices. Learning to separate these biases from my research was an important step in the data collection process. My status as an outsider was also a disadvantage in terms of building rapport with botánica healers and employees, so it took time and patience to gain access to their knowledge about these practices.

Strong Occupational Culture: "I was born with a gift"

According to the study by Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), the development of a strong occupational culture is an important component of maintaining a positive identity within dirty work because this allows workers to withstand stigma as a group rather than as individuals. In describing occupational culture, these authors state that "people sharing common social category and social pressures come to regard themselves as 'in the same boat' – as sharing a common fate" (1999:419). Thus, occupational culture results from the process by which dirty workers differentiate themselves from others. This differentiation process is critical because it is through occupational cultures that stigmatized workers employ defense mechanisms against the stigma itself (Ashforth & Kreiner 1999).

In understanding spiritual healers in terms of dirty work, it is clear how an occupational culture is formed among these individuals. For example, several individuals discussed spiritual healers as either being "born with a gift" or "having a calling". Javier, a healer that identified as a *Santero,* illustrated his identity as a healer when he stated "But people like me, you have to understand…you have to be born with a gift. And I was born with a gift." By making this statement, Javier is not only describing an identifying trait for himself as an individual, but he is also describing an identifying trait for all healers, or as he stated, "people like me". In making this statement, Javier distinguishes both himself and all healers in general apart from all other people. In the theory of Ashforth and Kreiner, Javier views himself as sharing a "common fate" with other individuals in his occupation (1999: 419).

In addition, four of the other interviewees also mentioned a "gift" or a "calling" as an identifying trait of spiritual healers. These types of statements are also discussed in the literature surrounding spiritual healers at botánicas (Jones, et. al. 2001; Viladrich 2006; Viladrich 2006; Mulcahy 2005). One woman in our study that identified as a *Santera* described another healer in her social network by saying "…he just happened to be one of the ones, you know, he did have this calling." According to Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), statements like these represent the process of articulating an attribute that not only identifies these individuals as spiritual healers, but also allows them to view themselves in the context of the world through an "us versus them" perspective. These articulations create a cohesive group of people that share a stigmatized occupation, and this "facilitate[s] esteem-enhancing social identities" through two "defense mechanisms" that will be further discussed: occupational ideology and social weighting (1999:419).

A Healer's Ideology: "This is meant for good"

As posited by Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), the formation of a workgroup culture is the first step in forming a positive identity amidst occupational stigma, which was exemplified among spiritual healers through their unifying identification with spiritual gifts. Continuing with Ashforth and Kreiner's theory, workgroup cultures allow for the formation of occupational ideologies, or "systems of belief that provide a means for interpreting and understanding what the occupation does and why it matters" (1999:421). The authors suggest that there are three ways of forming an occupational ideology that counteracts the stigma toward that particular occupation: “reframing, recalibrating, and refocusing” (1999:421). In this section, I will illustrate how spiritual healers at botánicas use the tactic of refocusing to maintain positive identities while experiencing stigma. By using the tactic of refocusing, “the center of attention is shifted from the stigmatized features of the work to the nonstigmatized features” (Ashforth & Kreiner 1999).

In the regards to spiritual healers, this tactic is used to literally shift the focus from the “bad” aspects to the “good” aspects of these practices. Other studies have described “good” practices as those with the intent of providing the customer with protection, good luck, empowerment, and love (Espin 1988; Viladrich 2006; Ceja-Zamarripa 2007). The practices considered “bad” involve evil spirits, demons, the devil, curses, hexes, witchcraft, or other practices that intend to do harm to others (Jacobson 2003; Koss 1977; Press 1971). In this study, many healers focused only on the “good”. For example, a curandero, who I will call James, firmly stated:

> We have botánicas that work for good, only good, and we have botánicas that work with both good and bad… So we try to just, so everybody knows, that there are some places that only work good. So this practice is not for good and bad, or bad at all. This is meant for good.

In this statement, James is “willfully dis-attend[ing] to the features of work that are socially problematic,” or the aspects of folk healing that are viewed as bad, evil, or occult through the lens of traditional Catholicism (Ashforth & Kreiner 1999: 423). Like several other healers that made similar statements regarding practicing only “good” and not “bad”, James doesn’t deny the existence of “bad” in the world of botánicas and folk healing. However, he purposefully presents his own work as positive. While he explicitly makes this shift through this statement, he and several other interviewees latently shifted the focus from the bad aspects of folk healing to the good aspects through anecdotes of extraordinary healing that they had accomplished. James discussed a woman in a wheelchair and how his healing practices helped her to walk again.

Another curandera, who I will call Fernanda, talked about a pregnant woman that was told her baby would die. Fernanda said that after healing her, the woman gave birth to a healthy baby. By explaining these stories in detail and emphasizing their pride in these positive experiences, the healers place their attention on the aspects of their practices that are *not* stigmatized among Latinos. Through this tactic of refocusing, spiritual healers develop an ideology about their occupation that “renders it more palatable” and offers them “internal legitimacy” (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999: 421).

Contrastingly, the Santero called Javier did provide detailed explanations of stigmatized practices. He was the only healer to describe his practices as witchcraft and to acknowledge participation in practices considered “bad”. Unlike the other healers in our study, Javier described practices such as animal sacrifice and harming others with spiritual powers – occult behaviors that are strongly stigmatized within the Latino population. However, he did make the statement “I do have my limits,” which parallels other healers’ statements on staying within the limits of “the good”. While Javier did not reframe his practices like the other healers in this study, this could be due to the fact that he was the youngest healer. He was still learning these practices and perhaps had not been exposed to stigma long enough to feel the “desire for social validation” (Ashforth & Kreiner 1999: 419).

By refocusing on the non-stigmatized aspects of their practices, the spiritual healers in this study form an ideology about their occupation that justifies the work itself. Except Javier, every healer referenced this occupational ideology by making some sort of statement about practicing only “good” rather than “bad”. This ideology “simultaneously negat[es] or devalu[e]s negative attributions while creating or revaluing positive ones” so that spiritual healers can positively identify with their occupation (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999: 421).

Moderating stigma: "Well okay you call that being a Christian?"

Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) illustrate how occupational ideologies legitimize the identities of stigmatized workers, however, they also discuss the importance of social weighting in identity formation. Social weighting refers to "practices that moderate the impact of stigma" (1999: 414). While the authors discuss several forms of social weighting, I will focus on the concept of "condemning the condemners" and how this tactic allows healers at botánicas to form positive identities by moderating the stigma toward their occupation (1999:424). By using this strategy, spiritual healers question the "legitimacy of critical outsiders as moral arbiters," and thus "dismiss the condemner's perceptions" in order to maintain positive identities (1999:424). One example of this is when a Santera, who I will call Carla, made a statement about her sisters:

> I have sisters that, oh my god, you know. No, they will not come out of the church, and I am doing something wrong. But yet, they will fight with everybody in the world. [laughs] You know, and I'm going like, well okay you call that being a Christian? You know, okay, you think you're safe because you go and pray, you know, and whatever you do, go to mass, or whatever. And I'm goin like I don't even go to mass, not regularly all the time. And I feel like, okay, I'm like above in my openness…

In this statement, Carla discusses how her sisters reject her involvement with folk healing due to their adherence to Catholicism. By describing them as "fighting with everybody in the world" despite praying and going to church, Carla posits her sisters as hypocrites and questions their moral character. Through this act of questioning, she renders their judgments tenuous and is able to justify her identification with the practices that her sisters stigmatized.

While Carla's statement explicitly displays Ashforth and Kreiner's (1999) theorized process of condemning the condemners, other individuals also participated in this process by making references to the Bible. One botánica employee, Carlos, stated, "You know, they say, you shouldn't. They say you shouldn't do that, but in the bible, I mean, it talks about card readings…If you look, it talks about it, reading cards." In this statement, Carlos implies that people say “you shouldn’t” participate in the practices of botánicas because it goes against Catholic principles, however, these people are making this assertion without actually referencing the bible. When he states that these practices exist in the bible, he questions the knowledge of the people that make these assertions. In doing so, Carlos can disregard the assertions that reflect stigma and thus maintain a positive identity.

The other individual that made a reference to the bible was a female card reader. Unlike Carla and Carlos, this woman participated in the process of “condemning the condemners” in an alternative way. She initially acknowledged a level of credibility to certain criticisms by admitting that the bible denounces these types of practices. However, this woman was still able to condemn the condemners by questioning how the bible is interpreted and suggesting that there is a “confusion of the material, physical, and spiritual in the Bible” (Fieldnotes 11/21/13). She could then discount any of the judgments made against her that were based on the Bible, and she was able to legitimize her own occupational identity as a card reader.

In this study, several spiritual healers make use of social weighting through the process of condemning the condemners, as theorized by Ashforth and Kreiner (1999). Healers at botánicas use this strategy in a variety of ways, whether through questioning the moral character of the condemners that consider themselves Catholic, or questioning the knowledge and interpretation of the bible itself. In doing so, these individuals are able to lessen the effects of Catholic stigma, and this allows them to maintain positive identities within their occupation.

Concluding Thoughts

This study has built upon E.C. Hughes’ (1951) theory on dirty work by recognizing the spiritual healer as a stigmatized occupation within Latino communities in the U.S. Spiritual healing at botánicas can be considered work that is morally dirty due to its association with practices that are considered blasphemous by the Catholic Church. In addition to providing another example of an occupation that validates Hughes' theory, this study also validates the research accomplished by Ashforth and Kreiner (1999). Our data on spiritual healers illustrate these authors' concepts of occupational culture, occupational ideology, and social weighting, which support their larger theory that individuals with stigmatized occupations maintain positive identities.

This study is a significant addition to existing literature in sociology and anthropology because it acknowledges different cultural conceptions of dirty work. For example, a person that does not identify as Catholic or Latino may not perceive spiritual healing to be dirty work in the same way that it is perceived by people from Latin American cultures. This study was unique due to its focus on conceptions of dirty work in another culture. On the other hand, due to our status as outsiders, we had limited access to spiritual healers in San Antonio, which caused weaknesses within this study. The limited access to healers forced me to analyze all of the spiritual healers at botánicas as representing one uniform occupation. However, it should be acknowledged that curanderos, Santeros, masters of Reiki, and other types of healers employed by botánicas are diverse in their beliefs and practices. Therefore, they likely experience stigma in equally diverse ways. As this study only captured a small portion of a large abundance of sociological and anthropological data on spiritual healing and botánicas, research on this topic should continue. Furthermore, making this research available to the public could work to break down the moral stigma that healers experience by revealing the prevalence of healers that carry out their practices with solely good intentions.

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