University Educational Opportunities to Adults 50 Years of Age or Older: Fundamental Reasons and Characteristics

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Abstract: Venturing inside the study of the phenomenon of university education for adults in Puerto Rico, particularly after the decade of the 1980s, lets us obtain answers to many questions that are born out of observation of the marked presence of adults in the classrooms on the island. In response to that, a lot of universities started academic programs that are aimed at adults. This theme of university education for adults in the island has, during the last decade, peaked the interest of a few researchers, who have approached it from different perspectives. One study that looked into the experience of being a university student who has 50 years or more of age during their bachelor’s degree, from a phenomenological standpoint is what gave rise to this essay. The author performs a very deep analysis of the starring role the adult students, who were interviewed individually (nine participants) awarded two issues: university education as a resource to serve human beings better; and, the example they embody, specially to their family members, by reaching their academic goals.

Key Words: Higher Education, Adult University Student, Bachelor’s Degree, University Education, Phenomenology.

1. Introduction

Even when universities in Puerto Rico establish nontraditional educational programmes targeted to older adults, studies show that these programmes were developed without having explored in a deep level several
aspects such as: feelings, life experiences, perceptions, beliefs, descriptions and opinions of the older adult population, regarding what it means to them to be a university student (González-Raimundí, 2015). This way, the field work that looked into the experience of being a university student who has 50 years or more of age during their bachelor’s degree is what gave rise to this article. The study performs an analysis of the starring role the adult students who were interviewed individually. The descriptive, analytical and refocusing processes in the interpretation of answers given by a participant, in the interviewing technique, lets the investigator extrapolate those matters that permeate throughout the entire interview, as well as noticing those common concepts in all interviews when various participants take part. This researcher implemented the modality of: re-focusing in the interpretation, to complement the modality of: extension of the analysis, both suggested by Wolcott (1994), as guides to carry out the interpretation of the answers to the formulated questions in the individual interviews that took place. This enabled her to observe that with a much higher frequency, and in response to diverse key questions, the totality of the informants featured the importance granted to services rendered and to serve as a role model to their families and communities.

The interpretation of the answers given to these matters, intends to show how significant they were to those interviewed. Some of these answers proved unexpected by the researcher, given that they did not fit the theoretical framework, however they were categorically expressed with the fluidity and the spontaneity that is enabled in the phenomenological focus of a best informant free of preconceived notions by the researcher. However, when interpreting said answers, the researcher is to consider the applicability of the postulates of Malcolm S. Knowles (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2001) and Abraham Maslow (Maslow, 1991) and other scholars of that topic, whose works, life experiences, learning process and expectations as an adult university student over 50 years old, was revised (Wolcott). Offer service: fundamental objective when studying at the university.

2. Objectives and methodology

Upon deeper analysis of the expressions of the participants in relation to the two fundamental reasons that motivated them to go back or to join the university in the first place, the researcher hopes to achieve the next objectives: a) describe the meaning of the answers offered directly by the participants in light of their feelings, experiences, perceptions, beliefs and descriptions with regard to the situation at hand; b) comprehend the reality that lies underneath the reasons given by the participants, as protagonists of the experience, to make the choice in question; and, c) learn about the factors that motivate people that are 50 years of age or older to achieve their
bachelor’s degree in Puerto Rico, and how they bring meaning to this experience.

As to the methodology, the study that inspired this essay was of qualitative character, grounded in a phenomenological approach and took place during an academic semester in three universities of Puerto Rico. These universities had academic programs focused on the adult student. The sample for this study: nine students (informants) -three from each university-, 50 or over, was selected by invitation, through a memorandum posted in the bulletin boards of the campuses. All the informants were required to complete a brief questionnaire about social, academic and demographical data, in addition to answering 13 guide questions in individualized interviews.

3. Phenomenological study

As is the case in every investigation with a phenomenological approach, this study enables the researcher to describe what she sees. Nevertheless, her main interest is not to capture the physical aspect of what she sees, but its essence. According to Riestra (1997), this enables the descriptive analysis of the phenomenon, without alteration, to capture its fundamental structures, which constitutes its true nature. Husserl (1976, p. 225), establishes that through phenomenology one searches to “describe experiences in relation to its essence”. Researching the experiences of adults 50 years of age or older as university students in Puerto Rico, in their bachelor’s degree, from the phenomenology prism, implies one ventures in the university environment where said experience occurs, to comprehend the meaning the participants bring to it. To feel well prepared to offer service: fundamental objective when studying at the university.

Since the 1940s, the notion of education being a continuous and permanent process that extends throughout the entire life of a human being (Porrata Doria, 1940) has been a clear one. On the other hand, university education is perceived as the summit of the formal educational process that was started in the pre-school level. The university remains the place where the student is exposed to multiple experiences, not only inside the classroom but outside as well, much of which enables the student to acquire and/or develop the requisite knowledge and skills that train him as a professional in his chosen field. This is the true purpose of the university, according to the general opinion of the common folk. The expressions of two participants,

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1 Terminology: Below are the terminology and the definitions that will be used for the purpose of his essay: a) service = make the necessary knowledge and skills readily available to all those who need it, with free or in-job training, b) experience = all living incident had by an adult 50 years of age and older as a university student in Puerto Rico, c) adult student = a person who forms part of a nontraditional educational program targeted to older adults in a university in Puerto Rico, or a person who has all the requirement to participate in a similar program, d) participant or best informant = adult student chosen for this study.
about their need to acquire technical skills, showcase the importance of the university’s role as an educational institution: “I had to innovate; you have a degree and you cannot do your job right. You have to keep up: the environment, globalization, technology; so you have to keep pace” (González-Raimundí, 2015) (Participant No. 2 of the institution C [P2C]).

“Many things have changed since I went to school and technology has been a challenge for me, I have had to do things that I did not do before: reports, presentations, there’s the internet, we did not have that before” (P1A).

However, the learning process is not limited to the acquisition of technical skills and knowledge, but is intrinsically related with the social and moral development of the individual (Freire, 1971; Mellado Parsons, 1984). This way the fundamental difference between universities and other educational institutions, which only provide technical and theoretical knowledge specific to a given job, is established: the university is called upon to provide the means to gain critical thinking to its students. The expression given by one of the participants, about what it meant to him to be a university student is overwhelming.

The most important meaning is that it allows me to have and use my critical awareness, that I can give my opinion, not only believe what a professor or a book tells me… it means to me to change the way that people think. (P3C).

The university then becomes the place where individuals transform into integral beings, well-versed in many different ways: physically, mentally, spiritually and emotionally. It shall then provide channels in which the individual may discern and pass critical judgment on different matters. One who sets aside prejudice, ties to preconceived notions or dictated instructions, with a universal projection towards everyone and everything around him: this person is a true academic. The academic “shall expose himself… to diverse schools of thought, cultures and perceptions about the human being and his environment… through the wide gamut of professors, students… and intra and extracurricular experiences… , with which he amplifies his vision…(of the world)” (González-Raimundí, 2009). For that reason, the academic does not cease to be once his structured education is over; he will continue to be one as long as he lives and maintains a universal vision about his surroundings and his personal improvement.

In relation to the university’s mission statement, various participants expressed that while they have not yet finished their degree, they went through several changes in their lives, among these: the way in which they perceived what happened to them, their interest in matters to which they did not care for (prior to being university students), their relationship with co-workers and/or family members, their way of thinking towards trivial and important matters alike and their analysis towards global events.

The expressions of two participants are very revealing towards changes they have experienced in the wake of their entry in the university and they...
confirm that their university experience in general enables them to have gradual and sustained development in comprehending intricate matters of the human being: “I have a different perspective of what my kids and my employee do, I can understand the people that surround me better, I can be a better human being, better supervisor, better colleague and a better mother” (PIA).

I have learned so much in the year and a half that I have been enrolled in the university, and I apply it when dealing with my daughters. If knew then what I know now, I would have thought different in many aspects, in things that had happened in my office. Concerning my job, I can see things better, I can understand things better; I can see the meaning of things, things that I did not care for before. Now I prioritize many things in my job; I have analyzed myself and I believe that I have changed (P2C).

The researcher recognizes the vital importance of the two functions that shall guide the university. Nevertheless she understands that the main function of the university is the transformation of the people that attend as students, making them the best human beings they can be. The person, as far as their professional role goes, is limited a set number of years by different factors; their skills and knowledge about different fields of human knowledge are subject to change for various reasons like technology, culture and scientific development. Nevertheless, the role of being human extends throughout the lifetime of an individual. That should be where the resources of a university are aimed towards. The expressions of the former president of the University of Puerto Rico, Jaime Benitez, support the opinions of the researcher, by clarifying that the most important aspect that the university student should develop is the capacity to be a person, be human (Benitez, 1962):

It is worth noting that the true profession, to which all others should be submitted to, and that which without all others are not worth much without, is the profession of being human, people that are eager to learn, create, to be generous with others and demanding with himself (p.66).

When analyzing this approach: the vital functions that should guide universities, all over the world, it is paramount to remember Jaime Benitez’s expressions, specifically in relation with the main purpose that the university of Puerto Rico was chasing, in the first half of the 20th century, particularly analyzed in light of events in which Puerto Rico was immersed, in the first half of the 21st century (Benitez, 1962):

The main objective of this university should be to make men free in their spirit, men that do not surrender the creative potential of their soul to anything in this world- not to flattery, to social cliché, to not be prejudice, to not have ambition, to not threaten, to not have power – to do nothing in this world (p. 197).
Concurrent with Benitez’s words, Ríos González (2006), when working with the subject of the learning of adult university students, hypothesized that the education of the adult was based on his needs, his freedom and his responsibility as a social entity. The expressions of a best informant of the investigation, when referring to the development he had reached in as an adult student in one of the private universities of the country, can attest that these words from Jaime Benitez in relation to the main objective of the University of Puerto Rico can and should be replicated in every university: Before… I used to be more restrained, more conformist, did not question things, I assumed they just were that way; now there is kind of this ability to question why? … Now, there is no amount of money that can buy my peace, no Bill Gates that can tell me: ‘Come work for me because you are going to earn as much as you want, but is has to be under my terms’ (P3C).

On the other hand, the opinions given by another participant clearly encases her point of view about the three goals the university is committed to fulfilling, reaffirming her reason to go to the university: These courses like Psychology, Ethics, are social themes, in order to be able to understand why these things happen, why this person has a given attitude. These courses help us look beyond what a career can be; they cover moral values, and that is extremely important to me. We have to know how to express ourselves before a crowd, and be ready for a moment in our lives in which we are going to come across a given situation in which we need to use psychology or apply ethics in our jobs. These options that are given to us by the university are fascinating for feeding us as human beings (P2B).

Next up are some quotes by the participants in the investigation, in which they expressed the importance they assigned to servicing other people, this being one of the main reasons to want a university degree after 50 years or more of age, considering that this will train them accordingly in all aspects and enable them to give better service, in contrast to the level of readiness they had prior to going to the university. “More than those (colleagues, young students) approaching me for inspiration, I have been an instrument, and I have felt good because I have been able to help them… I am completely ready to apply my knowledge and happy to know that I can pass it on to my colleagues” (P1A). “I have obviously felt good because I have been an asset to them (my colleagues)” (P3A). “I do not know if I will be a teacher, counselor or what, but I will be something in which I can help others, and that is fulfilling… When I thought about the university, I thought about being able to help when needed, I like being able to help others, I liked to be approached” (P2B). “I was happy about returning [to the university], a place where I look at the progress to improve my intellectual level and help my family, my kids, to be able to educate them in a more efficient manner… I want to continue to my doctorate, continuing to get ready for my family, my kids…, I want to be able to provide the best, the best way towards education,
and I think that the best way to approach all of this is to get my education, so I can be tool to them” (P3B). “Colleagues approach me all the time and ask me for ideas, how can I make this better, they give me their work for me to look over before they turn it in” (P3B).

“We as adults have to raise our voices because we have the experience, the education, the input of our lives, all of which we are eager to share with the puertorican society” (P1C). “The meaning (that the expression “being a university student”) has (…) is more than a status, what I can bring to the table; that is the meaning that my education has for me. I aspire to work in counseling, with addicts, white collar which is what I really want to do. I want to serve, the same way others have done for me… the institutions should offer (adults) careers that, even though they might be longer, would enable us to feel better prepared and with greater probability to become an asset to society as a whole” (P3C). “Which academic courses should be recommended to contribute to the improvement of society by achieving that people learn to preoccupies themselves on others and not by selfish. I propose that the main aspect that should be tended to should be the human aspect given that it is much more important to the person than any other knowledge they may gain; human beings should occupy themselves in each other through selfless service” (P3C).

By reinforcing the analysis (Wolcott, 1994) of the three vital functions attached to the university and the opinions of the participants about the importance that university education confers, we can infer that every best informant noted that one of the fundamental purposes from which they decided to join or go back to university, as adults with 50 years or more of age, was to achieve a university degree that made them better prepared for their chosen field. Their expressions arose in a spontaneous manner, the way it happens often in a semi structured interview, through body and verbal language and in different parts of the session.

The answers given by the informants show that they knew very well the utility of the knowledge they were acquiring and the value of the university experience in general, where they agreed with Malcolm Knowles’ first premise of the andragogy model: the need of knowing what it feels like being an adult. If the adult understands why he needs to learn something, and the advantage he will gain from the knowledge, he will be more willing to start the learning process (Knowles et al, 2001). The answers also coincided with what Daggett (2005) establishes with regards to the pertinence of knowledge: that which the student finds significant, he will be willing to learn.

This conception about the importance of a university career supports what Castillo Ortiz (2000) exposed, he states that the academic curriculum should equip the students with the necessary tools to perform successfully within the workforce. In this sense the adult student starts his university experience with the defined objective to gain, by all means provided by the university, the skills and knowledge aimed at his specialty, the development
of the capacity for critical thinking and the transformation of each individual into an integral person with the final goal of feeling prepared to provide better service. The university allows students to flourish and develop the necessary skills and capacities that a human being is able to develop.

On the other hand, according to this researcher, the adults need to provide service justifies itself: to the adult providing service gives them great satisfaction which makes them feel happy because he realizes he is doing what we as humans are called to do. This can be construed as the need of self-esteem that, according to Maslow (1991), is felt by humans. He establishes that, when a person realizes that his actions are useful and necessary, he experiences a sensation of self-worth which heightens his self-esteem. The best informants hope that, after they obtain their university degree, they will be better prepared to provide quality service which will redound in respect and acknowledgement in the puertorican society.

In relation to the emphasis of the best informants, adults of 50 years of age or older, in preparing to provide service, this is consistent with what is established by various researchers in Puerto Rico, who point that the adults possess very particular characteristics in terms of their goals or expectations, either personally or professionally (Ramos Rodríguez and Vázquez Rodríguez, 1992; Castillo Ortiz, 2000; Torres Nazario, 2003).

The researcher considers pertinent to mention that various informants from this study expressed that their availability to serve, once they had their grade was not conditioned by the economic remuneration, because their main motivation was not a high salary, and they were willing to serve for free, if it were necessary. This fact is corroborated by the expressions of one of the best informants on the study: “I do not believe that I will get a higher salary because of my bachelor’s degree, I am not doing it with that purpose, getting more money is not a motivation for me to finish my degree” (P1A).

The importance that is brought to the forefront by the adults in Puerto Rico to the presentation of services is evident, exemplified by community leaders who are in charge of hundreds of social welfare projects in Puerto Rico. An example of this is the voluntary service that, through multiple initiatives, thousands of adults in Puerto Rico take part in, with the non-profit American organization, founded in 1958: AARP. The mission of this organization is to “enhance the quality of life for all as we age” (AARP, 2015, p. 7). The volunteers that serve in this organization, one of which is this researcher, have the experience and compromise to make a real social transformation in the country and its quality of life. These initiatives benefits the entire community, but are aimed particularly in attending all matters related to adults 50 years or more of age. Some of these matters are: personal and community development, financial security, health, care giving, life reimagining and the upholding of any laws that may apply to the said population, as well as raising awareness to people about the fundamental role that these adults plays in the transformation stated above (AARP, 2015).
4. Model

The second issue stated by all of the informants in the study was another one of the main objectives by which they aspired to reach a university degree: to serve as an example to their families and their communities and show that “it is never too late” to make the choice to go after the life-goals that you have set. As to the particular mention of serving the family by example, understanding this is logical, given that a constant mention, across all interviews, was the pivotal role played by the family in attending university. The adult of 50 years or older, which is tasked with taking care of his family, feels this is his primary responsibility, and that other goals, among these academic goals, are contingent to meet the primary responsibility. For this reason, as an adult student, he incorporates his family in this university experience and feels the duty of giving his all until he reaches his goal with the highest possible academic level, which in turn will give them a good example.

In terms of the clarification of the best informants about serving as an example to their communities, the researcher understands that for adults 50 years or older in Puerto Rico, it is imperative to show new generations from their communities that when there is genuine interest in its members, they can reach all the goals they set for themselves.

These adults, most of whom belong to the generation called the baby boomers, have had to face great challenges in all facets of life, mainly economic challenges, that exceed in difficulty and quantity those who have been faced by the generations that came after them. The next quotes reflect what has been established, in a direct manner; in these, the best informants consider various factors that would establish them, as examples: “My son got a master’s degree; the same way that I feel proud of him, me getting a bachelor’s degree, so my kids can feel proud that his dad also made it” (P3A). “It is great to let your kids that are at a university level know about your progress and have them feel satisfied, and bring home good grades” (P1B). “I want to be an example to my daughters and granddaughters; I will send them a copy of my diploma” (P3C). “I hope my daughter can see a change in me” (P3C). “Looking at it from the outside, I have heard a lot of conversations about young adults and I think us older adults can serve as role models in the different issues that the youth can find curious” (P3B). “My community can see in me an example that adults can study” (P1A). “We adults want to be an example and inspiration for the youth; we need to have opportunities to continue to shine and contribute to the university, government and society” (P1C). “I have learned to serve the youth as a role model, they look at me as an aged individual, with experience and they come up to me anywhere in the university. For me, it is something good that I can still share my perception as
a student, that he can come and ask me things because they see me as a mature and experienced person” (P3B).

Extending the analysis of this issue (Wolcott, 1994) enabled this researcher to auscultate about the possible reasons that make a person feel like they are role models to others.

Another reason is that, as other participants have indicated, being in university is a reason for pride, which denotes that, even when they have not yet obtained the degree they aspired to, they considered the fact that they were on their way to getting this goal an achievement, which was a correct action. The researcher interprets that when a person considers that he/she is acting correctly and feels pride because of it, believes that he can serve as an example to other that want to follow the same path.

On the other hand, all of the best informants expressed themselves in term of the satisfaction they felt for being part of the university students in Puerto Rico. A few of them encouraged the older adults, through the interviews, to continue studying, as is reflected in the next quote: “Those people that have the desire to study and feel inhibited, that take advantage of this opportunity, that seeing themselves accomplishing academic life, is more than an achievement that they can use for their personal benefit” (P1B).

Another reason various participants understood that they should be taken as role models was that they considered they had to accomplish great personal sacrifice to go back to the university lifestyle, as older adults charged with personal and professional responsibilities. Nevertheless, if they could overcome such difficulty, they considered that other people could follow their example, knowing that it is possible to study past 50 years of age. An example of the expressions of the participants regarding this situation is the following:

When a professor says… “You have to do this, this and this for next week”; then comes the next professor: “I need you to do this, this and this for next week”; ‘come on: You guys think that I do not have anything else to do?’ These people think that we are full time students… I have to go work, I have a family and kids… the fact that you are in an adult programme does not change anything, they are going to ask the same thing from you… Let us do this, if it is too much work, let us split it up (P2A).

5. Conclusions

This essay revolved around the importance that all the participants brought to the study of the university education for adults in Puerto Rico, mainly in two matters: reach a university career as a means to better prepare themselves to bring service, and to serve as an example to their families and their communities. This researcher understands that these matters hold a relationship, in terms of the reasons that motivate them, according to the definition that Abraham Maslow established for the self-esteem concept. Maslow (1991) identifies the self-esteem as: the acknowledgement, the
attention, the importance, the dignity or the appreciation that make the human being feel confidence, courage and strength about himself. In that aspect, all the participants exhibited through their answers, a lot of which was aforementioned, a high level of self-esteem. To them, being university students implied feeling self-pride for what they had done and by recognizing that they were getting ready to gain the knowledge, skills and the university experience in order to be a better human beings, which denotes that they possessed a high level of self-esteem. By doing so, they understand they could provide service of the highest quality, be it at their jobs or by volunteer service. Regarding the importance they assigned to being role models to their families and communities, this researcher considers that when a person feels that he can be an example, it is because he recognizes his worth and his capacity and are worthy of emulating. That way, they have earned the respect and acknowledgement of the society from which he is a part of.

References


