

**“Making It”
Resilient Women Overcoming Adversity in Defiance of Negative
Predictors of Success**

by

Linda L. Meccouri

ISBN: 1-58112-035-4

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1999

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ISBN: 1-58112-035-4

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LINDA LUCIA MECCOURI

M.Ed., Organizational Development, Antioch University 1980

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fullfilment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

December 1995

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to the women who have shared their stories of courage, to the healers in our lives, and to my sons Daniel, Anís, and Badí in hopes that they will realize their own dreams.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation was more of a mission than an academic requirement for a doctorate and this mission was accomplished only with the help of the family, friends, and "healers" in my life. I was fortunate to receive support and encouragement from many sources including the women who participated in the study. From a word of kindness and encouragement, assistance with editing, a witness for my frustration and despair, care of my children, care of my tired body, to an unswerving belief that I could actually do this even when I did not believe it, my colleagues, faculty, friends and family have been there for me.

My deepest thanks to the members of my dissertation committee who are five of the "healers" at UNM. To Dr. Priscilla Norton for her brilliant mind, and her advocacy of me throughout my entire doctoral program - she has always helped to make a path for my work. To Dr. Breda Bova for her consistent and positive support, and for facilitating the process. To Dr. Vera John-Steiner, a role model of elegance and brilliance in qualitative research who showed interest in my work. To Dr. Gary Anderson who challenged my thinking, showed excitement about my work and pushed me to newer heights of achievement. To Dr. Kathryn Herr, a brilliant researcher, mentor, colleague, and friend who gently helped me to move forward in my work, believed in me, and inspired me with her commitment to just and ethical practice.

Thank you to Dr. Roger Kroth, my good buddy who was my advocate, teacher, student, colleague and heart friend and to Dr. Rick Scott who generously and often heroically offered expert support and use of resources.

Sincere gratitude to Dr. Carmen Linda Gonzales, my solace and dear sister-friend with whom I traversed the sometimes perilous journey of the doctorate. Without her encouragement, inspiration and loyalty this project might not have been completed.

To my dear sister-friends, Gail Hilyard, Martha Banda, Idelia Smith, Marion Groves, Marianne Summa, Diane Di Donato, and Sarita Gurung who are unswerving in their loving support, encouragement, inspiration, and prayers.

To Dr. Bruce Coulombe, my healer and brother-friend whose care gave me the miracle of health and whose friendship continues to inspire and encourage.

To Nick Von Stein for his loving care of our children and for his support during this process.

To my brother Paul Brauer for his strong, unquestioned loyalty and for making my life easier with a "phatt" car.

To Jon Kingsbury for his friendship, encouragement, support and the steady stream of inspiration.

Thanks to my sons Anís, and Badí for their understanding and patience when their mom was working on the dissertation. To my son Danny, thanks for being there to lend a helping hand and a healthy dose of laughter to brighten my day.

For institutional support, I thank the University of New Mexico Office of Graduate Studies for the GRPT and SRAC grants which helped to support this dissertation and Holyoke Community College for administrative support.

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ABSTRACT

Social indicators such as low socioeconomic status, minority status, battering, chronic illness, trauma, drug and alcohol addiction, and poor social environment are negative predictors of educational and social success. Why is it that some people, however, overcome adversity and succeed despite the odds? This study identifies and describes the context and factors involved for an ethnically diverse group of twenty adult women from low socioeconomic status being able to "succeed" despite the odds. Using qualitative in-depth oral history interviews, this study includes women whose voices are seldom heard in the literature - those who have many of the social indicators associated with failure, but who have defied the negative predictors for success and persisted beyond high school to post-secondary education. Among the questions explored are: How do these women define "success"? What were the barriers? What were the factors in overcoming adversity? and how can their voices inform policy and practice in adult and post-secondary educational programs?

The data revealed the following major themes .

- The presence of dynamic advocates or "healers" who extend beyond traditional roles to help and "believe" in the women.
- The importance of social structures and programs designed to assist non-traditional women as they seek post-secondary education.
- Making a difference for others and giving back to their communities as definitions of "success".
- Barriers such as conflict with dominant group cultural capital, and destructive teaching practices.
- The importance of strong and supportive relationships with family and/or friends.
- The Importance of connection to spiritual/religious practice and people.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

"What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?"

In his book *Savage Inequalities*, Jonathan Kozol described a 1964 incident in a crowded segregated inner city classroom in which an African American fourth grader began to cry when she heard the words of this poem by Langston Hughes. The little girl went home and memorized the lines to the poem. The next day Kozol was fired (Kozol, 1992) for exposing the children to "inflammatory" poetry. Kozol went on to teach in a privileged school across town and is a well known author on the subject of inequality in education. This researcher was left with the question - what happened to the nameless little girl who would be about forty years old now. According to the literature on low socioeconomic status people from inner city schools, she has most likely reproduced her social class and continued to live in poverty. The predicted outcome would be that her children are now in a situation which is worse than it was in 1964. But maybe not - maybe she has defied these negative predictions of success and has finished high school, attended college and has made a better life for herself and her family. Maybe she has succeeded against the odds. Maybe she became a poet herself.

Social indicators such as low socioeconomic status, minority status, battering, chronic illness, trauma, drug and alcohol addiction, and poor social environment are negative predictors of educational and social success. Why is it that some people, however, overcome adversity and succeed despite the odds? This study will identify and describe the context and factors involved in a diversity of adult women from low socioeconomic status being able to "succeed" despite the odds. Using qualitative in-depth oral history interviews, the researcher will include women whose voices are seldom heard in the literature - those who have many of the social indicators associated with

failure, but who have defied the negative predictors for success. Questions which will be explored will include: How do the women define "success" and how have they succeeded despite social indicators associated with failure? Do they report personal characteristics which have helped them to succeed? What do the women report as the barriers to their success? What is the relevance of theories of self-in-relation (Miller, 1988; Miller, 1992; Surrey, 1991) to these women and to the construction of higher education programs for women? What are the factors and themes which emerge as contributors of their success? What role did education play in the lives of women? What role did parents, significant others, children, or social institutions play in their success? What can their stories tell us about how we structure educational experiences for all people? This study is a contribution to the field of higher education as it attempts to include those who have been disenfranchised from the educational systems as they are presently practiced.

The Problem

Background of the Problem

The 1990's are a time of technological and demographic change. There has been a shift from an industrial based economy to an information age for which more education and training is needed by the average worker (Toffler, 1991). The baby boomers (the seventy million people born between 1946 and 1964) will contribute to the demographic shift to a society where adults are the majority (Cross, 1981; Merriam & Cafarella, 1991) and by the year 2000, minorities are expected to compose over 25% of the population.

In 1992, women represented 45% of the civilian labor force and are projected to account for nearly 60% of the labor force entrants between 1990 and 2005 with participation highest among those in the 35-44 age group (U.S. Department of Labor, 1993). In spite of the increased participation in the labor force, women are still over represented in low paying jobs, earning only 75 cents for every dollar earned by men.

Table 1. 1991 Median Earnings, Year Round, Full Time WorkersTable

All women	20,553	All men	29,421
White women	20,794	White men	30,266
Black women	18,720	Black men	22,075
Hispanic women	16,244	Hispanic men	19,771

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Money income of Households, Families and Persons in the United States: 1991

Median earnings for female high school graduates (with no college) working year round, full time in 1991 were less than those of fully employed men who were high school dropouts--\$18,042 and \$20,944, respectively. In addition, men with an associate's degree working year-round, full time earned nearly the same as similarly employed women with a master's degree--\$32,221 and \$33,122, respectively. (U.S. Department of Labor, 1993)

While it is certainly a depressing contrast that a woman with a master's degree can only expect to earn as much as a man with an associate's degree, a woman is more able to seek employment and enter the workforce if she has an education beyond high school.

Women who are from both low socioeconomic background and minority groups suffer even higher unemployment.

Table 2. Unemployment Rates for Women by Race, 1982, 1987, and 1992

	1982	1987	1992
All women	9.4	6.2	6.9
White	8.3	5.2	6.0
Black	17.6	13.2	13.0
Hispanic	14.1	8.9	11.3
Adult women >20	8.3	5.4	6.3
White	7.3	4.6	5.4
Black	15.4	11.6	11.7
Hispanic	12.5	7.7	10.1
Teenage women	21.9	15.9	18.5
White	19.0	13.4	15.7
Black	47.1	34.9	37.2
Hispanic	28.2	22.4	26.4

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Handbook of Labor Statistics, August 1989, and Employment and Earnings, January 1993

Minority adults are severely underrepresented in higher education and disproportionately represented among the poor, uneducated, and unemployed (Freedman, 1993). "Lifelong learning will be increasingly necessary for everyone and those who lack basic skills and the motivation for life long learning will be severely handicapped in obtaining the necessities of life." (Cross, 1981).

Statement of the Problem Situation

There is an unprecedented demand to meet the needs of adult learners in industry and education due to the drastic changes in demographics, technology, and society. However, among the most vulnerable of our society, at-risk women with children, recruitment and retention rates are extremely low (Cross, 1981; Merriam & Cafarella, 1991; Tinto, 1993).

With women becoming more significant in the work force, the clamor for welfare reform, combined with the information age requirements of more education for reasonably paying jobs, there is an urgent need to develop educational programs which accommodate a diversity of people. Women from low socioeconomic status and women of color are severely underrepresented in higher education. It is at this very critical time in history that adult learning environments must be responsive to the needs of this group of women. More importantly, institutions of higher education must be responsive and welcoming of the many "gifts" of courage, creativity, and strength that these women will bring to the teaching and learning environments into which they are admitted.

Recently, research concerning resilient children in schools has indicated that "resilience" is a very complex phenomenon that is promoted by a combination of personal characteristics, relationships and social structures (Donmoyer & Kos, 1993; Freiberg, 1994; Gordon & Song, 1994; Liddle, 1994; Peng, 1994).

Although the field of adult learning has been informed by recent theories which attempt to include women's voice in the area of development and learning (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982), there is little in the resilience research which is relevant to educational structures for adult women from low socioeconomic status. This study helps to fill the gap in the literature by identifying the population of adult women whose voices are not represented in the current literature in order to inform educational programs in adult and higher education.

Purpose of the Study

As we have listened to the voices of men and the theories of development that their experience informs, so we have come more recently to notice not only the silence of women but the difficulty in hearing what they say when they speak. ... The failure to see the different reality of women's lives and to hear the differences in their voices stems in part from the assumption that there is a single mode of social expression and interpretation. (Gilligan, 1982, p. 53)

The primary purpose of this study is to identify, describe and analyze the themes and factors involved in overcoming adversity as reported by women who would be labeled as "at risk" and "resilient" by popular educational terminology due to low socioeconomic status.

The second purpose of this study is to inform policy and practice of institutions of adult and higher education with the "voices" of these resilient women in order to increase recruitment and retention of adult women from low socioeconomic backgrounds through the creation of programs informed by the women's voices.

Questions that will be explored will include: How do the women define "success" and how have they succeeded despite social indicators associated with failure? Do they report personal characteristics that have helped them to succeed? What is the relevance of theories of self-in-relation to these women and to the construction of higher education programs for women? What are the factors and themes that emerge as contributors of their success? What role did education play in the lives of these women? What role did parents, significant others, children, or social institutions play in their success? What can their stories tell us about how we structure educational experiences for all people?

Intended Result of the Research

Although very few women from low socioeconomic status succeed in higher education, some persist in spite of adversity. The study of those who persist and succeed against the odds is critical to an understanding of how we create educational environments that either impede or encourage success among this underrepresented population.

Significance of Study

The significance of this study to the field of Adult and Higher Education is that it will include experiences and strategies for succeeding from the "clients" of adult education and higher education. This study is an opportunity to understand the perspectives of those (low-income women) who are not well represented in the literature. A definition of resilience that moves beyond the "personal characteristics" definition is the intent of this study.

Resilience encompasses diverse and complex phenomena. Understanding resilience is going to require sustained efforts by many investigators with different perspectives and expertise. .. (Masten, 1994, p. 21).

Resilience research, like many areas of social science, needs serious attention given to theory building that focuses on understanding the causal structures and processes that give meaning and direction to social life. Further accumulation of new or redundant data that we do not know how to interpret will simply cause stagnation in the research tradition. (Rigsby, 1994, p. 94)

A major emphasis of many adult and higher education programs and research efforts is on failure, with studies on why people fail or drop out of adult learning experiences (Tinto, 1993). The retention rates continue to plummet for "high-risk" students (Merriam & Cafarella, 1991), so a look at what works is clearly needed. If this study were not done, the voices of those who have found a way to succeed would continue to be absent from the literature. Continued protection of educational privilege