Identity, Knowledge Production, and Validation Theory: A Narrative Inquiry

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The stories we tell reveal who we are.
- Leon Edel, 1987

There was not one person who said Laura, you know, you can make it ... but there were instances in which for example when I was in middle-school, I was in accelerated courses, in high school I was in some accelerated courses so I knew I had smart you know, I knew that when I applied myself I was intelligent and I knew I could succeed.

-Laura Rendón, interview excerpt

As researchers, who we are and the ways we experience life shape the knowledge we produce. How we are situated in relation to history, gender, religion, class, ethnic background, and other markers of identity and social location, are all factors that inform our research (Scheurich, 1994). Knowledge is always marked by its origins (Haraway, 1991; Harding, 1991), making it essential that we situate knowledge as we engage with it.

In this narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Denzin, 1989; Reissman, 1993, 2007), I explore the biography of validation theorist Laura I. Rendón. Based on semistructured interviews conducted between October 2001 and June 2002, while Rendón served as Veffer Milstead Jones Endowed Chair at California State University–Long Beach, I focus on her life history in an effort to understand how her identity and life experiences have shaped her as a researcher and validation theorist, with an emphasis on the interplay between her life story and her work on validation theory.

As theorized by Rendón, validation theory is heavily informed by the work of Mary Belenky and her coauthors, documented in *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997). Based on a large study of women college students, Belenky and her colleagues argue that conceptions of knowledge and truth are shaped by a male-dominated culture that fails to recognize and value women’s ways of knowing. To address this reality, authors suggest, educators must focus on connection, understanding, acceptance, collaboration, and a recognition of multiple ways of knowing “to help women develop their own voices” (p. 229). Similarly, Rendón, in situating validation theory, argues that conceptions of how students succeed through self-directed involvement in college are based on the experiences of traditional White students of privilege, and therefore fail to take into account the experiences of first-generation students, low-income students, and students of color, who oft experience the academic environment as invalidating. To help nontraditional students succeed, Rendón (1994), based on a study of 132 first-year students, called for institutional efforts to foster “active academic and interpersonal validation” (p. 45), which she described as a “process that affirms, supports, enables, and reinforces ... [students’] capacity to fully develop themselves as students and as individuals” (p. 45). The challenge, she suggests, concerns “how to harness the strength [of diversity], and how to unleash the creativity and exuberance for learning that is present in all students who feel free to learn, free to be who they are, and validated for what they know and believe” (p. 51).

Through several close readings of the transcripts from my interviews with Rendón, I marked the six elements she identifies in validation theory (academic validation, interpersonal validation, early experiences of validation, self-confidence through validation, student development through validation, and validation as a developmental process rather than an end in and of itself) in her own experience as a first-generation college student, who is now a successful senior higher education scholar. I was curious about the role of the elements she describes in validation theory in her own educational journey. How had her life experiences shaped her focus and development of validation theory? I was also curious about her ideas concerning social change and her own practice and growth as a scholar concerned with cultural change to better meet the needs of diverse student body (Rendón, 1994).
The Early Years

Rendón, the daughter of Clementina Linares and Leopoldo Rendón, was born in 1948 in Laredo, Texas, where she grew up in a family of music lovers, with two sisters, Elva, 10 years her senior, and Ileana, born a year and a half after Laura.

As I asked about her childhood, she described growing up in Laredo:

At the time Laredo was a sleepy ... town located on the border, literally on the border dividing the U.S. and Mexico, [with] the Rio Grande in the middle. There was no four-year college there, there was just a two-year college, and that two-year college was just a struggling little place that got people going, but was nowhere near the community colleges we see today. My parents were separated when I was four or five, and the traditions that were communicated to me as a child were really that, you know okay, so maybe you are doing everything in school, but you know you are going to have to work, everybody works. I knew no one that had been to college.

I had no one encouraging me to go to college. There were times when we lived on $15 a week, which was for four people. I can remember times when we did not have enough to eat, we did not have money to buy shoes and we had holes in our shoes so, when I talk about low SES [socioeconomic status], I am talking low SES.

Our conversation quickly moved to a focus on education. Reflecting on her first exposure to education, Rendón described being five or six years old when her mother created a job in education for herself.

She advertised a little school, “una escuelita,” and kids from all over the community would come and for 50 cents a week she would teach them how to add and subtract. She went out and bought her own chalk and her blackboard was made out of tin that covered the store that was abandoned and that is where she had her classes.

Rendón’s early experiences suggest that she became aware of the importance of education early in life and that she also experienced being validated as a competent learner in her primary years. She described what it was like to start first grade:

I remember when I was in the first grade and how the teacher divided up the class. I think there were three or four groups, three groups for sure; group one were the smart kids that knew how to read, group two were those who were okay but not quite there and group three were “too bad.” Group one had four kids, group two had about twenty, and then group three had about six or eight. There were three boys and one girl in group one and I was the girl in that group.... What probably helped my reading was that my mother really liked to read. I mean, she did not read academic books, but novellas and comic books, so reading for me was ... sort of a refuge. I would read encyclopedias, and I would read comic books, and novellas, and magazines. Reading was always a part of my life. I love to read.

Throughout her K–12 experience, Rendón was placed in accelerated classes. However, in fifth grade, she described herself as becoming a mediocre student without really knowing why. This changed, however, when she transferred to a new middle school in seventh grade.

I found myself in a class of the group threes and ... fours. There were about three or four of us that were totally misplaced and we got taken out of there because we were certainly above and beyond the other kids and from then on I was in accelerated classes.

While she experienced academic validation, she also points to a lack of interpersonal validation in her home setting. As an example, she explained, “You know, there were times I performed at a high level and there were times I performed below what I could do, but I do not really recall my parents checking my report card or telling me to study. There was none of that.” In what Rendón shares of her time in high school, there was, however, evidence of interpersonal validation. It was the first time she spoke of making friends as a member of a newly formed debate club; she was affirmed academically and interpersonally as she engaged in public speaking.

At the same time as these instances of validation were present, the experiences she shared were also shaped by an environment where social realities reproduced a master narrative of interpersonal and academic invalidation. Rendón explained,

Because no one had gone to college, no one had graduated from high school, everybody was poor and that was the expectation, that you know quite frankly if I had dropped out of high school or junior high or whatever and gone to work that would have been okay. There was nobody there to say “Wow, this is terrible!” I guess they would have been disappointed, but if I had brought home a check they would have been very happy, and then they would have gotten used to that. And so there was not in my family this
notion that education, particularly higher education, was a realizable, viable goal. In reality, it was more a goal for the affluent, the well-to-do. We were not a part of that culture and … because we were not a part of their culture, how dare we try to break out of our own culture, because that was what everyone was comfortable with. People were not comfortable with folks breaking out of that culture to get educated and join another culture.

When I asked specifically about validation theory and the role that she thinks validation might have played in her life, she responded:

There was not one person who said, “Laura, you can make it.” But there were instances … when I was in … accelerated courses…. I knew that when I applied myself I was intelligent and I knew I could succeed. On the other hand, there was another part of me that was like, wow, is this really true and can I really make it? I think what took me over the edge was not someone validating me. I guess I am one of these people that just out of sheer drive and determination make it. I think that was the number one thing that carried me over because quite frankly, there was a lot of invalidation going on as well. I mean my parents were not entirely supportive of me taking off, for example, to the University of Houston. My mother, when I told her I was going to go to college said, “Estas loca?” (You are crazy!). A lot of my friends were not going to college, so there were a lot of opportunities for me not to go to college … so what takes me over the edge in those circumstances? I think knowing that I am smart, I have something that other kids do not have and that if I apply myself I can do it.

**College and Beyond**

After high school, Rendón wanted to become a teacher. I asked her why.

I guess maybe it was my connection to education, because it was a vehicle for me to become something different, something stable. And the other thing about a culture such as the one in Laredo is that the role models that one sees are very few and teachers are very obvious role models. That is why a lot of students in those cultures, if they go to college, they want to be teachers or they want to be in law enforcement or people that wear uniforms because they are respected; they don’t see all the other possibilities. And so, of the possibilities I could see, that was the possibility that made sense for me.

She enrolled at the local community college and described her first year as rough. She worked to help her family out while going to school.

I wanted to help my mother survive. She was upset with me because she wanted me to go to work full-time…. I told her, “Well you have to wait four more years.” That was not a happy piece of news, so I think she was resentful of that, but at the same time I knew she was struggling and I said … I better do something. So there was a period of time that I worked a part-time job Monday through Friday, then Friday night I would go to the restaurant where my mother worked, The Western Grill, which was the best restaurant in Laredo at the time, and I would work from 10 o’clock at night until 6 a.m. I remember for the weekend we got paid $5 plus tips. Unfortunately, Laredo is not a rich area so for tips we got a dime, a quarter. You were in major good luck if you got a dollar. So I always had money in my pocket, but I was starting to feel really tired, so I told my mother I was not going to work at The Western Grill anymore. So I was with stuff like work-study, or government programs, or things like that [after that].

Academically, Rendón described herself as underperforming during her first years in college; however, she also described moving forward aided by interpersonal validation

I guess what got me through … were people like my friend Raul who was very, very much into colleges and collected catalogues from all over the country. We would sit, we would be on the phone at times, or have a coke and we would talk and talk and talk and talk about college, college, college. He was the one that encouraged me to go to the University of Houston in 1968.

At the University of Houston, the primary experiences Rendón shared were focused on interpersonal interactions and the larger social reality of the Vietnam War. The only person she knew at the University of Houston initially was Raul, who started there before her. At school, almost everyone she met was White. Rendón explained that most students pronounced her name, “Rendin” and thought she too was White. Because of this, she would not get invited to the Latino events on campus. Sharing her experience in Houston, she said,

I lived with White females and we became good friends and I was actually more acclimated to the White culture, believe it or not, in Houston, than I was to the Latino culture, except for my friends like Raul was there and then Jose Carlos came and then Arturo and Manuel and others.
Although Rendón wanted to stay in Houston after graduating with a degree in English and journalism, her father came to take her back to Laredo.

I wanted to work there but my parents had other ideas. To them my moving away was temporary and they wanted me back. I was very angry about that and I considered joining the Peace Corps to really go away, but I came back and said okay, I am going to try it for a year and if I do not like it I am getting out of here. So, I started teaching at the middle school I had attended, Christen Junior High School, eighth grade reading and English. So that is how I started my teaching career.

She was a popular teacher and experienced multiple forms of validation that fostered her self-worth while at Christen.

After I had been at Christen for a while, whenever there were issues that needed leadership, I was one of the people that others turned to.... I began to see myself differently. I began to see that I was a leader and that I was able to make my dreams come true. I was able to do what I set out to do and I was finally doing it.

I asked what it was she felt she set out to do.

I saw a lot of suffering in my family. I saw how my mother worked so hard after my parents divorced to help the family survive. There was a great deal of suffering and grief and anger and despair and depression [in] my early years, to the point that when I was in my 20s and early 30s I had forgotten, I mean I did not want to think about it.

It was just too painful to deal with... But as I was growing up, somewhere along the line, I can not quite put a finger on it, but I said you know this is crazy, this is not going to happen to me....

I became totally determined to break away from that cycle of poverty and despair; I felt that there was a better way and I was going to find it.

Rendón was highly visible at Christen Junior High School. She ran the student paper and the yearbook and was a creative teacher always looking for new ways of becoming more effective. She was appointed to the superintendent’s committee looking at the future of schooling, and it was not long before she decided she needed to continue her formal education.

I decided I wanted to pursue my own education—that just having a B.A. was not enough. If I was going to make it in that system or another system I needed to have more education, and I started a master’s degree part-time. I would go to Kingsville in the evenings and in the summers to work on my master’s degree. I always had this passion for education and for becoming more and for thinking that this is not enough. We have to keep going, we have to just not be settled and comfortable just because we have achieved something. You have to keep going, you have to, you have to explore the new. The cutting edge is what it is about for me. All of my life is about pushing it to a higher level, taking it to another level and not being comfortable settling in because you think you have got it, you know. We have to keep going, we have to keep pushing.

Completing a double master’s degree in guidance counseling and psychology, Rendón initially sought out a position as a counselor in the K-12 system, but her superintendent let her know that there were no openings. With the help of a friend who worked at the local community college, she was able to secure a position as a counselor for a Title III grant the summer before she completed her master’s degree. She described this as the perfect job for her at the time.

I was having a lot of fun actually at the community college.... I felt great. I felt I connected well with the students. Toward the end of that year there was a crisis in that program and the two people that headed up the program were moved out and the president of the community college asked me to be the director. Again ... here I am the new kid on the block,.... [and] I am the one that gets the offer. I knew [those who had been there longer] were upset because it was slighting them, but I thought about it and thought about it and I said well, somebody is going to have to make the decisions about this program and I am either going to be at the end of someone else’s decisions that I may or may not agree with or I will make the decisions. And I thought to myself, it may as well be me. So, I took the job and I became the director of that program.
Becoming a Scholar

In the fall of 1979, after four years at the community college, Rendón made the decision to pursue her doctorate at the University of Michigan, a time she described with great fondness.

I had a wonderful experience at Michigan. Michigan opened up a lot of doors for me. When I got there I was very fortunate that we had a very small but very supportive and close group of Latinos, Chicanos. We had socials every weekend; it was a network that provided much of the support I think people in higher education need to have. These were people that were totally committed to education, making a difference for others and themselves and understanding the issues of Latino communities in the U.S. [They were] a group that believed in education and that I felt were going to be the future leaders of this country.

From Christen Junior High School to the University of Michigan, the experiences Rendón described were ones where positive notions of academic and interpersonal validation (such as in her comments above), the attainment of self-confidence, and ongoing development through validation feature prominently. Through these experiences, the development of an insider/outside positionality also became evident. Rendón developed an identity that moved between what Banks (1998) would describe as an indigenous-insider and indigenous-outsider. She endorsed the values, beliefs, and knowledge of her native community and culture, and was at times viewed as a member of that community by its members. At the same time, she assimilated into a different culture and assumed some of the values and beliefs of that community, meaning she may at times have been viewed as an outsider by her native community. This tension between the person she was becoming and her community of origin—one hand belonging, and on the other hand being and feeling different—is evident in a story she shared about attending a music event while in graduate school at the University of Michigan.

When I was in Laredo, Texas, in my teens there used to be a band called Sunny and the Sunliners ... from San Antonio, Texas. Their most famous [and] only hit nationwide was “Talk to Me,” but they were very, very famous locally and they would come down to Laredo and we always looked forward to this because we loved Sunny and the Sunliners. So when I went to Michigan, [even though] the band was not as popular any more, it was kind of like [an] oldies kind of thing. Some friends said, “You know, Sunny and the Sunliners are playing in Detroit,” and so there were some of us there from Texas that said, “Oh let’s go! Let’s go!” And so we went to Detroit. It was a dance hall, very similar to the dance halls where Sunny and the Sunliners appeared when we were teenagers, and it was all low-income, you know, Hispanic people [in the audience], mainly from Michigan because they were working in the fields, farming, and or in factories and things like that, working-class. And I remember going there, I was 31 years old, Sunny and the Sunliners were playing, and I was looking around and I saw these people who represented who I was and I said, I am going to do something for you. I just said that to myself, I am going to do something for you.

Reflecting on this process of change as her positionality shifted she noted:

The reality is that in order to make it and succeed there is a certain disconnection that will take place. There are certain concessions you have to make. I think many people who come from a similar experience and similar background [to mine] and go to a university ... do not stop to think about these things. We do not reflect [on these things]. We simply go through life and then all of sudden we notice that something is missing or [that] there is a void ... a sadness and we cannot quite come to grips with it, because this really requires [that we become] ... reflective participant[s] [in our own lives].

This tension is something Rendón (1992) explored in “From the Barrio to the Academy,” an article she wrote as a response to Rodriguez’s (1974) essay “Going Home Again: The New American Scholarship Boy,” which later became a part of his famous book, Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez (2004). I asked her about why she wrote the article:

I have to tell you that when I read it [Going Home Again], I was not totally in agreement with the criticisms that I had heard. I was not sure that it was disrespectful, for example, but I felt on the other hand that something was missing in Richard’s piece, that people needed to hear another side. I think part of that was that I do not feel that you totally need to disconnect from your culture, that yes there is going to be some disconnection but for you to think that you have to totally break away and that you have to forget
Spanish and be someone else and not you, I think (is) … asking too much of a person and being disrespectful to a person's culture.

As Rendón spoke of life in the academy and the consequences of the need to make concessions, it was evident these types of experiences heavily influenced her later work on spirituality in education. Further reflecting on what it meant to be a first-generation college student, she discussed some of the long conversations she would have with friends at the University of Michigan about their futures and the impact they hoped to have.

One of the things that I noticed was that all of us kind of came from the same kinds of experiences. I mean, not exactly the same, but certainly we knew poverty. We knew how our families were and we would joke around about these things and [at the same time] we would talk about our futures. I think at that level [of education] the thinking begins to be more analytical. You are faced with information that you did not have before, and you say wait a minute, what is really going on here and what role do I play and what am I going to do? What is going to be my piece? How am I going to use this education to make a difference?

The memories Rendón shared about the ways her location shifted in relation to power over time tell a story of how she moved from experiencing validation to providing validation. At Christen Junior High, she worked to be responsive in her style of teaching and choice of content, working with a student body she viewed herself as knowing well as a result of her own experience. At Laredo Community College she experienced others as seeing the community college as the slums of education. She described people seeing the students as "the kids nobody wanted," and so she focused on faculty accountability, academics, and programmatic integrity to turn this around. Speaking about validating students today, she described her current classroom practices:

I bring who I am to my class. I am more conscious of that along the years and communicate to students in different ways that they too are change agents, that they too are going to say they are the future leaders of our country and of our educational system and that the way they behave and the way they think and the way they act and what they write and what they do must go beyond coming to an 8–5 job, and that going beyond is about reaching out to the less fortunate and making a difference, challenging structures and ways of operation that do not seem to make sense, taking research to a higher level, and I am very committed to that.

Recognizing her current location of privilege and power, she touched on how she hoped her later work on spirituality in education and what she called sentipensante (sensing/thinking) pedagogy might contribute to validating the scholarship of junior scholars.

I speak from a privileged powerful position of being a full professor [with] tenure. I do not really have to please anybody and so that gives me a lot of freedom and a lot of latitude [in my scholarship], and if that freedom and latitude can help junior professors coming up who feel the same way [about the role of spirituality in higher education] to do their work, then I am giving voice to them right now and that is more important to me at this stage [in my career].

During our interview, I became curious about how Rendón views social change. How does she believe it happens? What is it that we need to do to create a more socially just and equitable education system? In responding to these questions, Rendón spoke of her own work and changing the academy from the inside.

I think it is important that I do it within the system because people that want to do this have to realize that they do not have to go outside. They do not have to go outside, it should not be something that requires that someone change structures. To some extent I think they are going to change but … if we were to say in order to do this you have got to change every structure, you have got to go outside the academy, you have to do all these things, then I think that would be tremendous risk-taking and laborious for a lot of people, because quite frankly we do not have that kind of time. People need to feel that wherever they are and in whatever way they feel comfortable they can begin. The way I do things is going to be very different from the way you do things and how somebody else does things, and we have to respect that. I think ultimately structures will change, they will need to change, but I do not think that communicating to people that they have to do things that are extremely laborious and that everybody has to do things in the same way and that you are going to be needing all these
experts and all of that is the best way to proceed. I mean, I did it out of a
calling. I did it out of what I felt was a void in my life.

The way Rendón described the changes that brought her where she is today
made it clear that she views choice as a salient factor. In high school, she viewed
her environment as providing four possible choices: getting married, going into
the armed services, becoming a nun, or going to college. And she chose college.
As a junior high school teacher, she made a choice to pursue her master's degree
and become a counselor. After being a counselor for a number of years, she
chose to begin working toward her doctorate. As a doctoral student, she chose
how she would give back to her community. In her current position in the
academy, she views herself as having great freedom of choice.

In listening to Rendón grapple with the notion of choice, I experienced
a tension in her answers between the notion of individual responsibility
and choice and the role of structural realities in individual experiences. She
understands her experience as one where she made it through by sheer
determination and successful choices. At one point in the interview, she
described recognizing the importance of education as a child and her
determination to attain it: “The message was that education is important, and
the more you had to me was a ticket out of poverty. There was a ticket out of
struggling to survive. The ticket was education, and I was going to get that
ticket.” She described her family as instilling in her “the values of determination,
education, and self-motivation.” The role of the individual is also present in her
engagement of some of the critiques of her work on validation.

As a student you have a responsibility to do the best that you can, to learn
to access resources, to submit high quality work, to put your best foot
forward, to develop networks with others, to learn how to use the library, to
express yourself well, to write well, to do everything that you can to become
a totally successful college student. Unfortunately, I think a lot of people
who see my work and others like it sometimes misread it and say that we
are dismissing the role of the student. I would disagree with that. I think
students definitely have a responsibility to do what they can to succeed.

On the other hand, it is clear that concomitantly she is cognizant of the role
of larger structural realities. Discussing her first introduction to Cross’s (1971)
work illustrates this powerfully. “I remember reading Pat Cross’s book which was

Beyond the Open Door, and that made me cry because I thought to myself, she is
writing about me and I had no idea that anybody cared about students like me.”
Although Rendón suggests that change can happen from the inside and need
not be focused on structural change, she also understands the need for structural
change. This was particularly clear as she reflected on Rodríguez’s (1974) Going
Home Again and the changes that first-generation students experience in college.

The academy should also change. It is not ... like we have to do all the
changing. There are certain structures and behaviors and conventions and
traditions within the academy that also need to be changed and ... I do not
believe Richard addressed those. It was more that the student has to change,
but he does not really say anything about the institution making any changes.

As we continued to talk, she also spoke of her own complicity in the status quo
and her efforts to show up in the world differently.

There are issues that arise and what it makes me think of is that as far as we
have come, the other values as so entrenched. I mean, they are entrenched in
me too, sometimes I have to wake up Laura you know, slap myself because I
am thinking along the same lines. They are so entrenched that it makes me
think my God, I have to start, it is like starting at ground zero, step one and
even before step one, prestep one. If you have not taken the time to process,
to read, to think, to critically reflect, if all you have read is a line of Laura
Rendón or Parker Palmer or Angeles Arrien or whatever and you read that
quote, you say, well this is very nice but then ... if the next thing you do is
the same old thing, then that is not what is required here. We have got to go
beyond quotes and passages to deeper reflection and deeper analysis, and so
I think that is going to be part of the steps that I need to take in order to lift
this movement [spirituality in education] and move it along, because I think
that even with people who are open, this becomes very challenging because
again, all of us have the kind of training that is so much a part of us, that it is
difficult for us to see another way. My life now is about the third, fourth, fifth
and sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth way. And so maybe that is my role,
to sort of be the insider/outsider that has been privileged and blessed with
having the space and the positioning to be able to serve as an agent that can
present the other ways or at least steer us toward other ways. No matter what
I do people can not fire me. Maybe I can be ostracized but there are ways to
get around those things, because I think that I am not the only one in the
academy doing this and I am ok with that, if that is what has to be my role, then that's what has to be my role.

As our last conversation drew to a close, I asked Rendón about her thoughts for the future.

What is going to be my legacy? What am I going to leave behind? After all of this is said and done, what do I want to be remembered for? Clearly, what I think I will be remembered for is that I made a difference in the lives of people who grew up like me having no hope, and I made a difference in folks thinking about the world in a much more connected, humanistic, holistic way. I think at this point in my life, those could be two things that I would care very much about, and I think that the essence of both of those things are love.... The essence of those things is that I learned how to give and how to receive love, so that will be my legacy.

Through her narrative, Rendón revealed a passion for education, a drive to succeed, and a yearning to make change and inspire others. At the same time, her narrative also revealed the tensions and contradictions of life and of desire. Highlighting the interplay between how we construct ourselves and the knowledge we produce, Rendón's narrative contextualized the experiences that laid the foundation for her work on validation theory. Hence, to come to know validation theory is to know a part of Laura I. Rendón.

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