Maxine Baca Zinn and Barbara Wells “Diversity within Latino Families: New Lesson for Family Social Science”

Main Point: Zinn and Wells expose the limitations of Latino family research that take on a structural functionalist perspective. Preoccupied with the notion of what is a “normal family,” structural functionalists have examined Hispanic families separately from the rest of society. Zinn and Wells argue that Latino families, like all families, are “products of social forces” (446) and that you must study the differences among Latino subgroups to understand how Latino family experiences vary in relation to these social forces (socially constructed conditions). Diversity is rooted in the imbalanced distribution of constraints and opportunities among family units. As is the case in all families, Latino family members strive to meet their needs by coping with, adjusting to, and modifying social structures.

Central Issues and Concepts:
- Zinn and Wells present three macrostructural conditions that they claim produce extensive diversity among Latino subgroups: the sociohistorical context, the structure of economic opportunity, and global reorganization. The sociohistorical context of a particular Latino group refers to when, why, and how they entered the United States. These factors, in turn, help shape the structure of economic opportunity for Latino families whose access to labor markets depend on where they have live in United States. Their placement into these labor markets and their individual economic contexts greatly affect the experiences of Latino families. Global reorganization, including economic restructuring and immigration is characterized by “new technologies based primarily on the computer chip, global economic interdependence, the flight of capital, and the dominance of the information and service sectors over basic manufacturing industries” (447). Latino families, in particular, endure significant economic social marginalization and are strongly affected by shifts in their environments.

Two Key Quotes:
- “Sociology has distorted Latino families by generalizing from the experience of dominant groups and ignoring the differences that make a difference.” (Page SS463)
- “Family diversity is an outgrowth of distinctive patterns in the way families and their members are embedded in environments with varying opportunities, resources, and rewards.” (Page SS446)

Two Key Questions:
- Why do Zinn and Wells not address the fact that the United States has become a bilingual nation within the last few years? It seems as though this shift in the environment is a critical macrostructural condition that largely influences the experiences of Latino families.
- To what extent do Latino families compete with other immigrants in terms of employment and other resources?