

## A New Look at the Maquiladora Industry

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### Introduction

I have conducted research in the maquiladora industry in Ciudad Juarez, an industry and a location much written about in the social science literature. Until recently, this literature has been about the oppression of female maquiladora workers. While I have talked with people about their experiences of oppression, I have also heard them describe opportunities as a result of their association with the industry. Using qualitative research methods, I have produced many stories about the lives of maquiladora workers, one of which I will tell today.

I argue “that positivist methods that have dominated maquiladora research are but one way of telling a story about society or the social world. They may be no better or no worse than any other method; they just tell a different kind of story” (Denzin and Lincoln 1994: 5). A basic issue in qualitative research is how to describe and interpret the experiences of other peoples and cultures. The problem of representation derives from this. Within a poststructural perspective, the research process is understood to be interactive, shaped by the researcher’s history, gender, race, education, social class, age and epistemological bent. The object of the research is a particular story that the researcher tells, framed within the researcher’s paradigm (Denzin and Lincoln 1994:5). The knowledge produced is uncertain, always contingent. Knowing becomes a process,

always under construction. In this respect, poststructuralism is a critique of positivism.

Important in poststructural qualitative research is an imperative to turn the anthropological gaze developed during the research process back on the positionality of the researcher and ask how an insight gained in the field may challenge existing ways of seeing (Marcus and Fischer 1986: 138). Thus, poststructural qualitative research provides an ongoing critique of itself: its methods, its representations and its implications. Since all of the stories resulting from fieldwork are interpretations and since the link between the lived experience the researcher attempts to capture and the text produced is recognized to be problematic, the issue of representation becomes less important. All interpretations contribute to an understanding of the phenomena being studied but none can be viewed as definitive.

I place my work within a discourse of difference, a space in which relations of gender and class are investigated, not assumed. I recognize my (or anyone's) inability to speak for maquiladora workers. The solution to this contradiction cannot be to abstain from representing them. The goal then is to add a level of understanding that has been unrecognized, allowing the reader to accept the possibility of a different reading of the conditions and relations of production and the lives of maquiladora workers.

Perla

Perla began working in a maquila when she was sixteen. Now, at 25, she has worked in at least five maquilas (she cannot quite remember) and several non-maquila

jobs. She left these jobs for various reasons. At RCA, the work was hard and at Camisas de Juarez, the food was bad.

“I left Proctor Philips after two years because they threw me out,” she said

“What happened?” I asked.

“There was a fight. I had just returned from maternity leave when a woman accused me of going out with her husband. It was a big scandal. I told her I had just had my baby and how could I go out with your husband. I can’t fight with you because I just had an operation. She said, ‘I don’t care.’ We had a fight and I was fired,” she recounted.

“Did you like working in the maquilas?” I asked.

“No, because they put you in an operation and you are not always in one place. They put you in different places and they want you to work like the people who have already been working there for years, at the same rhythm and without any mistakes. They want everything to come out correctly,” she said.

While Perla has been able to meet the maquilas’ requirements to produce defect free work at specified rates, she will not accept that she should be forced to do this. She carries a resentment that borders on anger.

Most of the people I met felt that the maquilas were good for the people of Mexico in that they provided jobs and important benefits such as health care. Perla is definitely not of this opinion.

“I think the maquilas are exploiting people. They entice the people from outside [the South], people who don’t have anything to start with and who are happy to have 10 pesos [\$1] in their pockets,” she said.

“What is it like to work in a maquila?” I asked.

“There is a lot of gossip and trouble,” she said.

“Have your supervisors been strict?” I asked.

“Yes, they are slave drivers. If your supervisor doesn’t like you, you are screwed. You get thrown out,” she returned.

Although Perla’s maquila jobs pays about the same as her current waitress position and she received benefits which the restaurant does not provide, she feels very differently about the wages the maquilas pay.

“They pay between two hundred and eighty and three hundred pesos per week. They pay you but they really want a lot from you. For the amount of work you do, you should get three hundred pesos a day, not a week,” she said.

An exception to Perla’s disregard for the maquilas occurred when we talked about sexual harassment.

“Have you been sexually harassed in the maquilas, by your boss or fellow workers?” I asked.

“Everyone there does it but joking I think, because that is the way you get along with people,” she answered.

“Have your bosses ever asked you to do anything with them?” I asked.

“No,” she responded.

It seems that Perla’s objections to the maquilas where she has worked are related to the structure of work. She mentions having to be exactly on time and being told what to do and when to do it. She has been moved to different positions within a maquila and has had to quickly learn new jobs and found it stressful to meet the new production

output and quality requirements. Lunch and break times have not been respected by her supervisors. When she complains about wage levels, her concern is about the fairness of the wage within the context of production and quality demands. She likes her current job as a waitress, a job that pays the same as the maquilas but does not include benefits. In this job, it does not matter if she arrives a little early or late. At the end of her work day, she leaves after her last customer and the clean-up is finished. Leaving early or remaining later is a decision she can make based on the needs of the job at the time. No one stands over her and tells her what to do.

In the usual representation of the lives of maquiladora workers, Perla's story would be about her oppression. I believe that oppression is only one side of Perla's coin. In my rendition, both sides are always up. Perla strives at any moment to "make the best of her situation." She is always oppressed and liberated. Much depends on her frame of mind at a particular moment, and, of course, the researcher's when the story is told.

## Work

For the last three months Perla has been waitressing in a restaurant in the center of Juarez, a forty-five minute bus ride from her home. Her hours are 7 PM until 2 AM. While she likes this job, she is thinking about finding something else. The problem is the danger she feels when she leaves work at 2 AM. A month ago three men abducted her, put her in a truck and drove her out to the desert. After they stole everything she had, they beat her up and dumped her in an arroyo. As she says, "I was lucky they did not

rape me.” Now, whenever she goes out, she is “always afraid, but you can’t let that stop you because you have the necessities. You have to go to work. I go and I just say ‘Oh God, don’t let anything happen to me. But if you want my life to end in this moment, then I leave you in charge of my children.’”

## Home

Perla is a single mother of three. She quit school at fourteen when she became pregnant. Her oldest son was born when she was fifteen. A few years later, she married and had two more sons. When that marriage ended she moved in with her grandmother who watched her children while she worked. After her grandmother sold her house, Perla, her children and her grandmother moved in with her mother who now takes care of Perla’s children while she is at work. There are a total of ten in the household, including two brothers and two sisters.

I asked Perla if her life was easy or difficult.

“I think it is difficult to bring up three boys as a single mother,” she answered.

“Do you think it will become easier in the future?” I asked.

“I think it will be more difficult,” she answered.

“Are there problems in your neighborhood with gangs or drugs?” I asked.

“Yes,” she answered.

“Are your children exposed?” I asked.

“I think that everyone is exposed. My oldest son asks me to go to the park. You know that when druggies walk around, they don’t care if there

are children or ladies present; they just walk around crazy. My son asks me ‘why he is walking around like that. Is he crazy?’ And I even speak to him about God,” she recounted.

“What can you do as a mother?” I asked.

“As mothers, we are stuck. We let our children do what they want. You cannot beat up your kids anymore because if they complain, you will do badly. One can only say get out of here, you smell bad. You can’t do anything because if you hit them, they will denounce you and instead of taking the boy to get him fixed, they will take you,” she responded.

Does Perla literally mean that she has lost control since she cannot beat her children? Or is that a figure of speech, an expression of frustration or hopelessness? Her children are not street wise yet. She does not have problems of drug abuse, delinquency or criminal behavior in her immediate family. Perhaps she reveals what is on her mind when she says that she expects her life to become more difficult in the future.

In families with a working single mother, her children and her mother, roles have shifted. Perla’s mother and grandmother take care of her children when she is not there. To some extent, They have become substitute mothers. The maquila-working single mother is, of course, also a mother. At the same time, she assumes the role of a traditional father. She goes to work and has responsibility for the economic support of the family. She also goes out some evenings, leaving her mother and grandmother home to care for the children. Working in a maquila, a woman is usually able to find other women with whom she can socialize. For Perla, one of the few benefits derived from working in the maquilas is that she has met many different people. On her days off, she visits

friends she knows from work. They go to dance halls on the weekends. It is a way to forget about the daily responsibilities and have fun.

### Wage Work

What is curious is that Perla feels much better about her waitress job even though she has suffered a loss of benefits. At the moment, she is not experiencing the loss of the health insurance. Her restaurant management are not slave drivers. Is she intuitively recognizing a favorable but perhaps temporary change in her rate of exploitation or are other factors affecting her judgment? In the future, if a medical need arises, she may not be so sanguine about her departure from the maquilas.

### The Household

The analysis of the household labor is complex. For Perla, her mother, grandmother and younger sister, the arrangement is communal. There is a significant amount of work for a family of ten which the four adult women have resolved into their individual responsibilities. None of them feels trapped by their household work load. Grandmother does what she can. Perla and her younger sister provide income to the family and are responsible for part of the household chores they perform when they are home. It helps that they work on different restaurant shifts so that one of them is usually at home to work with their mother. The timing of this arrangement also serves to alleviate tension that might arise between the two sisters. Whenever there is a change in the



amount of work any of these four women is able to contribute, they jointly decide how the household duties will be redistributed.

However stable the household arrangement is at the moment, it is anything but stable over time. The discussions/negotiation that took place between Perla and her mother and younger brother and sister before she, her three children and her grandmother moved in was protracted and at times, heated. While the family size doubled, the family income only went up by 40 per cent. The use of household space was severely stressed. Suddenly, there were three young children in what had been a quieter household. In the future, there will continue to be changes. Perla's younger brother has a girlfriend. Perla may find a partner and move out with her children. Either of Perla's sisters could become pregnant and add additional infants to the family.

How can Perla's story be viewed?

Perla's story can be seen through the lens of the discourse of oppression. In her maquila jobs, she was required to produce at a specified rate and level of quality. Further, she was moved to new jobs within her factories, putting her at an experiential disadvantage. She had to be on time for work or she lost a punctuality bonus. All of this she found stressful. She felt that she was not paid enough for the work demands. She describes the factories where she has worked as unsafe. Her supervisors have been slave drivers. In her last maquila, she found herself in a situation in which an employee accused

Perla of going out with the woman's husband. A fight ensued that resulted in her termination.

As I mentioned earlier, at fourteen Perla quit school when she became pregnant. Her son was born when she was fifteen and at sixteen, she was working in her first maquila. Thus, her entry into adult life began abruptly. She lived with her grandmother because, at the time, she and her mother were "at odds." As a young single mother, she was vulnerable; she had to work to support herself and her son and contribute to her grandmother's household expenses. Thus, work has been a way of dealing with overwhelming responsibilities. At the time her several year marriage failed, her grandmother was also having difficulties living alone. Perla and her mother resolved their differences, sold her grandmother's house and put the family together in Perla's mother's house. Back home at nineteen, Perla needed to work as much as ever. In this view, work has not been liberatory for Perla.

I can make a case that life in Mexico is oppressive for the poor. Most must drop out of school by the time they are sixteen. The safety net for old age is the family. People are aware of the attractiveness of consumerism. In making this case, I am reflecting my values and beliefs, not theirs. When I evaluate their conditions of existence by my standards, I assume they should live as I do.

Perla's story can also be seen as liberatory. At fifteen, Perla was certainly not going to sit home and take care of her baby. By age sixteen, most poor young Mexicans throughout the country have already dropped out of school and are contributing to their

families financially. Their mothers and grandmothers take care of their children. The social and economic systems functioning in Mexico depend on this. Older people know of few other ways to survive. In this role they contribute to their families economically and socially by providing child care and domestic labor. All of the women I met expressed a desire to live with their children when they are old. In the present export processing job climate, parents hope to provide more education for their children than they received, because, in the maquilas, people recognize that education is important for advancement. And as Perla says, I want to “give them as much education as I can so that when I am old, they will support me.”

Perla is not in a double bind, working during the evening in a restaurant and during the day at home. Her mother and grandmother provide most of the domestic labor for the family. Nor is she part of a labor reserve army to be called upon when capitalists' needs arise. With her strong personality, Perla is anything but easily manipulated. She knows her worth in a high turnover (10% per month), low unemployment (less than 1 %) labor market. When she has felt she was not treated properly in her maquila, she found another job. In the current employment situation in Juarez, she is not excluded because she made a large number of job changes.

Each reading of Perla's situation reflects certain assumptions (entry points). Choosing one version versus the other reflects the viewer's agenda. Perla can always be seen as oppressed and/or provided with opportunity. When she began to work at sixteen, she can be seen both as having to work out of necessity and fortunate to be able to find a

job. When she feels oppressed because she cannot adapt to the requirements of industrial discipline, she is able to find a job more to her liking outside the industry. If she is unfortunate to have had a child when she was fifteen, she was able to call upon first her grandmother and then her mother for assistance in the raising of her child. When her marriage does not last, she can return home and add her three children to the family responsibility while she continues to work. Her family makes demands but provides relief. While she finds life difficult as a single mother, she does not have to put up with a marital situation that she finds intolerable. Because work has been available, Perla and her family have been able to forge a relatively comfortable working-class standard of living.

In analyzing Perla's oppression and liberation and showing that neither works exclusively and that both are always "in play," I have produced a discourse of difference. A discourse of difference for the maquiladora industry is not based upon assumptions of oppression or liberation. Rather, a researcher selects an entry point (class, gender, etc.) and analyzes the intersections of the effectivities that impinge on the site of investigation; that is, the maquiladora worker in a particular time and place. There is no attempt to generalize across maquiladora workers. Each person is assumed to be unique with particular interests, desires, problems and constraints. In Perla's case, she is always affected by all of the conditions these discourses describe. Her interests and attitudes are constantly changing. Some of the things she does work out and others do not. She makes choices. She does not see herself as a victim. Rather, when she does not like her situation, she changes it.