

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: BEING CALLED TO SOCIAL WORK: WHAT LATINA WOMEN CARRY

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This phenomenological inquiry explores the lived experiences of eight Latina women and their call to the social work profession. The women who generously agreed to participate in this study all identified as Latina women, first or second-generation immigrants who completed at least a Bachelor's degree in Social Work and were working as professional social workers. From in-depth conversations, their lived experiences were interpreted through the methodological lens of hermeneutic phenomenology applying Max van Manen's (2016) essential research activities.

This study begins with what led to this exploration, including a (mis)labeling of the phenomena from the researcher's position as a social work educator. The unveiled themes include how the women's lived experiences calls them to become the person they needed when they were younger and how their families and communities enjoin them to create essential spaces. The women describe how they often claimed the roles of social workers as children, helping, advocating, translating, and educating their families, and they reflect on how they seek to do the same work in their current professional practice. They each embody specific gendered and cultural expectations and claim their authentic

selves—including their native, accented, and immigrant identities that provide an understanding of being-in and being-between world(s) like many of the clients and the communities that they serve. They carry their memories of struggles, triumphs, the smell of home, and the importance of family, all of which provide a way to understand and embody empathy.

Lastly, this study illuminates essential considerations for social work educators, exploring how current social work theories and pedagogical practices might (dis)miss students' lived lives. This work suggests the need to create new and inclusive theories of lived lives while rethinking social work's explicit and implicit curriculum. By encouraging social work educators to re-imagine and re-create classroom practices—this study suggests that creating brave spaces where teaching and learning of lived experiences might be explored is essential to students and faculty alike. Finally, this work imagines pedagogical spaces where students might cultivate what lies within their call to social work as they prepare to serve diverse clients and communities.