

CHAPTER 6

What the Cuban Revolution Means to Older Cubans

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Abstract: This paper discusses what the Cuban Revolution means to older Cubans and how it has changed their lives. It addresses why many older Cubans still appear to identify with the revolution and its accomplishments, despite its failure to provide for their basic needs. The elderly are disproportionately affected by the hardships of life in Cuba, receiving pensions on which they cannot live, residing in overcrowded homes, and suffering from shortages in food and transport (Durán Gondar and Chávez, 2000). Yet many older persons retain a positive attitude about the revolution.

The question of why many elderly Cubans hold positive attitudes about the historic event of 1959, despite the hardships of life noted above, emerged from a study I conducted in 2005 with 25 older persons about the importance of the revolution in their lives. In this paper, I discuss the findings from that study, which was guided by the following questions: 1) How important has the revolution been in the lives of older persons? 2) How has it changed their lives? 3) Do older Cubans retain faith in the future of the revolution? and, 4) Do they believe younger Cubans share their views about this historic event? I expected at the outset of my investigation that years of exposure to adverse living conditions would have significantly diminished the degree to which the elderly identified with the major societal transformations that began in 1959.

“Identification with the revolution” refers to an expression of ongoing support for the economic, political and social transformations begun in 1959. The meaning of “the revolution” varies from individual to individual in Cuba (Rosendahl, 1997). It has been associated with collective participation in shared struggle in the 1960s, with acknowledgement of the state and the political class in the 1970s, and with community and solidarity in the 1990s (Gray and Kapia, 2008). “The revolution” here refers to

What the Cuban Revolution Means to Older Cubans

a series of ongoing cultural, political, and societal processes set into motion in 1959 by the government of Fidel Castro. These processes included the socialization of the Cuban economy and the attempt to construct a more egalitarian social order (Saney, 2004).

More than a million Cubans (11.3% of the population) are 65+ years of age (Oficina Nacional de Estadístas, 2006). Published information on this disproportionately large and growing older population is sparse (Durán and Chávez Negrín, 2000; Harnecker, 1996; Strug, 2004; Lewis, 1977a, b). Most of this literature relates either to the health of older persons or to the national challenge of meeting the needs of an aging population (Alonso Galbán, Sansó Soberats, Díaz-Canel Navarro, Carrasco García, and Oliva, 2007; Díaz-Briquets, 2002) rather than to older persons' beliefs and attitudes about government or about life in Cuba today. It is important to document these beliefs and attitudes before this age cohort disappears.

Key Concepts

Social scientists suggest that exposure to societal values in young adulthood shapes a person's thinking later in life; and that remaining faithful to one's ideals may provide meaning for the individual later in life (Ikels, 1990). This assumption is relevant to our investigation of how exposure of study participants to a new set of societal values and transformations in early adulthood may have affected their current thinking about the revolution.

Psychologists note that a person's core beliefs and values formed earlier in life tend to persist over time and frame the individual's perspectives about an imagined future (Ruth and Coleman, 1996). The psychological literature on aging also suggests that it is important for persons as they age to envision a future for themselves, for their children, and for their country that links key beliefs and experiences in their past and present lives (Shenck, Davis, Peacock, and Moore, 2002). This investigation examines whether this applies to the elderly Cubans in this investigation.

Methods

Study Design and Sample

Information for this article comes from a study I conducted with 25 older Cubans in Havana in the summer of 2005. Participants had to be 60+ years of age and to have lived in Cuba all their lives for inclusion in this study. Study participants represented a sample of convenience and some subjects entered the study through a snowball sampling technique. I interviewed 8 participants whom I was first introduced to by administrators of two senior day programs (casas de abuelos). I interviewed an additional 7 participants whom I met through contact with Cuban colleagues. I explained to these colleagues that I wanted to interview individuals who held a wide range of views about the revolution. These 7 referrals from colleagues in turn introduced me to 10 of their acquaintances. Three of these persons declined to be interviewed, resulting in a refusal rate of 11% (3/28). I stressed with all potential study subjects that the open-ended interview I conducted in Spanish was voluntary and anonymous, and that it did not involve payment.

I asked interviewees both demographic and open-ended questions that included the following: 1) What meaning has the revolution had in your life? 2) How did the revolution change your life? 3) Do you have faith in the future of the revolution? and, 4) Do you think younger people share your views about this event? I probed after asking each open-ended question to increase the likelihood that participants' responses reflected their true views. For example, if I asked the question "How has the revolution changed your life?" and the respondent answered "It improved it," I then asked "Can you tell me in what ways your life was improved." Interviews lasted between one and two hours. Information was hand recorded, entered into a computer, and transcribed. I carried out an iterative content analysis of interviewee's responses and identified common subthemes for use in writing in this paper.

Limitations of the Study

The investigation was exploratory and based on a small sample of convenience. It is possible that referral sources were biased in favor of the revolution and that I was introduced to individuals with more favorable views

of this event, despite my efforts to interview persons holding a range of views. I interviewed persons who remained in Cuba after the revolution and who may have been biased in favor of it. I did not directly interview younger persons. It was impossible to know in every instance if a respondent's statement was true. However, the length of the interview, the lack of hesitation on the part of participants to provide answers, the apparent frankness and spontaneity of their responses suggested that interviewees reported their actual views rather than what they thought would be suitable to the government or the interviewer.

Findings

Description of the Study Population

Of the 25 study subjects, more than two-thirds were female (68%, N=17). They ranged in age from 62 to 105 and the median age was 74. Over half (64%, N=16) were married and living with a partner. All had children and 85% (N=22) had grandchildren. Six (24%) had a university education, 12 (48%) had completed 12 years of schooling. All of those who had held jobs were now retired. Eleven (44%) of the women had never worked. Only one study participant reported being affluent before the revolution.

How Important Has the Revolution Been In Your Life?

Over 80% (21/25) of respondents answered the revolution was of great importance to them because of its achievements. Respondents mentioned the following accomplishments: education and literacy programs, guaranteed health care and family doctors, vaccinations, affordable housing and access to cultural events.

Other participants responded the revolution was important to them because it eliminated economic, racial, and social injustice. A 70-year-old former economist stated the revolution was significant to him because it meant "total liberation of the Cuban people, ideological, political, and social; the equality of men and women; and lack of censorship." A 75-year-old woman said the revolution was important to her because it brought equality to Cuba. She stated: "For all of us who lived through these events, we know what equality means. It is the right to many things, including the right not to have to fear terrorism and murder." She

Findings

described the dread she would feel when she encountered the bodies of murdered students and political opponents of Batista on the streets of Havana during the dictatorship.

Seventy percent of respondents (N=18) reported the revolution was important to them because it taught them the significance of hard work, self sacrifice, and cooperation. One 83-year-old noted that everyone in her building helped one another:

There is no egoism here, and there is solidarity in this building. We help one another. If María, my upstairs neighbor, needs an egg for her 5-year-old grandson and I have one, then of course I am going to give it to her. That is the revolutionary way of doing things—cooperation.

Respondents reported their views about the revolution had remained constant since its inception.

How Did The Revolution Change Your Life?

Ninety percent of participants (N=22) answered the question “How did the revolution change your life?” by reporting on how it improved their lives in many ways including, by increasing their wages, by offering them educational opportunities, by reducing their exposure to racial discrimination, and by raising their consciousness concerning economic and social justice.

A sixty-three-year-old black female who was a poor teenager at the time of the revolution stated:

I would not be here talking to you today if it were not for the revolution. I would never have been able to pursue an education and because of my black skin color, there would be many neighborhoods where I would not even be allowed to walk.

Wilma, a 76-year-old black woman and former educator, noted that her life improved after the revolution when legal racial discrimination ended. Her father discouraged her from applying to the university as a working class black female, because he was afraid she would not be admitted or that she would encounter racial discrimination as a student. Then the revolution occurred and she began her studies at the University of Havana. She felt economically, politically, and psychologically liberated as a result of her university education and by her exposure to other

societal changes as well: "I felt realized as a person. I married who I wanted, I studied what I wanted, and I lived where I wanted. I worked in what I wanted and I had the children that I wanted."

Forty-five percent of participants (N=11) said the revolution made them more conscious about the need for an improved life for all Cubans throughout the island. Rosa, a 70-year-old former teacher, said that her revolutionary consciousness was heightened by participation for several years in literacy campaigns throughout Cuba, including one for members of Fidel Castro's rebel army. She is currently a volunteer teacher at Cuba's University for the Older Adult. Rosa stated: "They don't pay me. I do this work because I feel good when others feel good as a result of my work. The revolution gave me these values." Margarita, who also had been trained as a teacher before the revolution, became involved in health education and sanitation projects throughout the island. This experience sparked her interest in social work and she went on to become a leader in this field.

Not Everyone's Life Was Dramatically Improved

A small number (N=3) of respondents stated that the revolution did not necessarily improve their standard of living and they reported that they initially reacted to the revolution with a degree of indifference. The centenarian Amelia was 58 in 1959. The daughter of a tobacco merchant, she indicated that she lived well prior to the revolution and continued to do so afterwards. Marta (age 86) was a seamstress before the revolution. She was forced to work in a clothing factory after it began, instead of making clothes for rich clients, which she had done before the revolution. However, she noted that she adapted well to change and that her life was not transformed by the events following 1959. She noted that she has always lived in a comfortable house and that her savings were not affected after the revolutionary government nationalized the banks in 1960.

The Revolution Has Brought Us Good Things and Bad Ones

Sixty-five percent of participants (N=16) reported that despite the revolution's achievements, ordinary Cubans like themselves face many problems related to lack of money and the high cost of basic necessities. "The revolution has brought us good things and bad ones" was a common response in speaking about the effect of the revolution on their living situ-

Findings

ation. However, respondents were quick to add that the good brought by the revolution outweighed the bad, that no perfect societies exist, and that the country's leaders were human and therefore sometimes made mistakes.

The most frequent complaint was that monthly pensions were too small, especially since food prices have increased in recent years and many basic items had to be paid for in dollars not pesos. Respondents said they were unable to afford to live independently from their families, even if they could find housing and even if they wanted to live separate from their younger relatives. Amelia stated:

I would have to be living in an old age home if it were not for the material help my family provides. I could never live on 164 pesos a month (approximately \$7, her deceased husband's pension). The bottle of wine I drink every week on the advice of my doctor for my blood circulation costs more than that. Nobody lives off the ration book (which allows Cubans to buy limited amounts of food at reduced prices). As an old person, I need more eggs and protein than I can buy or my family can give me.

Other problems mentioned included complaints about overcrowded housing in need of repair, inadequate public transportation, and older persons' perception that they should keep their views to themselves when they conflicted with those held by the younger people they lived with in order to maintain peace within the multigenerational household. Five persons (20%) complained that Cuba's famed health care system had become strained in recent years by the sending of thousands of doctors to Venezuela in exchange for petroleum. Nevertheless, no respondents stated Cuba should stop sending doctors abroad, because they were proud of this humanitarian aid.

Do You Have Faith in the Future of the Revolution?

All the respondents expressed faith in the future of the revolution and its leadership. They uniformly expressed the conviction that Cuba would continue to support the right of its citizens to universal access to health care, free education, low cost housing, social equality, and other achievements of the revolution, even after Fidel Castro dies.

They noted that they had never lost faith in the revolution, even at the most difficult of times during the Special Period. An 82-year-old man stated:

I never thought about the end of socialism in Cuba, even at the worst of times when we had money, but there were no goods to buy. Our country is very Fidelista (believers in Fidel Castro and his ideas). Fidel told us there would be difficult moments like those we endured during the worst of the Special Period and that we would have to adapt and we would get past those difficult times. And so we adapted then and we need to be flexible now.

Do Younger Persons Share Your Views about the Revolution?

All of the respondents acknowledged that few of today's youth share their faith in the Cuban Revolution. They noted that a sector of today's youth, including in some instances their own grandchildren, had no historical memory of what capitalist life was like in Cuba prior to the revolution, had lost faith in government's ability to improve the lives of ordinary Cubans, and believed that Cuba should have a more capitalist, market-oriented economy. Forty-two percent (N=10) of respondents said their children believed their views to be utopian, out of touch, and antiquated. However, they stated that the majority of youth have grown up in homes where they had been exposed to the revolutionary principles and values of their parents and grandparents and they were certain that young people would give their lives in defense of those principles if necessary.

Discussion

Study findings showed that all the older persons who were interviewed reported positive views about the revolution, identified with its values and achievements, talked about life's hardships, but remained optimistic about Cuba's future. The detailed and spontaneous nature of their responses suggested that interviewees reported what they truly believed, although these findings are subject to the study's limitations noted earlier.

These findings do not negate the fact that there may be many older persons who have become discontented with the revolution as the result of many years of difficult living conditions. However, this study suggests that there are many older persons who still identify with the revolution

Discussion

and who want and expect Cuba to retain its successful revolutionary projects including those in education and health.

The revolution was a life-altering macro-event that exposed study participants to liberating social change and to a radical vision of the New Man. Study findings showed this exposure elevated participants' consciousness about economic, racial, and social justice, and also improved their lives in material ways when they were in their early adulthood at the start of the revolution. The establishment of free health care, the end of legal race discrimination, and improvement in wages left a lasting psychological impression on the older persons in this study, perhaps because these radical changes contrasted strikingly in their minds with the economic decline, the class, racial and political inequalities, and the violence, corruption, and U.S. domination of Cuba of the pre-revolutionary 1950s (Domínguez, 1978).

The fact that many older Cubans continue to identify with the revolution and its values almost half a century since it began is testimony to the impact that exposure to radical social change can have on adult political socialization, that is, on the way people acquire enduring orientations towards a political system (Sigel, 1989). Older Cubans like those in this study acquired their revolutionary attitudes in their education and work settings, through participation in mass mobilizations, and through the media. Through this involvement, many elderly Cubans like those in this investigation appear to have established a bond with the revolution that remains strong.

One might have expected the positive identification with the revolution expressed by the elderly in this study to have been seriously weakened by the difficult economic conditions they have been exposed to, and especially by the calamity of the Special Period and its aftermath (Demartini, 1985). However, it is important to consider that participants' identification with the revolution in early adulthood had been consolidated by the experience of the U.S. blockade, the Bay of Pigs invasion, and the Cuban Missile Crisis. Study participants were in their late fifties and early sixties during the worst of the Special Period, by which time their revolutionary political attitudes and identification with the revolution had been strengthened by the country's more than forty year history of struggle and survival. The "Battle of Ideas" campaign launched at the end of the 1990s, an effort to strengthen Cuba economically, ideologically, and socially

through a variety of educational and social programs including ones for the elderly (Barthelemy, 2004), may have further fortified the political views of the elderly in this study. Also, in recent years the government has introduced social assistance programs for older persons and a modest increase in pensions, which many elderly point to as an indication of the government's interest in their wellbeing. All of the above may help explain the ongoing support for the revolution expressed by study participants.

Consideration of the effects of the aging process and of the psychological correlates of old age may also explain why the elderly persons in this study retain positive views about the revolution. Those views, held for some fifty years, have become a core component of their outlook on life and an important element of their psychosocial identity. Their perspectives on the revolution may contribute to psychological coherence and stability as they age. It might be psychologically disillusioning for these older persons to seriously question the value of the revolution after having lived all of their adult lives identifying with its principles.

It may be important for the elderly persons in this investigation to imagine a future for themselves, for their children, and for their country that links their core beliefs about the triumph of the Cuban Revolution to their imagined future for themselves, for their descendants, and for Cuba. This is the case even though they report that their children and grandchildren think that fundamental change in Cuba is necessary.

Implications of This Investigation

This study suggested that many older Cubans born before the revolution may hold views about this event that are different from those of subsequent generations whose political consciousness was formed at later periods in the country's history. Youth has been particularly outspoken about the need for change and for the introduction of economic reform in the country; and young people are probably more willing than are older persons to see the country deviate from its socialist path (Generación Y, 2008). This implies that some degree of intergenerational difference of opinion exists concerning views about the future of socialism in Cuba and about the path the country should take. It is important to assess the extent

The Need for Further Research

of this intergenerational difference of opinion and its impact on older persons.

The Need for Further Research

Seventy percent of Cubans alive today were born after the revolution. Older Cubans are an important and fast disappearing source of information about life in Cuba as it existed before the revolution and in the early years of this transformative event. It is important to collect data about the impact of the revolution on the lives of the elderly before their generation passes into history.

We noted this was an exploratory study based on a sample of convenience and that the information collected cannot be generalized to a wider population of elderly Cubans. Therefore, it is important to collect data from a broader, more representative sample of older persons to better understand how age and cohort effects have influenced the political socialization of today's elderly. It is also necessary to collect information directly from younger family members about their interactions with the elderly. This will increase our knowledge about how age related differences of opinion about the revolution may affect intergenerational relationships.

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The Need for Further Research

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