Revisiting Validation Theory: Theoretical Foundations, Applications, and Extensions

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Abstract

Laura I. Rendón (1994) introduced validation theory with particular applicability to low-income, first-generation students enrolled in higher education. Validation theory was offered as a new way to theorize how these students might find success in college, especially those who found it difficult to get involved, had been invalidated in the past, or had doubts about their ability to succeed. This article gives special attention to: 1) how the theory was developed, including the theoretical foundations of the theory; 2) how the theory has been employed as the foundation to frame studies, discuss student success, improve pedagogy, foster student development, and frame institutional strategies; 3) which theoretical perspectives overlap with validation theory; 4) epistemological and ontological assumptions in validation theory; and 5) future directions that could enhance the theory, as well as advance the future research and practice of validation.

Introduction

Introduced by Laura I. Rendón in 1994, validation theory slowly yet significantly found an audience of scholars and practitioners who sought a theory that could speak to the issues and backgrounds of low-income, first-generation students (the first in the family to attend college), as well as adult students returning to college after being away for some time. As originally conceived, validation refers to the intentional, proactive affirmation of students by in- and out-of-class agents (i.e., faculty, student, and academic affairs staff, family members, peers) in order to: 1) validate students as creators of knowledge and as valuable members of the college learning community and 2) foster personal development and social adjustment.

Often, students labeled as "nontraditional" attend affordable community colleges and Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Hispanic-Serving Institutions, as opposed to elite, expensive, research-extensive universities. "Traditional" students are those whose families have a history of college attendance, come from middle- and upper-class families, and typically feel confident about attending college. Conversations and expectations about college attendance are generally part of family life. Conversely, for nontraditional students the decision to attend college is typically not automatic or expected. Students struggle weighing the costs and benefits of attending college versus working full time to help supplement the family income. Some students question if they are "college material," which often stems from past invalidation in their prior schooling experiences. Many of these students hail from communities where college graduates are scarce. Consequently, they have few role models and friends in their communities who can help them navigate the college-going process (i.e., filling out college admissions and financial aid applications, taking college entrance exams, selecting appropriate programs). While college involvement is a desired activity for these students, they are often unaware of the availability of opportunities and resources because they do not know what questions to ask. For nontraditional students, institutional validation can be the key to attaining success in college (Rendón, 1994, 2000; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000).

The Development of Validation Theory

In the early 1990s, the U.S. Department of Education funded the National Center for Postsecondary Teaching, Learning and Assessment, which was headquartered at Pennsylvania State University. A key research strand dealt with the transition to college and involved well-known researchers and student affairs leaders such as Patrick Terenzini, Lee Upcraft, Susan B. Millar, Romero Jalomo (then a doctoral student at Arizona State University), Kevin Allison, Patti Gregg, and Laura I. Rendón. These scholars were primarily interested in assessing the influences of students' out-of-class experiences on learning and retention. To do so, they designed and conducted a qualitative study involving focus group interviews. A total of 132 first-year students were interviewed. Sites included a predominantly minority community college in the Southwest, a predominantly White, residential, liberal arts college in a middle Atlantic state, a predominantly

Black, urban, commuter, comprehensive state university in the Midwest, and a large, predominantly White, residential research university in a middle Atlantic state (Rendón, 1994).

Researchers worked with an institutional contact person who recruited the students to participate in the focus group interviews. Students who volunteered to be interviewed were paid $10 for participating in focus groups lasting between 1–1.5 hours. The sample yield included a diverse student body in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, and residency (residential and commuting students). The original transition to college study was framed using Astin's (1985) theory of student involvement and Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) review of 20 years of research on the effects of college on students. An open-ended interview protocol was designed. Questions dealt with issues such as how students made decisions to attend college, their expectations for and the reality of college, significant people and events in their transition, selected characteristics of the transition, and the general effects students felt college was having on them (Rendón, 1994).

Once interviews had been transcribed, the research team held telephone conference calls to analyze what students were saying about their first year experience in college. Initially, the researchers were looking for emergent themes related to college student involvement, given that the scholars were employing Astin's (1985) theory of involvement as the study's framework. As the study progressed, two revelations became apparent: 1) there were stark differences in the way that low-income and affluent, "traditional" students experienced the transition to college, and 2) at some point, low-income students suddenly began to believe in themselves as capable college learners not so much because of their college involvement, but because some person(s), in- or outside-of-college took the initiative to reach out to them to help them believe in themselves and in their innate capacity to learn.

For example, when students were asked when they knew they could be successful, they did not typically cite instances of getting involved in college. Rather, they spoke, often with excitement and awe, about the reassurance and validation they received from individuals they encountered in college (i.e., faculty, peers, counselors, advisers, and/or coaches) and the outside-of-college personal world of family and friends (sisters, brothers, partners, spouses,

children, grandparents, uncles, aunts). For many students this was the first time someone had expressed care and concern; the first time someone made them feel that their prior life experiences and knowledge they brought to college were valuable. For example, validating experiences included instances such as when:

- Faculty took the time to learn their names and refer to them by name.

- Faculty gave students opportunities to witness themselves as successful learners.

- Faculty ensured that the curriculum reflected student backgrounds.

- Faculty shared knowledge with students and became partners in learning.

- Faculty told students, "You can do this, and I am going to help you."

- Coaches took the time to help students select courses and plan their futures.

- Parents, spouses, and children supported students in their quest to earn a college degree.

- Faculty encouraged students to support each other (i.e., form friendships, develop peer networks, share assignments, provide positive reinforcement).

- Faculty and staff served as mentors for students and made an effort to meet with them outside of class such as in patio areas, in cafeterias, and/or in the library.

Reflecting carefully on what students were saying about what was most meaningful to them as they navigated the transition to college, the term "validation" seemed to make the most sense. The impact of validation on students who have experienced powerlessness, doubts about their own ability to succeed, and/or lack of care cannot be understated. Validation helped these kinds of students to acquire a confident, motivating, "I can do it" attitude, believe in their inherent capacity to learn, become excited about learning, feel a part of the learning community, and feel cared about as a person, not just a student.

Theoretical Foundation of Validation Theory

Rendón (1994) took the originally conceived construct of validation and theorized its implications for student development and learning in an article that appeared in *Innovative Higher Education*. In developing the theory of validation, Rendón (1994) was influenced by the work of feminist researchers

who had produced a groundbreaking study of women as learners, *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). These scholars discussed a class of women who were essentially "undereducated," and felt powerless and voiceless. These women had come to believe that "they could not think or learn as well as men" (p. 16). They "feared being wrong, revealing their ignorance or being laughed at" (p. 57). Coming from all walks of life, and cutting across class, racial/ethnic, age, and educational backgrounds, some of these women had experienced a powerful developmental progression "from silence or conformity to external definitions of truth into subjectivism" (p. 54).

In short, these women had moved from relying solely on external "authorities" for reliance on truth to acknowledging and working with an internal authority which recognized that truth and understanding relied on considering multiple perspectives, including one's own personal experience. What had transformed these women was affirmation provided by maternal or nurturing authorities (in these cases: therapists, peers, mothers, sisters, grandmothers, and/or close friends). These sympathetic, nonjudgmental individuals helped women to "begin to hear that maybe she is not such an incompetent, a dummy, or an oddity. She has *experience* [original emphasis] that may be valuable to others; she, too, can know things" (pp. 60–61). A paradoxical situation appeared to be at work here. External confirmation from nurturant authorities was helpful in order to get women to focus on their internal, subjective views about their ability to become knowers in their own right. While women relied on external agents as powerful knowledge bearers, they also recognized the self as a shared authority in meaning making and knowledge production.

Similarly, Rendón (2002) noted:

> Many nontraditional students come to college needing a sense of direction and wanting guidance but not in a patronizing way. They do not succeed well in an invalidating, sterile, fiercely competitive context for learning that is still present in many college classrooms today. For example, some faculty and staff view certain kinds of students as incapable of learning, assault students with information and/or withhold information, instill doubt and fear in students, distance themselves from students, silence and oppress students, and/or create fiercely competitive learning environments that pit

students against each other. This kind of "no pain, no gain" learning context greatly disadvantages nontraditional student populations such as working-class women and minorities. (p. 644)

This suggests that many students encounter subtle and overt forms of racism, sexism, and oppression on college campuses. While some students are perfectly able to overcome these potentially devastating and invalidating experiences through sheer determination and will to succeed, it is likely that the most vulnerable students will respond by dropping out of college. Validation theory provides a framework that faculty and staff can employ to work with students in a way that gives them agency, affirmation, self-worth, and liberation from past invalidation. The most vulnerable students will likely benefit from external validation that can serve as the means to move students toward gaining internal strength resulting in increased confidence and agency in shaping their own lives. As such, both external affirmation and internal acknowledgements of self-competence are important in shaping academic success. What is being theorized here is that for many low-income, first-generation students, external validation is initially needed to move students toward acknowledgement of their own internal self-capableness and potentiality.

Elements of Validation

The theory of validation has six elements. Rendón (1994) indicated that "validation is an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development" (p. 44). This first element places the responsibility for initiating contact with students on institutional agents such as faculty, advisers, coaches, lab assistants, and counselors. Nontraditional students will likely find it difficult to navigate the world of college by themselves. They will be unlikely to take advantage of tutoring centers, faculty office hours, or the library, because they will be working off campus, will feel uncomfortable asking questions, and/or will not want to be viewed as stupid or lazy. Consequently, it is critical that validating agents actively reach out to students to offer assistance, encouragement, and support, as opposed to expecting students to ask questions first. There are some who would say that validation is akin to coddling students to the point that it might make them weaker, and that college students should be able to survive on their own. However, validation is not about

pampering students or making them weaker. In fact, it is about the opposite; it is about making students stronger in terms of assisting them to believe in their ability to learn, acquire self-worth, and increase their motivation to succeed. Validating actions should be authentic, caring, and nonpatronizing.

The second element speaks to the notion that when validation is present, students feel capable of learning and have a sense of self-worth. Whomever the student turns to for validation, the affirming action should serve to confirm that the student brings knowledge to college and has the potential to succeed. The third element is that validation is likely a prerequisite for student development. In other words, when students are validated on a consistent basis, they are more likely to feel confident about themselves and

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their ability to learn and to get involved in college life. The fourth element is that validation can occur in and out of class. Validating agents actively affirm and support students on a consistent basis. Fifth is that validation should not be viewed as an end, but rather as a developmental process which begins early and can continue over time. Numerous instances of validation over the time the student spends in college can result in a richer college experience. Finally, because nontraditional students can benefit from early validating experiences and positive interactions in college, validation is most critical when administered early in the college experience, especially during the first few weeks of class and the first year of college.

Types of Validation

There are two types of validation: academic and interpersonal. Academic validation occurs when in- and out-of-class agents take action to assist students to "trust their innate capacity to learn and to acquire confidence in being a college student" (Rendón, 1994, p. 40). In classrooms, faculty can create learning experiences that affirm the real possibility that students can be successful. One way this can be done is by inviting guest speakers and exposing students to individuals who come from backgrounds similar to the students. One of the reasons that many students find ethnic studies programs so appealing is that they are able to learn in a validating classroom context. Students can

nurture a community, have professors who draw out student strengths, learn about their history, see themselves in the curriculum, and interact and develop close relationships with students and faculty who reflect their own backgrounds. Another example is that faculty can validate the notion that what students know and bring to the classroom is as valuable as what others think and know. This calls for attention to the curriculum so that students witness themselves in what they are reading and learning. Yet another example is that faculty can affirm student cultural experience and voice by having students write about topics rooted in students' personal histories. Rendón (1994) also noted another example of academic validation, which can occur when faculty members design activities where students can witness themselves as powerful learners. In this example, the participant, a community college student who had been out of school for a long time and had been raising children on her own, thought she might not be able to find success in college. When asked, "When did you believe that you could be a capable college student?" she enthusiastically referred to her communications class, in which she had been taped giving a speech. The student reflected on the experience of watching herself on tape:

> I don't know quite how to say this, but when you hear yourself talk … and you observe this individual that has blossomed into something that I hadn't even been aware … I would sit in awe and say, "That's me. Look at you. And I like me." (p. 41)

In a validating classroom, faculty and teaching assistants actively reach out to students to offer assistance, encouragement, and support and provide opportunities for students to validate each other through encouraging comments that validate the work of peers.

Interpersonal validation occurs when in- and out-of-class agents take action to foster students' personal development and social adjustment (Rendón, 1994). In a validating classroom, the instructor affirms students as persons, not just as students. Faculty do not detach themselves from students. Rather, faculty build supporting, caring relationships with students and allow students to validate each other and to build a social network through activities such as study groups and sharing of cell phone numbers.

Review of Research Studies Using Validation Theory

A review of quantitative and qualitative studies over the past 15 years employing validation theory indicates that the theory has been employed in a variety of ways.

Validation as a Theoretical Framework

Validation has provided a theoretical framework to guide research that attempts to understand the college experience for low-income, first-generation students such as students of color, developmental education students, immigrants, community college students, and international students (Ayala Austin, 2007; Barnett, 2011; Bustos Flores, Riojas Clark, Claeys, & Villarreal, 2007; Dandridge Rice, 2002; Ezeonu, 2006; Gupton, Castelo Rodriguez, Martinez, & Quintanar, 2007; Harvey, 2010; Holmes, Ebbers, Robinson, & Mugenda, 2007; Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, & Miller, 2007; Pérez & Ceja, 2010; Rendón, 2002; Saggio & Rendón, 2004; Stein, 2006; Vasquez, 2007). Collectively, these studies provide the following key findings:

- Some students experience invalidation during their college experience. Examples of invalidating actions include some faculty who students believe are inapproachable, inaccessible, and often dehumanizing toward students.

- Academic validation can take multiple forms. For example, faculty, counselors, and advisers can affirm the real possibility that students can be successful college students. Faculty can also validate students' cultural experiences and voices in the classroom, provide opportunities for students to witness themselves as capable learners, and actively reach out to students to offer support and academic assistance.

- Faculty could benefit from training to provide academic and interpersonal validation for their students.

- Students benefit significantly from validation. They are proud when they are recognized as capable learners, and can develop a strong sense of confidence in themselves as students. They feel cared about when faculty and staff take the extra time to support them during difficult times.

- Employing validation does not mean that faculty need to lower their academic expectations.

Validation as a Framework to Foster Student Understanding and Success

In numerous cases, the theory is cited in literature reviews and research findings and recommendations (often alongside other student success, engagement, and persistence theories) when attempting to provide educators and policymakers with a better understanding of at-risk, underrepresented populations and when proposing strategies to improve student retention, transfer, and academic success (Bragg, 2001; Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Chaves, 2006; Cox, 2009; Dodson, Montgomery, & Brown, 2009; Jain, 2010; Jalomo, 1995; Maramba, 2008; Martin Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Martinez & Fernandez, 2004; Martinez Aleman, 2000; Moreno, 2002; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Nora, 2003; Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2006; Nora & Crisp, 2009; Nuñez, forthcoming; Nuñez, Murkami-Ramalho, & Cuero, 2010; Oseguera, Locks, & Vega, 2009; Patton, McEwen, Rendón, & Howard-Hamilton, 2007; Pérez & Ceja, 2010; Rendón, 2000, 2005, 2009; Tinto, 1998; Smith, 2009; Solorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005; Terenzini, et. al., 1994; Woodlief, Thomas, & Orozco, 2003). The theory has also been used to frame student success initiatives (Bustos Flores, Riojas Clark, Claeys, & Villarreal, 2007; Richter & Antonucci, 2010; University of Texas at El Paso, 2006). Taken together, these research articles posit that:

- Low-income, first-generation students require both in- and out-of-class validating support strategies and communities comprised of faculty, counselors, advisers, family, peers, and professionals.

- Student knowledge and experience should be used as a learning resource and be validated in the curriculum.

- Students' personal identities and occupational roles should be validated.

- A validating team of faculty and counselors can provide students with care, encouragement, and support, as well as key information needed to transfer and academic skills needed to be successful in college.

Validation as a Tool to Improve Pedagogic Practice

Validation theory has been employed in connection with the improvement of teaching and learning practices through the use of validating environments (Rendón, 2009, 2002) and in the development of teaching approaches with concern for inclusive, liberating pedagogy (Bragg, 2001; Jehangir, 2009; Nuñez, Marakami-Ramalho, & Cuero, 2010; Rendón, 2009). Liberatory pedagogy

works against the oppressive banking model of education that oppresses and exploits students (Freire, 1971). Instead, a liberatory pedagogy honors diverse ways of knowing, invites all to participate in knowledge production, allows both teachers and students to be holders and beneficiaries of knowledge, promotes an ethic of care, helps students find voice and self-worth, and works with a curriculum that is democratic, inclusive, and reflective of student backgrounds. Researchers such as Nuñez, Murakami-Ramalho, and Cuero (2010), as well as Rendón, (2009), contend that faculty need to critically reflect upon their own assumptions of students. Often, students of color and first-generation students are regarded as non-college material, and some faculty view these students from a deficit standpoint. Validation theory is related to the tenets of liberatory pedagogy in the following ways:

- Faculty become accessible, supportive validating partners in learning with students.

- Faculty validate student cultural identities. Validation of one's cultural identity and prior knowledge can address the existing inequities with educational attainment among student-of-color populations.

- The classroom invites students to explore the connections between their personal histories, group, and community contexts to allow students to affirm their own identities and create new knowledge. This can also help students decipher abstract concepts and become comfortable challenging ideas in class.

- The curriculum contains assignments that reflect student backgrounds.

Validation as a Student Development Theory

For the next generation of student affairs practitioners and scholars, student development theory is important in understanding the developmental process of college students. At the same time, researchers (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010) have cautioned practitioners and scholars to keep in mind: 1) the applicability of theory in various contexts (theories must consider environmental factors), 2) the generalization of theory to all student experiences (theories must consider student differences), and 3) the utilization of theory as a solution to student behaviors (theories are not prescriptions to remedy student behavior but rather a way in which students can engage and reflect about their own developmental process).

Validation theory (Rendón, 1994), can be considered to have an "interactionist perspective" (Evans et. al, 2010, p. 29) that considers environmental factors and agents such as "… physical surroundings, organizational structures, human aggregates, and individuals" (p. 29) that can either help or hinder students' growth and development. Nancy Schlossberg's (1989) concept of mattering and marginality has attributes of interpersonal validation by focusing on human needs such as attention, caring, feeling needed and appreciated, and identifying with others.

Theoretical Perspectives Supporting Validation Theory

Theoretical perspectives posed by numerous scholars share remarkable consonance with some of key elements of validation theory. The theories briefly summarized below have important implications for creating validating, inclusive learning environments where all students (regardless of gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, physical ability, or socioeconomic background) can thrive.

ABC model of creating inclusive environments. Daniel Tatum (2007) posits that inclusive classrooms should focus on an ABC model, where A is affirming identity, B is building community, and C is cultivating leadership. Affirming identity "refers to the fact that students need to see themselves—important dimensions of their identity—reflected in the environment around them, in the curriculum, among the faculty and staff, and in the faces of their classmates to avoid feelings of invisibility or marginality that can undermine student success" (p. 22). Building community "refers to the importance of creating a school community in which everyone has a sense of belonging, while cultivating leadership prepares students to be active citizens in society" (p. 22).

Community cultural wealth model. Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model employs a critical race theory framework to challenge deficit-based perspectives that view all low-income students as marginal and as possessing limited social, educational, and cultural assets. Instead, Yosso (2005) views low-income students from an asset perspective, and theorizes that students may possess at least one but often multiple forms of capital. This capital may be categorized as 1) aspirational (referring to student hopes and dreams), 2) linguistic (speaking more than one language), 3) familial (ways of knowing in immediate and extended family), 4) social (significant others who provide support), 5) navigational (ability to maneuver institutional structures), and 6) resistance (ability to recognize and challenge inequities).

Funds of knowledge. Luis Moll, Cathy Amanti, Deborah Neff, and Norma Gonzalez (2001) worked with the concept of funds of knowledge "to refer to the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (p. 133). Funds of knowledge is an asset-based theory where teachers can become learners, and can come to know their students and the families of their students in new and distinct ways. The theory of funds of knowledge debunks the pervasive, deficit-based notion that linguistically and culturally diverse working-class minority households lack worthwhile knowledge and experiences. When faculty and staff take time to get to know students—to acknowledge and validate their backgrounds, culture, family sacrifices, challenges they have overcome, etc.— they can view students with more respect and understanding. In the process of working more closely with students, faculty can potentially draw out hidden talents and abilities.

Liberatory pedagogy. Scholars such as Paulo Freire (1971) and Laura I. Rendón (2009), among others such as Peter McLaren (1995), Antonia Darder (2002), bell hooks (1994), and Henry Giroux (1988), have advanced the notion that education must transcend the "banking model" (Freire, 1971), where knowledge is simply "deposited" in students' minds and faculty operate at a distance from students. These scholars posit that the banking model is oppressive in nature, exploiting and dominating students, as well as working against democratic structures that honor diverse ways of knowing and participation in knowledge production. A liberatory pedagogy allows both teachers and students to be holders and beneficiaries of knowledge. Through an ethic of care, compassion, and validation, faculty and staff can liberate oppressed students from self-limiting views about their ability to learn and help students find voice and self-worth. The curriculum is democratic, inclusive and reflective of student backgrounds. Ultimately, a liberatory pedagogy has the potential to transform both faculty and students who break away from conventional ways of teaching and learning that oppress and marginalize students. Students can begin to define themselves as competent college students and find their sense of purpose and voice (Rendón, 2009).

Ethic of care. At the core of validation is authentic caring and concern. Both Nel Noddings (1984) and Angela Valenzuela (1999) expressed concern that many schools are focused on detachment, impersonal and objective language,

and nonpersonal content. These forms of invalidation can lead students to believe that who they are and what they represent are not valued. Noddings (1984) and Valenzuela (1999) argued that an ethic of caring can foster positive relationships between faculty and students. Noddings (1984) noted that care is basic in all human life; all people want to feel that they are being cared for in their lives. Simple actions such as calling students by name, expressing concern, and offering assistance can go a long way toward building caring, validating relationships with students.

Epistemological and Ontological Assumptions in Validation Theory

From the discussion above, one can conclude that validation theory finds strong conceptual, theoretical, and pragmatic support from different theorists and bodies of research. This rich body of literature illuminates what could be considered the epistemological and ontological assumptions of the theory. Validation theory:

- Works with students as whole human beings. Attention is placed not only on academic development, but also on emotional, social, and inner-life aspects of human development (i.e., caring, support, reflective processes, relationship-building, nurturance).

- Embraces students' personal voices and experiences, which are as important as traditional, objective ways of knowing.

- Is an asset-based (as opposed to deficit-based) model. A key assumption is that students, regardless of background, bring a reservoir of funds of knowledge and experiences that render these students open to learning with validating instructors and classroom climates. When validating agents work with students as possessing a reservoir of assets, the dominant view that poor students only have deficits is shattered and decentered.

- Is rooted in the experiences of low-income, nontraditional students. Validation theory emerged directly from student voices, and the theory places students as the center of analysis.

- Opens the door for faculty and staff to work with students to promote equitable outcomes, the elimination of racist and sexist views about students, and the promotion of inclusive classrooms.

- Engenders transformative consequences for students as well as for validating agents. With validation, students can begin to view themselves as competent college students and college staff can begin to work

with students in a more respectful, compassionate manner, while not sacrificing academic rigor.

- Is focused on making students academically and personally stronger, as opposed to coddling or patronizing students. The emphasis is on working with student assets in order to unleash potential to learn, promote well being, and help students feel that they are being cared for in a way that promotes their ability to succeed in college.

- Shifts the role of the institution from passive to proactive in terms of promoting learning and retention. In other words, it is not enough for the institution to say it offers student services. Proactive measures to actually get students to take advantage of these services must also be in place. This means that college faculty and staff must be ready to actively reach out to students (as opposed to having student reach out to them first), be accessible, and be open to establishing close working relationships with students.

Validation Theory: Enhancements and New Directions

Like all theories, validation theory has its strengths and limitations. Future research, theoretical perspectives and practice strategies should consider how to enhance the theory.

Research Enhancements

Most of the studies employing validation theory have been qualitative in nature, and more quantitative analyses are needed to confirm the impact of validation on student learning and overall academic success, including changes in motivation, attitudes toward learning, and identity changes, among others. Research questions to consider include the following: To what extent does validation predict retention? To what extent does validation overcome past invalidation and/or feelings of incompetence? In what ways does validation contribute to identity development? What are the liberatory elements of validation?

In the original study (Rendón, 1994) where validation emerged as a theoretical construct directly from the voices of students themselves, the analysis did not specify how the theory could apply to all kinds of students with a multiplicity of

diverse backgrounds (i.e., race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, academic ability, physical ability, religion, sexuality). It is appropriate that future studies apply the theory to understudied populations. As future research develops, it will be important to examine the theory closely with an eye toward providing more specific examples of academic and interpersonal validation in and out of the classroom context.

The original study also did not fully employ a social justice perspective. Validation theory has liberatory and equity elements related to power and agency, and future studies could explore the role of validation with a social justice framework.

Theory Enhancements

Theorizing about academic success for underserved students will become increasingly important as more low-income, first-generation, and older students choose to attend college. Advancing theory for these students requires a theoretical critique of notions of self-efficacy. The uncritical acceptance of the premise that all students can and should be successful on their own seems to privilege affluent students who have significant financial, social, and academic capital. Students lacking these forms of capital will ultimately want to function on their own, but studies employing validation theory demonstrate that there is a class of students that does initially benefit from nonpatronizing, caring, external authorities who can provide affirmation and support. This external support can eventually translate to internal strength as students gain confidence and agency.

Related theories noted in this article (i.e., ethic of care, mattering, funds of knowledge, etc.) support the premise of validation. It is likely that both internal acknowledgements of self-confidence and external forms of validation are important; one is not better than the other. However, future theoretical perspectives should illuminate the concept of self-efficacy with a deep critical analysis. For example, given the oppressive, invalidating elements in some parts of higher education (i.e., racism, monocultural curricula, stereotyping of students, etc.) how can students develop their own form of affirmation?

While validation theory has been explored as a student development theory, it is important that educators understand how the theory contributes to student development.

The transformative power of validation for both students and faculty also needs to be confirmed and expanded as future studies are developed.

Pedagogic Enhancements

The role of validation in fostering a liberatory, inclusive teaching and learning context needs to be further defined. Training in the use of in- and out-of-class validation could benefit educators with whom students are most in contact such as faculty, teaching assistants, advisers, and counselors. Faculty also need to engage in self-reflexivity which explores their own identities, assumptions they make about students, positionalites, and how they have located themselves within societal context (Osei-Kofi, Richards, & Smith, 2004).

Final Thoughts

Validation has emerged as a viable theory that can be employed to better understand the success of underserved students, improve teaching and learning, understand student development in college, and frame college student success strategies. With its underlying tenets of social justice and equity, validation theory can serve researchers and practitioners alike with a framework to create liberatory classroom environments, work compassionately with students as whole human beings who can best function with an ethic of care and support, and transform underserved students into powerful learners who overcome past invalidation and oppression. For those researchers and practitioners who seek a socially conscious, effective way to theorize student success, as well as to understand and work with underserved students, validation theory holds great promise and merits increased research attention

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