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Later-Generation Mexican-American Undergraduate Stages of Passage and the Development of a Transformational Impetus

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Abstract

Race and immigrant generation are among the most important factors that shape educational opportunities and outcomes in U.S. society. While sociological researchers point to downward mobility after the second generation among Mexican-Americans, there is limited empirical attention to the role that generational status may play in shaping post-secondary educational experiences and outcomes. Drawing on the under-utilized Undergraduate Stages of Passage Model advanced by Yosso (2006), this study qualitatively examines the experiences of later-generation Mexican-American students. Findings indicate that later-generation Mexican-American college students experienced unique challenges to building counter spaces with other Latinas/os/xs on campus. Yet, participants consistently described a desire to transform, which I call a “transformational impetus.” Implications for post-secondary persistence among Mexican-American collegians are discussed, as are implications for advancing racial justice for the Latina/o/x population more broadly.

Keywords: Mexican-Americans, college experiences, generational status

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Introduction

Mexican-Americans have lived in the United States for generations but race and racism continue to delimit their educational opportunities. This has been the case since the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, wherein Mexicans living in the southwestern states of California, New Mexico, Texas, and Arizona (previously Mexican territories) became American citizens but were denied access to the rights and privileges of Whites. To be clear, Mexican-Americans represent an ethnic group, not a race. Yet, Mexican-Americans receive differential treatment on the basis of their ethnic identity, which serves to *racialize* the group as a whole. In other words, Mexican-Americans may be understood as a racialized ethnic group in which discriminatory treatment creates and strengthens boundaries around how they are classified and positioned within a rigid racial hierarchy characterized by varying levels of prestige and privilege in society (Telles & Ortiz, 2008).

Racialization, then, is a social process by which to understand the experiences of Mexicans living in the U.S. as “American society often stigmatizes those of Mexican origin, regardless of whether Mexicans are considered or consider themselves white, whether they are physically distinct, or whether they speak Spanish or have a Spanish surname or accent” (Telles & Ortiz, 2008, p. 15). While sociologists disagree about the nature and extent of upward mobility among Mexican-Americans (Jiménez, 2010), Telles and Ortiz (2008) argued that racialization is a viable explanation for observed patterns of downward mobility among later-generation Mexican-Americans. It “creates shared personal and political identities, which often become the basis for collective political action” (Telles & Ortiz, 2008, p. 15).

The perspective of Mexican-Americans as racialized group positioned at the bottom of a racial hierarchy is evinced by persistent educational inequities including, but not limited to: residential segregation, low levels of academic achievement on standardized tests, limited access to quality curriculum and Advanced Placement courses, tracking into vocational or remedial programs, overrepresentation in special education, low teacher expectations, and lack of role models, all of which threaten college access and persistence. While Mexican-Americans may share some of these challenges with other ethnic groups within the Latina/o/x category, Mexican-Americans educational levels are among the lowest in the United States. Indeed, Mexican-Americans are experiencing a downward mobility in which third- and fourth-generation Mexican-Americans achieve less educationally than their first- and second-generation

counterparts (Telles & Ortiz, 2008). Such patterns underscore the importance of recognizing heterogeneity within and among racialized groups as they shape educational opportunity.

Currently, there is much attention to broader demographic shifts and the growth of the U.S. Latina/o/x, Black, and Asian populations. Citing an urgency with which post-secondary institutions must respond to demographic changes, educational researchers tend to rely on essentialized understandings of racial and ethnic groups (Warikoo, 2018), with Latina/o/x students often treated as a homogeneous population. For example, higher education literature tends to focus on experiences and outcomes among second-generation children of immigrants belonging to an unspecified Latina/o/x ethnic group. Alternatively, Latina/o/x students may be characterized in terms of challenges associated with immigrant generation, but this sometimes narrowly amounts to undocumented immigrant status. Essentializing portrayals of Latina/o/x students as immigrants only are problematic for several reasons. They negate the underlying drivers of contemporary U.S. population growth (i.e. birthrates vs. immigration), undermine the prolonged participation in the elusive fight for social justice and inclusion among U.S.-born Latina/o/x groups, and relatedly, inscribe the Latina/o/x population as perpetually foreign such that they are consistently excluded from the rhetorical landscape of race and racial justice. Practically, a lack of in-depth knowledge of intra and intergroup differences among Latina/o/x students will lead to further essentialized notions of their collegiate experience, needs, and persistence behaviors.

To disrupt essentializing portrayals of the Latina/o/x population in higher education, I explore experiences of later-generation Mexican-American college students attending four-year public institutions in California. The purpose was to examine qualitatively the potential significance of generational status in how Mexican-American students navigate the college environment. The goals of this study were to provide a rich description of the college experiences of a population that is, arguably, facing erasure from higher education institutions and to better understand the challenges and barriers unique to later-generation Mexican-Americans. To achieve these goals, I conducted semi-structured interviews with ten recent graduates of four-year institutions. Guided by one of Yosso's (2006) less studied frameworks—the Undergraduate States of Passage Model—I pursued the following research questions: 1) What barriers do later-generation Mexican-American college students face? 2) What strategies do later-generation Mexican-American college students use in order to successfully complete

their college degrees? 3) How do race, class, and generational status shape the ways in which third- and later-generation Mexican-Americans navigate the college environment?

Literature Review

A range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives inform research on Mexican-Americans yet higher education research has been somewhat limited. Post-secondary research has tended to focus on Mexican-Americans more generally (without emphasis on generational status) or on Latina/o/x students as a whole (without emphasis on ethnicity). In early higher education research on Mexican-Americans, authors tended to reference participants as “Chicanos,” implicating a later-generational status (e.g. Attinasi 1989; Nora, 1987; Olivas, 1978). In more recent research on Latina/o/x students, one is often left to infer, based on when and where the study was conducted, the ethnic and immigrant generation of participants. For example, research samples of Latina/o/x students in California may mostly include experiences of second-generation children of Mexican immigrant parents (e.g. Abrica & Martinez, 2016). Rarely is context expressly engaged as setting a foundation of students’ experiential realities via racial histories and patterns of immigrant incorporation (e.g. Abrica, Hatch-Tocaimaza, & Abrica, 2019). Within the University of California system, for example, students increasingly come from households with at least one immigrant parent (Douglass, Roebken, & Thomas, 2007). Unfortunately, higher education literature has yet to afford sufficient attention to ways in which a distant or more recent immigrant experience may shape the college experience or a wide array of college outcomes explicitly for Mexican-Americans.

An intersectional lens is increasingly used in research on Latina/o/x students. This allows for recognition of students’ multiple social identity statuses that are associated with intersecting forms of oppression. These works challenge “unidimensional understandings” of how students navigate power and privilege as they move through their academic trajectories (Alemán, 2018, p. 178). Though intersectional approaches are useful in shedding light on the experiences of later-generation Mexican-Americans in particular, there are three emerging issues with its application. One is application of intersectionality as a description of where social identity categories meet (Nunez, 2014). Another is that there is still an essentializing of culture among ethnic and racial minorities (Warikoo, 2018). Finally, there is a presumption that all Latina/o/x students are “equipped with the critical awareness to navigate the barriers resulting from intersectional oppression” (Alemán, 2018, p. 197). This third point is particularly important as

post-secondary interventions designed to support Latina/o/x students may not fully account for the ways in which students' subjective meaning around their social identities or sense of belonging within a particular community may complicate their utilization of available resources. For example, Abrica and Dorsten (2019) argued that how students think about race may shape how they utilize supports and services within the community college context. Thus, even when an intervention targets Latina/o/x students, it may presume a level of ethnic belonging among participants or racial consciousness not shared across all students.

Meanwhile, psychological literature has shown that not all Latina/o/x and/or Mexican-Americans share the same level of ethnic sense of belonging, which is unfortunate given that ethnic identity is well-documented as a buffer against racial stress. A study by Gloria, Castellanos, and Orozco (2005), for example, examined psychological coping strategies among primarily second-generation Latina undergraduates and found that ethnic belonging was more significant than generational status in shaping coping strategies. Similar studies have identified a strong ethnic identity as having a positive effect on psychological well-being among Latina/o/x students (Iturbide, Raffaelli, & Calro, 2009). These findings support extant sociological research which documents the many protective effects of a strong ethnic identity and ethnic support among children of immigrant parents. Co-ethnic support is also identified as a contributing factor to the success of the second immigrant generation over their native born counterparts. Co-ethnic support or ethnic enclaves are believed to foster educational attainment through supportive networks. Access to an ethnic enclave connected by language and customs provides an academic benefit to those generations who can still connect to the support of their co-ethnics.

Ultimately, later-generation Mexican-Americans' experiences are unique. They are simultaneously racialized according to negative racial stereotypes but may lack a sense of ethnic belonging and membership within the Mexican community that could otherwise be beneficial. Yet, higher education research tends to assume a uniform Latina/o/x identity that is largely based on studies of the second generation children of Mexican immigrants. As the second generation comes of age and new generations of Mexican-Americans go to college, it will be critical to understand both the racialized dimensions of these students' experiences and the nuances of immigrant generation, ethnicity, culture, and language as they differently shape students' experiences and navigation of post-secondary environments.

Conceptual Framework

This study uses a Critical Race Theory framework to explore the undergraduate experiences of later-generation Mexican-Americans. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a framework that emphasizes race and racism as essential factors in understanding social inequality that is perpetuated and maintained by U.S. institutions. Within education, CRT is a framework by which to understand the phenomenon of exclusion of students of color in higher education via a lens that centralizes their racialized experiences. More specifically, CRT in education challenges the dominant discourse on race and racism in educational theory, policy, and practice and examines how they are used to subordinate specific racial and ethnic groups (Solórzano, 1998). Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) named five major tenets that characterize a CRT framework in education: 1) centrality and intersectionality of race and racism, 2) challenge to dominant ideology, 3) commitment to social justice, 4) centrality of experiential knowledge, and 5) utility of interdisciplinary perspectives.

A CRT framework asserts that racism is endemic to American life and shapes the experiences of people of color in higher education. Ideologically, CRT challenges notions of neutrality and objectivity in higher education and contends that such ideas serve White self-interest, power and privilege (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Methodologically, CRT draws from a variety of disciplines and approaches to issues of racism. It seeks to bring attention to both historical and contemporary experiences with racism by drawing on the experiential knowledge of people of color (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Ultimately, CRT is committed to dismantling institutions that perpetuate and maintain racist ideologies.

Situating a study of the experiences of later-generation Mexican-Americans within a Critical Race Theory framework allows for an emphasis on race and racism while still acknowledging that students of color bring to bear multiple social identities that collectively shape one's educational experiences and experiences with intersecting forms of oppression. The centrality of race and racism comes not at the expense of class analysis or attention to other differences within a particular racial or ethnic group. Rather, CRT allows for an understanding of later-generational status as both a privileged identity (*vis a vis* formal citizenship) as well as one shaped by prolonged exposure to racism endemic to U.S. institutions. In other words, CRT allows me to interpret generational status not simply as a trivial aspect of

one's identity but as one that signifies a racial history with U.S. racialization and a particular racial ontology.

While Yosso's (2005) model of Community Cultural Wealth has gained the most traction in the study of Latino students, underutilized is her conceptualization of Undergraduate Stages of Passage. Drawing on a CRT framework, Yosso (2006) put forth what she calls a "Chicana/o Undergraduate Stages of Passage Model." The model, Yosso posited, breaks away from "assimilation tendencies" of traditional models of student departure to capture a more holistic process by which Chicana/o students navigate the campus environment. Yosso used the method of counter storytelling, defined as a method of telling the stories of marginalized people of color, to present three stages that characterize the Chicana/o undergraduate experience.

The first stage is called "culture shock" and refers to the stage in which students feel isolated and alienated immediately upon entering the university. As a way of coping with culture shock and racial, class, and gender discrimination, students do not withdraw but build communities to "ease the sense of culture shock" (Yosso, 2006, p. 120). Such communities, or counterspaces, support Chicana/o students both socially and academically. Yosso's (2006) counterstory informs us that counterspaces often occur on campus through student organizations. Examples of social counterspaces are those that "allow room, outside the classroom confines, for students to vent frustrations and to get to know people who share many of their experiences" (Yosso, 2006, p. 123). Counterspaces are thus born when students come together to address their marginalizing experiences and work to support each other. As a result of building communities on campus, Chicana/o students become integrated into multiple communities and this contributes to their academic and social success (Yosso, 2006). Thus, Yosso (2006) revised extant higher education models emphasizing separation, transition, and incorporation to reflect the culture shock, community building, and critical navigation of Chicana/os. A visual representation of the model is presented in Figure 1.

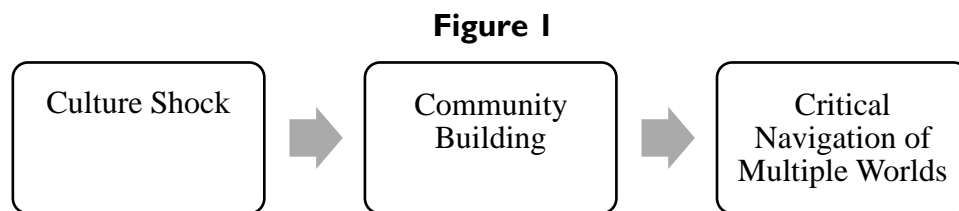


Figure 1. Chicana/o Undergraduate Stages of Passage

In exploring the undergraduate experiences of later-generation Mexican-Americans, this study utilizes Yosso's (2006) model as a guiding conceptual frame. It serves as both a conceptual guide as well as an organizational tool for highlighting both the barriers and strategies to success that were identified in this study. What follows is a methodological overview of my study, followed by a presentation of findings, and a discussion of the utility of this model for understanding the experiences of later-generation Mexican-Americans in college.

Methods

To examine the collegiate experiences of later-generation Mexican-Americans, I conducted an exploratory, qualitative study. Exploratory research allows the researcher to “investigate a little-understood phenomenon, to identify or discover important categories of meaning, and to generate hypotheses for future research” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). In this case, college experiences (phenomenon) were explored to understand the salience of later-generation identity status among participants. Specifically, the study design allowed for the exploration of “themes and categories of meaning” around race and generational status as it shaped their navigation of the college environment (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 34).

Data Collection

This study utilized semi-structured interview data. Semi-structured interviews combine the directness of survey instruments with an open-ended interview structure to produce focused qualitative data (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). Semi-structure interviews allow for the exploration of a contextualized understanding of how participants' racialized, ethnic, and generational status identities were operationalized within the college context. A total of 10 interviews were conducted, each lasting between 40-60 minutes and audio recorded.

During each interview, participants were asked to describe the neighborhood they grew up in, their experiences in high school, as well as their social networks before entering college. Next, respondents were broadly asked to identify how they got to college, which allowed me to explore the pre-college ethnic, generational, and educational background of participants. Next, respondents were asked, broadly, to describe any obstacles they faced within the college environment and to identify how they dealt with those challenges. The latter set of questions allowed me to explore general collegiate experiences as well as how race and/or generational status informed those experiences.

Site Selection and Study Participants

Several four-year, University of California (UC) campuses were targeted for recruitment. Each UC campus represents a highly selective research university. With level of selectivity and demographic makeup being similar, I assumed similarities in the quality of the campus environment and focused specifically on individual-level experiences with race and generational status. California was an appropriate site for the study given that Mexicans are the ethnic majority among Latinas/os/xs and this allowed for greater exploration of within group difference (i.e., generational status).

Participants were selected for this study if they self-identified as being of Mexican-American descent and were third, fourth, or later-generation. Participation was limited to this one ethnic group because extant literature establishes the unique racial history of Mexicans in the U.S. Other Latina/o/x ethnic groups were excluded from the study because they potentially enter the United States under different political and economic contexts and thus have different experiences. Finally, participants were included in the study if they were in their third or fourth year of college during the first few years of the Obama administration (2008-2011).

Though almost a decade old, this study importantly documents the experiences of Mexican-American college students during the “post-racial era” that are not otherwise well-documented. There are important comparisons to be made now, early in the Trump era, in terms of the racialization of Mexican-American college students and the salience of immigrant generation. In other words, this study captures the potential salience and significance of intragroup differences that, in the more racially hostile political era, may look much different. As such, the data presented are not historical but what I call *critical heritage data*, information of social and political significance that cannot be replicated because of the obsolescence of the conditions in which the data were generated.¹

Data Analysis and Reflexivity

¹ Heritage data is a term borrowed from a geographic research article titled “When are Old Data New Data?” In the article Griffin (2018) outlined a myriad reasons why scientists should never dismiss older experimental data, defining heritage data as that which is at risk of loss due to factors like environmental catastrophe. I have adopted this for application to social science data because of a dearth of parallel discussion around qualitative, interview data.

I first engaged in a preliminary, inductive coding round in which I looked for general themes related to the stated research questions. From this open coding process, based on the recommendations of Saldaña (2016), I generated a preliminary coding schema that was then used to develop more abstract ideas about the salience of immigrant generation for participants. Later, as suggested by Saldaña, (2016) and Strauss and Corbin, (1998), I engaged in a secondary coding round in which I relied on an axial coding approach (Saldaña, 2016; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This allowed me to examine relationships or axes among categories, which proved particularly fruitful in helping me understand what elements of the findings mapped onto the conceptual framework and which elements were missing from the stages outlined by Yosso (2006).

My positionality as a researcher fundamentally informed the design, data collection, and analysis of the study. My own understanding of race and racism was primarily shaped by my experiences as a later-generation Chicana living in California as well as my educational background in Chicana/o studies. The story of my own family's life in the United States, and their struggles to gain equitable access to educational opportunity, provided the impetus for studying students' subjective experiences with race and immigrant generation.

Findings

Culture Shock

Respondents identified experiencing a culture shock upon arriving to the university. When asked to identify the biggest challenges faced during college, Monica² immediately cited a culture shock that made her physically sick. She explains:

It was the culture shock that was a huge barrier for me to get over and get past, especially being in the dorms—like, my dorm being picked up and cleaned by people that I identified with. I was uncomfortable having brown folks cleaning up after me or serving me food because not long ago that would have been my job.

That's the kind of work that I was used to.

While Monica described coming to an environment where brown people like herself occupied the service roles on campus, Elena emphasized social class. When asked to describe her biggest barriers in college, she said: "For me it was a class issue, like I clearly wasn't a diplomat's

² All names are pseudonyms.

daughter, or, a king's daughter or whatever. I mean, I thought I knew rich people, like sons and daughters of doctors and lawyers. But when I got there [the university], I was just totally blown away by the amount of wealth that a lot of the international students had."

For the later-generation Mexican-American participants in this study, one of the greatest barriers in college was experiencing what they describe as a culture shock. This shock was described as a result of entering environments where they felt marginalized on the basis of their racial and class backgrounds. For the majority of participants, culture shock presented a challenge to degree completion. This finding is consistent with Yosso's (2006) conceptualization of "Culture Shock" as the initial stage of passage in her model of undergraduate Chicana/o students.

Lack of Co-ethnic Support

Lack of co-ethnic support presented later-generation Mexican-American respondents with additional challenges that began during high school and continued into their undergraduate experiences. A lack of co-ethnic support manifested itself in three interrelated categories: in the context of ethnic organizations on campus, through the mechanism of language, and resultant feelings of ethnic inferiority.

Student Organizations. Feeling excluded from ethnic student organizations was a recurring theme. For example, Jessica described experiencing a disconnection between herself and Latina/o/x student organizations on campus rooted in a lack of acknowledgement of her experience. She said, "I feel like I don't fit into these Latino associations or sorority groups. A lot of them are like first- and second-generation, and I don't fit in there...I am so far removed from that immigrant narrative—it's you know, it's a disconnection, and people assume that it is part of my experience." Jessica acknowledges an "immigrant narrative" which prevails in Latina/o/x student groups that does not reflect her own experiences as a later-generation Mexican-American. She says that as a result of being formed around more recent immigrant experiences, she felt a disconnection between herself and Latino organizations on campus.

Mary-Ann described feeling excluded from Latina/o/x student organizations because of the perception that she wasn't Latina enough. She shared a frustration with student groups which did not recognize the great diversity among Latinas/os/xs in terms of their backgrounds and academic interests in college. She recounts having to repeatedly remind others in the group that although she was different, she was still a Latina:

I am third-generation like a lot of people are. We have been here for a long time and because I didn't learn Spanish, because I was light skinned, because I was articulate, because I was smart, I wasn't a Latino. It was like you had to be down, you had to be the most oppressed so—about the students who were pursuing science or business, they would make comments that they shouldn't be at the meetings.

Mary-Ann explained that she felt that the goal of these groups should be to support all students of color and that students should be free to pursue any field of study they choose.

For Mary-Ann and Jessica, Latina/o/x student organizations served not as sources of support, but as sources of exclusion. Xavier echoes this sentiment and describes how he felt excluded because he did not know Spanish:

I did venture into a Latino organization, and I quickly realized that just like in high school, there is a status: those who know how to speak Spanish and those who don't know how to speak Spanish. I felt personally that I was a little brushed aside because I didn't speak Spanish, and it's funny because I would say that those in my high school who didn't speak Spanish actually had a little higher class status than those who spoke Spanish. But in this organization, speaking Spanish elevated your status. I always felt a little left out. I didn't feel that there was a space where I belonged.

Feeling excluded from Latina/o/x student groups on the basis of language was a common theme. Respondents described looking to Latina/o/x student organizations as a result of feeling marginalized on campus, but finding little support or opportunities to build community with their co-ethnics. They felt excluded from Latina/o/x ethnic organizations because their experiences as a later-generation Mexican-American were not recognized, they did not speak Spanish fluently, or they did not meet the ethnic criteria upheld within these organizations.

Language. Upon arrival in college, not knowing Spanish becomes a serious barrier to establishing connections with other Latinas/os/xs and becomes an implicit social demand that respondents constantly struggle to meet. Participants described experiencing the inverse of what they had experienced before college: whereas the Spanish language was generally looked down upon in U.S. society, they found that speaking Spanish was a prized asset that was the primary criteria for establishing a sense of belonging among co-ethnics. Carla, who is a

participant in a Latina/o/x community service organization at UCR said that she is the only one in the group who doesn't speak Spanish. When I asked whether or not they expect her to know Spanish, she exclaimed:

Yeah! That's the thing, I think there are a lot of first generations in college, and I guess they just expect me to know Spanish, and I'm like, "No, I don't know [Spanish]!" They're like, "What?! You don't know Spanish?!"...or like in my Spanish class, I'm like the only brown person in there.

Here Carla is sharing how there is always an implicit assumption among co-ethnics that she knows Spanish and there are seldom others who share in her lack of Spanish proficiency on campus.

Some participants shared painful memories associated with expectations to learn Spanish. As Monica put it, "If we don't speak Spanish well, like, there is something wrong with us or we are too good." Selena humorously described the embarrassment associated with not knowing Spanish while at UCLA:

We would go out to parties, and I always was feeling like I was missing part of the joke 'cuz they would have little inside jokes in Spanish. And I would just sit there like, "Ha ha ha," and laugh like I knew what was going on, but I didn't have a clue. And then after a while, since they see you, they start to talk to you in Spanish, and I mean, I can only carry a conversation so far. Sometimes I would ask what things mean and they would find out I don't speak Spanish. It would come out, and that was always the thing that I didn't want to have come out.

As a result of not wanting to keep this secret, several respondents took classes in high school and in college to try to learn Spanish. Many respondents said they have been taking Spanish classes "forever" but have not been able to master the language. Thus, the pressure exerted by individual peers and Latina/o/x ethnic organizations had a significant influence on the courses respondents decided to take in college as well as the areas of study they decided to pursue.

Ethnic Inferiority. Several respondents describe being labeled as "whitewashed" or being called a "coconut" for not meeting ethnic standards set by other Latinas/os/xs and Mexican-Americans. These experiences began early on, even before students arrived at college. Yet issues continued to surface as students pursued their degrees. All respondents described how their entire lives have been characterized by not fitting in with Whites or Latinas/os/xs,

leaving them feeling like they don't belong anywhere. For example, Jessica said she was labeled "White" early on in grade school: "I definitely didn't fit in with the white kids, you know. I didn't fit in with the Mexican kids who were being bussed in because a lot of them were first- and second-generation, and I talked like a white girl and I had a mother who was educated." Thus, Jessica describes feeling disconnected from co-ethnics on the basis of language and class criteria. Yet, she acknowledged how the racism she experienced didn't change with the level of education held by her mother. She said, "Everyone thought my mom was like the cleaning woman and that my dad was a groundskeeper. I was like, 'Uh no, my mom has a B.A. and my dad is a doctor, thank you very much.'" Despite her parents' high levels of education, Jessica experienced racism from Whites in her native San Diego, exclusion from her co-ethnics, and low teacher expectations of Mexican students, which she says resulted in her not applying to college and never feeling like she should ever go.

Respondents express never fitting the criteria of Whites because of their appearance but also never fitting in among co-ethnics as a result of limited Spanish proficiency, class background, higher levels of parental education, or differential levels of acculturation to U.S. society. Thus, lines were clearly drawn between Mexicans and Whites, and respondents in this study consistently describe being somewhere in the middle. Mandy shared the following:

I remember being called an Oreo—like I guess, darker on the outside, white on the inside. I wouldn't feel like I was white, but that's how people saw me. Like they would speak negatively about Mexicans, and I would say, "You know who I am right? You know what I am?" and they would say, "Oh not you, you identify with them, but you're not like them." So because I didn't have a strong connection to them [Mexican-Americans], that's what made them see a distinction between me and them [Mexican-Americans].

Here, Mandy was the subject of a racist comment about Mexicans, and when she challenges that racist behavior, she is immediately deemed the "exception." For her, befriending Whites in high school meant being bombarded with racist rhetoric directed at her ethnic group.

As a result of persistent racism directed at the respondents, some described wanting to be White for a long period of time before college. Jessica tried to change her appearance to reflect a White identity:

I changed my name, I died my hair blond with peroxide and lemon juice, which made my hair orange. I started to gain a lot of weight during that period because of puberty but also because I was really depressed.

For Jessica, not being able to live up to standards of Whiteness or Mexicanness was particularly damaging. Her depression lasted for much of her young adulthood and resulted in a diminished sense of self. She explains that the period of depression she endured caused her to drop out her first quarter of college. For Selena, her rejection by Mexican peers with a more recent immigrant experience resulted in her taking up an Asian identity. She said:

I started hanging with the Asians, and I would really like hang out with pretty much—and it was pretty much me and some Southeast Asian folks and like Korean and Chinese folks. Then they were like, “Great! Since you hang out with us, and you’re like the only non-Asian person that hangs out with us, we’re going to give you an Asian name.” So my best friend at the time was Vietnamese and Chinese and her and this other Korean girl were like, “We’re going to name you. You’re new name is ‘Lin Tran.’” So they totally gave me a name, and they basically tried to like assimilate me into their—you know, and it isn’t until now that I realize this is so weird, you know, how these cultural/racial dynamics play out in education, right? Or my educational experience.

As a response to racial exclusion, Selena began to hang out with Asian peers who happened to also be immigrants. She attempted to be part of this friend group and was happy to adopt a different racialized identity and abandon her name. This, arguably, signified the disconnect Selena felt with her Spanish-origin name, and by extension, her ethnic group. While it was talked about as a privilege to be able to transition between ethnic and racial groups, it also demonstrated a lack of connectedness to a primary Mexican community.

Desire to Transform

When asked to describe how they managed to succeed in college or how they are currently managing to succeed in college, respondents cited a strong desire to utilize their education as a means of transforming society. They describe feeling as though they have been given their unique positionality as an outcast from both the dominant White U.S. society and Mexican co-ethnics in order to serve as agents of change. They see their positionality as a unique opportunity to transform society in the interest of social justice.

For example, Mandy said she wanted to become a teacher so that her unique background would become a standard of what her students would see as Mexican-Americans. She said of her experiences with racial discrimination:

It's made me much more aware of—it's developed a desire not to allow people to see me as my friends saw me. I don't want them to see me and say, "That's Mandy, the exception." So it's made me very passionate and made me want to help my people. My ethnicity. My race, Mexican students, Chicana students, Latino students—whatever you want to call it. It's helped me in the sense that I want to be able to teach the stuff that I got so late. I don't want there to be those negative perceptions of Mexicans.

Jessica reports feeling a desire to change society as a result of her marginalizing experiences as a single Latina undergraduate mother:

I discovered that there were no services for parenting students, there was nothing. I was like, "How do other single moms do this?" because I was so stressed by the challenges with raising my daughter. I was like, this is a research project, and I should do that kind of research and go research some of the stuff about transfer students and see if it has anything about parenting students!

In this instance, Jessica turned a marginalizing experience into an identifiable gap in existing literature in higher education. It was her desire to make college easier for herself and others that motivated her to pursue research. In pursuing that research, she says she was "saved" and re-enrolled after withdrawing from a quarter.

Michael also turned his isolating experiences into a research project. He said: I felt so alone. I felt like there was no one in the world like me. There was no one who had an uncle in jail, a crack-head aunt, teenage cousins with babies and working at Target, or a dad with a needle in his arm. There was just no one like me. So, I had nothing else to do but do "me-search." I wanted to learn about people like me from people like me. I had to go to graduate school and do this work. It was like, "Get a Ph.D. or die trying!"

For Michael, his isolating experiences in college resulted directly in the desire to understand his experiences, to engage academically with his marginalized identity. In this case, Michael turned the isolation he experienced into a research agenda and career path.

Discussion

This study asked later-generation Mexican-Americans to identify the most significant barriers to and strategies for success in college. The most salient barriers to degree completion among later-generation Mexican-American participants in this study were experiencing a culture shock and a lack of co-ethnic support. When asked to identify how they have managed to succeed in college, respondents most often identified a desire to transform social inequities they see operating in their daily lives. Respondents identified experiencing a culture shock upon arrival to the university. Participants reported feeling like they didn't belong, that there must have been some mistake that brought them into college. This was true even of those whose parents themselves had college degrees. This shock is consistent with the first stage of Yosso's (2006) model for Chicana/o undergraduates.

As a result of experiencing a culture shock upon arrival to college, participants described attempts to join Latina/o/x student organizations unsuccessfully. They did not find a community to which they could belong because, according to respondents in this study, they "fit the criteria but didn't meet the standards," as Mandy put it. In other words, there were unwritten ethnic criteria that participants didn't meet. Lack of Spanish fluency, "acting White," having educated parents, or not conforming to an "immigrant narrative" made it difficult to gain access to Latina/o/x ethnic student organizations on campus. However, in losing access to Latina/o/x ethnic student organizations, respondents felt further marginalized and unable to build community. If participation in ethnic student organizations provides students of color with an important sense of belonging on campus, then these students definitely missed out.

Feeling excluded on the basis of not meeting Mexican ethnic criteria was nothing new to my respondents. Many described high school experiences in which they struggled with claiming a "White identity" or a "Mexican identity." Although such experiences typify the lived experiences of many later-generation Mexican-Americans, such a lack of belonging has implications for their academic success. It is not enough to simply say this characterizes the experiences of a group when it has profound consequences, such as depression and feeling "so alone" in college. These complicated ethnic/racial circumstances make later-generation Mexican-Americans a particularly vulnerable population in higher education which experiences the same racially hostile campus environments as other students of color, yet does not have the co-ethnic support we may assume Black and Latino students provide one another.

Given that participants in this study were made vulnerable both by a hostile racial environment and the exclusion of their co-ethnic peers, I see a lack of co-ethnic support as a key mediator in the undergraduate experience of later-generation Mexican-Americans. I define a “lack of co-ethnic support” as an exclusion from ethnic “counterspaces” on the basis of ethnic standards erected by those expressing internalized racism (Yosso, 2006). As a result of not gaining access to ethnic group membership, students do not benefit from interacting or seeing people of the same racial/ethnic group, and thus, feel further marginalized than they might feel if were granted access to their ethnic peer groups.

I present lack of co-ethnic support as a rejection from ethnic student organizations and rejection from Mexican co-ethnics for failing to meet standards of “Mexicanness.” The rejection among co-ethnic peers is, arguably, a reflection of internalized racism among the perpetrators of the exclusion. I present lack of co-ethnic support as a significant part of the undergraduate experience for later-generation Mexican-Americans. Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the interlocking relationship between the aforementioned concepts.

Figure 2

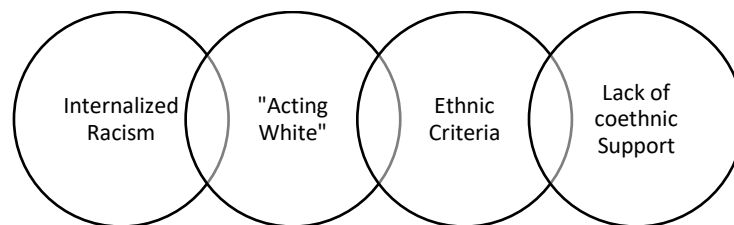


Figure 2. Lack of co-ethnic support as manifestation of internalized racism

As a result of extreme isolation, students develop what I call a “transformational impetus,” or a desire to pursue education in order to change elements of society which have exerted a negative influence in their lives over a sustained period of time. The concept is derived from college impact studies which often measure student activism in terms of the extent to which a student describes a desire to influence social values, participate in a community action program, help others in difficulty, and influence the political structure (Sax, Byrant, & Harper, 2005). Thus, although similar to the social activist factor, transformational impetus offers a different focal point, which centralizes not only an interest in social justice but also an interest in changing environments that the individual deems oppressive.

A transformational impetus is also not unlike Solórzano and Villalpando’s (1998) concept of resistant cultural capital, which is defined as the ability to transform experiences with

marginalization into social transformation. It is referred to as a skill, a tool, a form of capital in which students of color find ways to utilize their education and university resources to ultimately benefit the communities from which they come (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998). I use the term “transformational impetus” to describe the experiences of my respondents because I believe it specifically captures: 1) A prolonged exposure and knowledge of U.S. inequality, and 2) The sole reason for pursuing education is to transform society. For my respondents, a desire to change society as a result of marginalizing experiences wasn’t a skill to survive and succeed in higher education, but the motivation for pursuing a life’s work and for finding a reason to live. Transformation is something that my respondents developed in order to find purpose in life and a purpose for their education.

Both dimensions of participants’ experiences—lack of co-ethnic support and a transformational impetus—might be added as stages of undergraduate passage for later-generation Mexican-Americans. Although a transformational impetus might be reflected in the critical navigation stage of the model, I see it as a precursor to critical navigation, a prerequisite that emerges as a result of adversity in college and witnessing generation after generation the same adversity within an individual’s community. Figure 3 represents a revised model of stages of passage for later-generation Mexican-Americans with prolonged exposure to U.S institutions.

Figure 3

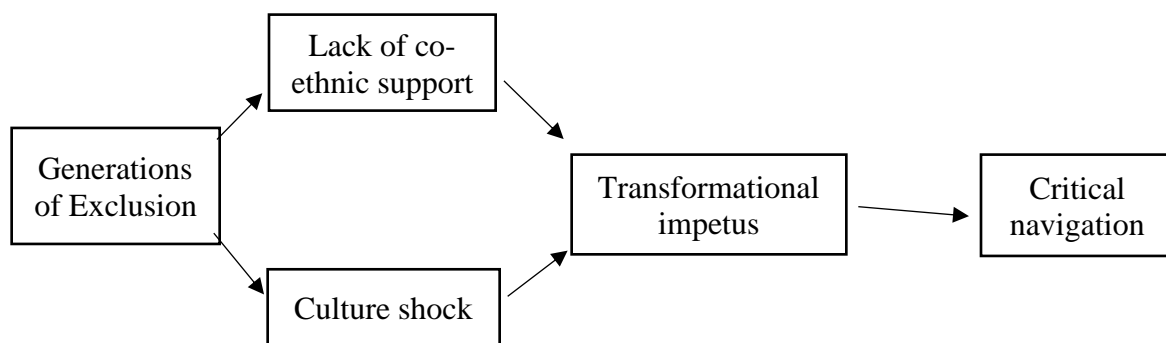


Figure 3. Revised Undergraduate Stages of Passage for Later-Generation Mexican-Americans
The revised stages of passage reflected in the model for later-generation Mexican-Americans reflects the themes most salient for respondents in this study.

Implications

There are a number of implications for higher education research and practice that stem from this exploratory study. Namely, practitioners should consider that interventions, supports,

and programs geared toward Latina/o/x students may inadvertently privilege a particular community. As we adopt culturally relevant interventions that draw on cultural resources of communities of color, we must critically and clearly define who those communities are and who gets to be a part of them. Heterogeneity among and within ethno-racial groups complicates the design of such student support services. This may be a rather obvious implication but one worthy of emphasis amidst the growing focus on Latina/o/x demographic shifts.

In terms of future research, higher education scholars might draw on interdisciplinary literature to complicate seminal frameworks that may no longer “fit” increasingly diverse ethno-racial populations. Intersectional perspectives that consider the simultaneity of multiple forms of oppression are particularly compelling to not only assess but redress inequitable power dynamics in education. Application of an intersectional lens, coupled with disciplinary evidence of the complexities of ethnic identity, immigrant generation, and racialization may serve to move the field past description of educational inequity toward meaningful solutions. The underutilized Undergraduate States of Passage Model advanced by Yosso (2006) is an example of a framework that breaks from traditional integrationist approaches to the study of college students, though it too suffers from potentially essentializing notions regarding the formation of counterspaces among students. As this study demonstrated, within-group heterogeneity and access to co-ethnic peers complicates the formation of counterspaces. Future research must engage more critically with Latina/o/x heterogeneity, racial conceptions and/or consciousness, and students’ experiences, beliefs, and subjective interpretations of social oppressions and identities. New and nuanced models that account for such subjectivities are urgently needed.

Finally, later-generation Mexican-Americans, though perhaps privileged by documented status and knowledge of U.S. institutions, are not immune to the deleterious consequences of their positioning within U.S. racial hierarchies. They should not be peripheral but central to conversations of racial justice and educational equity. Moreover, it is important to recognize that lack of ethnic cohesion and internalized racism within the Latina/o/x community poses a significant threat to racial unity, with implications for how this population moves forward politically and responds explicitly to racist nativism characteristic of the Trump era. Ultimately, intra ethnic group tensions and traumas are barriers to collective racial mobilization that delimit opportunities for political advocacy and unity within the Latina/o/x population. Recognizing Latina/o/x divisions as a byproduct of a legacy of racial exclusion and discrimination begat by

White supremacist, heteropatriarchal social structures is a step toward understanding their contemporary effects on students' collegiate experiences.

Conclusion

This study explored the college experiences of later-generation Mexican-Americans enrolled in four-year institutions in Southern California. I drew on the under-utilized Undergraduate Stages of Passage Model advanced by Yosso (2006) to examine specifically how race and generational status informed students' navigation of the college environment. Participants were made vulnerable by structural inequities and negative racializing experiences as well as instances in which they felt they were not "Mexican enough" to engage with co-ethnic peers. Despite feeling betwixt and between both Mexican peers and dominant White peers, participants managed to be academically successful by connecting to what I call a transformational impetus, a desire to advance social justice and transform society. As outsiders of their ethnic group, participants saw themselves as uniquely positioned to transition in and out of different group boundaries. Thus, although lack of ethnic cohesion was found to prevent the formation of counterpaces with peers, later-generation Mexican-Americans in this study leveraged their negative experiences into a desire to transform society, resulting in a critical navigation of the college environment.

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