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Exploring the Intersectional Higher Education Experiences of Latinx Students

Miguel A. Trujillo

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Abstract

The intersectional experiences of Latinx students in higher education have largely gone underexplored in the literature, particularly when it comes to Latino men. The current literature treats the experiences of the Latinx community as a monolith, when there are multiple potentially impactful intersectional aspects of identity that could influence our lived experiences, such as generational status, documentation status, country of origin, and gender. This three-manuscript dissertation addresses these gaps in the literature by both conducting research that is more descriptive of our respective within-group community and by focusing on the impact that gender may play in the experiences of Latinx students in higher education.

The first manuscript draws from both Latinx critical theory and community cultural wealth to propose a framework that allows for an intersectional, strengths-based exploration of the Latinx experience in research. While community cultural wealth is already theoretically rooted in Latinx critical theory, often it is not utilized as such in the existing literature. This paper urges those using community cultural wealth to return to the intersectional principles of critical theory for the betterment of our research and communities.

The second manuscript is a qualitative phenomenological study that builds upon this framework by using community cultural wealth to analyze secondary data collected by researchers at the University of Denver. The gendered experiences of first generation, documented, higher education students of Mexican origin in Colorado are explored. Findings provide evidence of navigational, resistant, and social cultural wealth, while suggesting possible gendered differences in family dynamics, on campus programming, and non-institutionalized social support.

The final manuscript is similar in methods to the second, as a phenomenological study utilizing community cultural wealth in the analysis of a gendered, first generation, documented, experience of higher education students of Mexican origin. This study uses primary data collected from former participants in an after-school program to determine what elements of the program contributed to their cultural wealth and how those experiences differed in higher education. Findings suggest long term mentoring relationships as impactful to the success of these students, while affirming possible gendered differences in family dynamics and on campus programming.

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Miguel A. Trujillo

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Introduction

Higher education has a disparate impact on individuals depending on identity (Edwards & Coates, 2011; Harvey, et al., 2017), but generally higher levels of education are correlated with a multitude of positive outcomes. Individuals with postsecondary education are shown to have greater earning potential, higher job satisfaction, better physical and mental health, and even increased educational outcomes of their progeny (Chetty, et al., 2014; Corak, 2013; Lleras-Muney, 2018). Large disparities exist amongst the population however when discussing postsecondary education, particularly amongst the Latinx[1] community. In 1997, Latinx adults had one of the lowest levels of educational attainment in the U.S. amongst those ages 25 years or older, trailing all other racial/ethnic groups in associates degrees, bachelor's degrees, and master's degrees by percentage of population (Espinosa, et al., 2019). While the overall level of educational attainment has improved in the U.S., in 2017 Latinx adults were once again trailing everyone in those same categories (Espinosa, et al., 2019).

With the Latinx population predicted to be a quarter of the population in the U.S. by 2050 (Casellas & Ibarra, 2012), these trends will result in a large segment of the

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[1] While there is debate over which term best represents the community of people from Mexican, Latin American, or Caribbean heritage living in the United States (Hispanics, Latinos, Latine, Latin@, etc.) I choose to utilize Latinx to describe the community in general for this dissertation, as it is intended to be inclusive of all genders (Garcia, et al., 2021)

population not realizing the benefits of higher education. Economically, this can be damaging for families and the country, as someone with a bachelor's degree earns $25,000 more annually and are two times less likely to be unemployed than someone with a high school degree (Nichols, 2017). This then can influence the health of our citizenry as income correlates with general health, as well as access to healthcare (Dubay & LeBrun, 2012). Lastly, our democracy relies on an educated citizenry for success (Schak, et al., 2019). In short, the long-term prosperity of the United States will, in large part, reflect the success of the Latinx community.

As the importance of an educated Latinx community has grown, this has been met with some achievements, such as 72% of recent Latinx high school graduates enrolling in college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). These gains however have mostly been seen amongst Latina women (Latinas), with Latino men (Latinos) falling behind their peers in the landscape of higher education (Saenz, et al., 2016). In the Latinx community, Latinas earn every 3 out of 5 degrees and enroll in college at a rate 25% higher than Latinos; amongst recent college graduates, this has resulted in 18% of Latinas having a bachelor's degree versus only 12% of Latinos (Saenz, et al., 2016). These disparate outcomes peaked in 2007 and have not changed since (Saenz, et. al., 2016). This gender gap is not unique to Latinos, as women of all races and ethnicities are now outpacing men; however, Latinos have one of the most pronounced educational gender gaps and trail all other young men of color in their rates of degree completion (Lee & Ransom, 2011).

In addition to the concerning gap in education outcomes for gender, other Latinx within-group differences often go unexplored. Native-born Latinx adults are more likely to attain a college degree than foreign-born Latinx adults; with 29.8 % native-born versus 17.2% foreign-born completing some form of college (Schak & Nichols, 2017). For Latino men specifically, the data reflects a similar trend, with a high school pushout rate (sometimes referred to as drop-out rates) of 12% for native-born students versus 37% for foreign-born (Lee & Ransom, 2011). With 58% of Latinx adults being foreign-born or born in a territory of the United States (e.g., Puerto Rico) this could have an outsized impact on Latinx education levels (Schak & Nichols, 2017).

Country of origin also plays a factor in Latinx education outcomes. While the majority of Latinx adults in the U.S. identify as Mexican American (60.8%), Mexican Americans also generally have the lowest college degree attainment, as well as the most pronounced gender gap amongst Latinx adults (Lee & Ransom, 2011; Schak & Nichols, 2017). These and other within-group differences are important, but unfortunately, there is currently a lack of data disaggregated by gender and ethnicity/country of origin, which prevents deeper analysis (Lee & Ransom, 2011; Saenz, et al., 2017). A more nuanced analysis of the Latinx population, highlighting the impact of gender, while illuminating the experiential impact of country of origin and generational status is needed to better understand the phenomenon behind these educational disparities and to develop effective policies and practices to address these needs.

Highlighting intersectional differences amongst Latinx students in higher education in the U.S., has been called for by multiple researchers in recent years

(Cammarota, 2004; Crisp, et al., 2015; Garcia, et al., 2021; Lee & Ransom, 2011; Perez, 2017; Saenz, et al., 2009) but the research literature has not developed a robust repository of information. Following the call from these scholars, three manuscripts are presented in this dissertation that address a more specific group than is typical in our current research paradigm.

My overarching research question for this dissertation is what are the intersectional experiences of Latinx students in higher education? Within this question, I aim to apply a more nuanced, social justice-oriented lens to this topic compared to what has historically populated the literature. The first manuscript provides a theoretical framework through which we can answer this research question using a strength based intersectional lens; sharing some examples from the literature as well as narratives from my own experience. Building off that initial framework, my second manuscript utilizes secondary data analysis, incorporating theory into the analysis itself, to share the strengths of a more specific group of Latinx higher education students than is typically explored in the literature. The third manuscript presented is similar in tone and scope to the second, as it uses the same strengths-based framework and analysis as the second manuscript. However, this manuscript uses primary data from Latinx students who graduated from a college prep style after school program and later attended at least one class in an institute of higher education. Each of these manuscripts intends to demonstrate possible ways to address the existing educational disparities while also highlighting the solutions and strengths that are already within the Latinx diaspora. With these papers having the potential to feel disparate, these all necessitate and rely on the applied use of

theory, specifically theories that are liberatory rather than historically oppressive. As in the words of Gloria Anzaldua, "If we have been gagged and disempowered by theories, we can also be loosened and empowered by theories" (1990, pg. xxvi).

Manuscript one: Recreating what we hope to dismantle: Returning Community

Cultural Wealth Research to its Theoretical Roots

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Abstract

The Latinx community in the United States is one of the fastest growing segments of the population yet are lagging behind other racial and ethnic categories in graduation rates from institutes of higher education. While there is a growing body of literature that has explored this issue, we have yet to understand who the Latinx population is, as we are not a monolith, which hampers any efforts to address this issue. This theoretical paper emphasizes the need to utilize more intersectional, strengths-based research to better study the Latinx community. The blueprint for this type of research already exists in Latinx critical theory, which emphasizes intersectional research, and community cultural wealth, which is strengths based and comes from the field of education. Unfortunately, these theories are not often used in partnership with one another in the literature. This paper urges researchers to return community cultural wealth to its Latinx critical theory roots to better illuminate the plethora of strengths that exist withing the various identities the Latinx community contains; in turn creating research and interventions that can harness the strengths already existing within the community that could bolster education.

Keywords: Latinx, Latinx critical theory, Community Cultural Wealth, Higher Education

Introduction

By the year 2050, racial and ethnic minorities are going to shed that 'minority' label and become the new majority (Poston & Saenz, 2019). This shift is in large part due to the growth of the Latinx population. While Latinx population growth has slowed recently, by the year 2050 Latinx individuals will be the largest minority population, and a quarter of the entire population (Casellas & Ibarra, 2012). An understanding of strengths and barriers faced by any historically marginalized population is important, but specifically one that numerically will have an outsized impact on the future of this country; finding ways to support our Latinx community could benefit us all. Unfortunately, we have not been supporting our Latinx families in ways that address ethnic disparities. Currently, Latinx families overall have considerably less wealth and are less likely to own a home than White families (Bhutta, et al., 2020). In part, these continued economic disparities deprived the US economy between $310 to $525 billion a year, with the gap only widening (Cruz, 2021).

In the realm of education, Latinx students have one of the lowest rates of high school graduation and are earning fewer bachelors and master's degrees than any other racial/ethnic population measured based on recent data (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). A higher level of education in our communities could work towards addressing a variety of disparities, as education is correlated with higher earning potential, increase self-efficacy, and better health outcomes (Corak, 2013; Chetty, et al., 2014; Education Trust, 2017). Collectively, scholars have recognized the importance of education, with numerous researchers demonstrating the benefits of education,

particularly for Latinx students (Zarate & Burciaga, 2010; Vasquez, et al., 2017; Schak & Nichols, 2017; Saenz, et al., 2016). Despite these efforts over many years, we still have not made the type of progress in supporting Latinx education that one would hope.

One of the difficulties that may exist is trying to create an intervention or develop a policy without knowing details about the target population. We have interventions geared towards Latinx students (Garcia, et al., 2021; Moreno & Sanchez Banuelos, 2013; Griffen, et al., 2016), but there really is no single Latinx population. We have been grouped together by an arbitrary geographic distinction by current or historical connections to places south of the U.S. There are over thirty countries that exist in the Latinx diaspora (US Census Bureau, 2022), each with their own practices, foods, and various language(s). Even the use of the terms we use to describe ourselves is debatable and numerous (Comas-Diaz, 2001), as I could simultaneously call myself Latinx, Latin@, Latino, Hispanic, Chicano, Mestizo, Mexican American; each term could be correct, each term could be rejected, with some only applying to a specific group of Latinx individuals. Despite the varying differences, it is rare to see these differences highlighted in scholarly research. This issue is one that is increasingly being recognized (Garcia, et al., 2021; Mendez & Cortina, 2021) but has seemingly yet to be adopted on a larger scale.

Beyond culture, research often essentializes our lived experiences to one identity. I am Chicano, but don't the other aspects of who I am play a role in my life? As individuals we have a multitude of identities that would be difficult to fully account for; however, we can expand our research beyond the singular. When conducting research by

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culture, gender could be included, documentation status, generational status, amongst others. It is the decision of the researcher what to leave out, it is also on us what we include. These salient factors of identity could be included in our analysis in every study. Understanding how our intersectional identities impact our population could lead to better outcomes, research, and targeted change. In part, specifically for Latinx individuals, this can be put into practice by researchers using Latinx Critical Theory (LatCrit). This valuable lens with which we can view our community has a variety of benefits, the merits of which will be discussed in this paper.

With greater adoption of the intersectional lens shared with LatCrit to illuminate our various identities, we could then use different stories and lived experiences to share our results in a way that uplifts and empowers others, rather than focus on deficits. There has been a growing movement of work (DeNicolo, et al., 2015; Martinez, et al., 2017; Perez, 2014; Romo, et al., 2019), originating in the field of education, which has pushed us towards considering the strengths that communities of color contain that may go unrecognized by a system not created with them in mind (Yosso, 2005). The theory of community cultural wealth (CCW) identifies six community strengths that students of color use to survive and thrive in the U.S. education system. Providing an opportunity to document and build upon our strengths can help support effective, sustainable, solutions to issues facing our communities of color.

A move towards a strengths-based perspective is critical, but we cannot continue to fall into the trap of a single story. The strengths of one community do not necessarily apply to another, despite shared characteristics. I, as a third generation Chicano, have a

different lived experience than a first generation Dominicano, despite us both being included under the Latinx diaspora. Only identifying the strengths of the Latinx community diaspora overall, has the danger of ignoring what each of us can bring to the table. If we are to find true, strengths-based solutions for our local communities, we need to be able to document and support what is already working. Despite the applied use of LatCrit and CCW by some scholars, within group differences are not yet clear in the literature, but we can create this change. This paper describes the origins of the two theories, provides examples for how they may be better utilized, and will encourage us to continue using them together to be more effective researchers and practitioners. I begin with a more in-depth description of LatCrit, one of the theories that paved the way for CCW.

Latinx Critical Theory

Arguably, LatCrit originated in 1972 when Rodolfo Acufia was the first scholar to write about American history while considering the colonization of Mexican land and how it impacted Mexicans living in those territories (Stefancic, 1997). Most scholars however credit the theory with being operationalized at a meeting of Latinx law professors during a 1997 colloquium on Latinas/os and Critical Race Theory (Valdes, 1997). Originating in the legal profession as a complement to CRT (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001), LatCrit has strong theoretical ties to CRT, sharing many of the same tenants, such as the centrality of race and racism, challenging the dominant ideology, a commitment to social justice and praxis, the centrality of experiential knowledge, and an interdisciplinary perspective (Villalpando, 2003). LatCrit also shares similar critiques as CRT, with scholars alleging

CRT essentializes the racial/ethnic identity of people of color (Kennedy, 1989; Villalpando, 2003) and others challenging the reliability of experiential knowledge, or counter stories used in the work of CRT and LatCrit scholars (Farber & Sherry, 1997; Posner, 1997; Villalpando, 2003). However, LatCrit was created explicitly to push back against essentialist views and research on the Latinx community, with the intention of describing positionalities as shifting and dynamic (Bernal, 2002).

LatCrit when applied to education can be defined as "…a framework that challenges the dominant discourse on race, gender, and class as it relates to education by examining how educational theory, policy, and practice subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups" (Bernal, 2002, p.109). While this definition can also apply to Critical Race Theory (CRT), a grand theory that LatCrit complements (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001), LatCrit has a specific focus on highlighting the multidimensional identities of Latinx individuals and communities, such as language, immigration, ethnicity, and culture (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Stefancic, 1997; Valdes, 1997). In considering these intersecting identities, LatCrit allows us to fully analyze practices and policies of racial inequity so that we can dismantle obstacles that exist for the success of Latinx students in education (Villalpando, 2004).

The LatCrit framework encourages the exploration of a gendered, documented, generational, ethnic experience, which has been largely absent from the research literature. Illuminating some of these key pieces of identity would not only assist in increased representation for Latinos in research, but also contribute to a real world understanding of

our education system. A personal reflection on the interplay of my intersectional identities as told through a LatCrit lens illustrates this possibility:

>*During my undergraduate education, I used to volunteer with a program for Latina teen moms at an alternative high school. I was only a few years older than the women we served but this was the first time I really came to understand my privilege. While I felt accepted by those in the program, the differences were stark. Being a third generation, middle class, Chicano, I never had to fear about deportation, navigate an educational system by myself, or worry about becoming pregnant. Despite sharing an ethnic background with many of these women in the program, my challenges were quite different. I never had to consider becoming pregnant, and even if I were to become a teen parent, expectations of raising the child would be lessened that what these women faced. I faced low expectations and policing from teachers, but my parents knew enough about the system to not let me be pushed out; these women were in a constant battle to stay in school, often being kicked out of their original school due to pregnancy, facing pressure from family to work and take care of their child, holding expectations to graduate high school despite no guarantee of work or enrollment in higher education due to citizenship status. This program for teen moms was not created to support my Chicano self and there were specific elements needed that could help these women succeed, that I did not need, and vice-versa.*

Based on this example, it would be a disservice to both me and the Latinas in this program to combine our experiences into one study. While we both exist within the Latinx

continuum, even sharing Mexican heritage, we had varying life experiences. Creating a research project or developing an intervention without considering the lived intersectional identities of the community of focus would mis-characterize our existence. Without that knowledge, we would not be able to effectively describe our population, understand the needs and strengths of our community, and it would be difficult to create an intervention to equitably serve everyone.

While LatCrit is invaluable to my work, researchers may stop once they have identified the deficits in the Latinx community. Too often I would find myself longing for more during my own research exploits. I could easily find what was 'going wrong' in my community but I had a harder time finding documented strengths. Our oppression, struggles, and deficits have a place; how we thrived through those challenges was missing. To better illuminate the strengths of our communities, another theoretical framework later emerged from LatCrit thought, community cultural wealth (CCW).

Community Cultural Wealth

Historically, multiple approaches have been used to explain the depressed outcomes for Latinos in higher education. Lopez-Figueroa (2016) advocates for using the geography of academic support, which "considers how and why students physically situate themselves in particular places within our respective campuses" (pg. 44). Rashwan-Soto and Cabrera (2011) describe this phenomenon as a privilege paradox, highlighting the tension between theory and empiricism, with Latinos simultaneously privileged in society due to their gender identity, marginalized due to racial/ethnic identity much like other groups, and yet still underrepresented in obtaining a prized social commodity such as a

bachelor's degree. These ideas certainly have applicability, however, also continue to perpetuate a deficit emphasis in highlighting what Latinos are missing or doing wrong. A more novel approach is to focus on the strengths Latino students contain: How have so many been able to succeed in a system that does not seem to support or acknowledge these students? CCW provides the theoretical framework necessary to describe the strengths Latino students utilize in navigating systemic educational barriers.

CCW was posited by Yosso in 2005, as a critique of Bourdieu's (1977) theory of cultural capital (Perez, 2014). Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, originally referred to as 'linguistic capital,' postulated that a person's class, and to lesser degree sex, had a strong relationship to their success in higher education. This was not due to the failings of the individual but rather due to a system of education that valued the norms and practices (culture) of the upper classes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Bourdieu did not believe that there were inherent advantages or disadvantages to any one culture (Robbins, 2005); however, by higher education teaching language and cultural practices mostly known to those in the upper classes, it provided an advantage to students already familiar with that culture. Students not fluent in upper-class culture faced a steep learning curve during their schooling with, according to Bourdieu, only very exceptional students from working-class families able to successfully grasp the culture required to succeed in higher education (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). This in turn would perpetuate the ruling upper-class culture as the norm in a society, with those in positions of power typically having been born into an upper-class culture or learning it as the 'right' one through their schooling.

While not the intent of Bourdieu, who largely focused on class rather than race/ethnicity, his theory of cultural capital has been used to explain the differing levels of success across cultural groups, with proponents urging the adoption of upper/middle-class white values and devaluing the knowledge of other groups (DeNicolo, et al., 2015). This type of deficit thinking in education damages students of color. The recent pushback from the political right on calls for more inclusive, integrated school curricula is an example of the systemic hold this idea has on our education system. Rather than encourage teachers to begin to incorporate a non-white, Eurocentric concept of history, the federal 1776 commission suggests this to be a challenge to America's principles, with the former U.S. Secretary of State even denouncing multiculturalism as "not who America is" (Evelyn, 2021).

CCW is a response to both Bourdieu and those who use cultural capital to suggest the continued adoption of upper and middle-class white values in education. Bourdieu did not elaborate on the strengths students from other classes or identities had, rather placing a focus on what they were lacking. With an emphasis on Latinx families, Yosso urges the education system to no longer do the same, with a call to look at Latinx students using a strengths perspective. In doing so, Yosso draws from a LatCrit framework in refuting dominant ideology and white privilege, insisting on centering the experiences of people of color (Yosso, 2005). Despite being a relatively new theory, and explicit focus on Latinx students in higher education, scholars have already applied CCW to a variety of educational settings and populations; from Latinx students in Elementary and Primary schools (DeNicolo, et al., 2015; Liou, et al., 2016) to African American youth and college access

(Holland, 2017), and in a chapter describing deaf adolescent resilience (Listman, et al., 2011). CCW asks: while our system of education does not acknowledge historically marginalized cultures, what strengths do students with this background bring? How do so many survive a system not intended to honor them or their families?

In answering some of these questions for Latinx families, CCW lays out six forms of cultural capital that help Latinx students survive the U.S. education system. These are strengths our Latinx families have that are often not acknowledged or given the attention needed in public education, higher education, or the research literature in general (Yosso, 2005; Saenz, et al., 2016). These forms of capital can, and often do, intersect, making it difficult at times to delineate exactly where one form of capital begins and another ends (Yosso, 2005). In attempting to clearly outline the six forms of cultural capital, I summarize these concepts with an example of how these have appeared in my own life.

Aspirational Capital

The first form of cultural capital identified by Yosso (2005), is one of hope. It is a "…strength of spirit combined with a critical awareness regarding how society functions" (DeNicolo, et al., 2015). This is often transmitted to Latinx children by family, through teaching students to maintain their personal, professional, or academic goals in the face of real or perceived barriers (Perez, 2014). Students have described developing aspirational capital by being both inspired by the success of others in college, as well as by the hardships that others have endured (Perez & Taylor, 2016; Romo, et al., 2019). It is perhaps best summed up with the popular Latinx rallying cry, Si se puede! (Yes, we can!).

Familial Capital

This type of capital is reflected in Latinx children's sense of responsibility, solidarity, and loyalty to immediate and extended family members (living or passed on) as well as good friends (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995). It also is cultural knowledge passed down by the family that carries a sense of community history, memory, and cultural values (Perez, 2014). Familial capital helps to develop educacion, a traditional Latinx value, which refers to emotional, moral, educational, and occupational consciousness (Yosso, 2005). This form of capital can also be fostered between families, by connecting around common issues (Yosso, 2005). With this inherent support network, which is simultaneously both broad and intimate, the Latinx community and Latinx students can rely on family, even when they cannot rely on other social systems.

Social Capital

This is comprised of the individuals in one's social network and the resources embedded within those relationships (Romo, et al., 2019). A keen sense of community is often embedded within Latinos, and we rely on the community to provide resources or information necessary for us to be successful in school (Perez, 2014). Emotionally, these connections are vital to reassuring students that we are not alone in pursuing higher education (Yosso, 2005). Social capital is also understood to be a mutually beneficial relationship, as historically, we "lift as we climb" (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). Potentially sharing many of the same social networks as familial capital, this form also includes other friends, teachers, acquaintances, co-workers, or anyone else that is an ally, and beneficiary, to a Latino student's success.

Linguistic Capital

The skills and knowledge gained by being fluent in multiple languages or communication styles are evidenced through recounting oral histories, Cuentos [stories], and Dichos [proverbs] (Perez, 2014). Latinx students recognize how language is used for communicating in different contexts and can utilize these skills depending on the purpose, and experience needed (DeNicolo, et al., 2015). Linguistic capital also refers to the ability to communicate through visual art, music, or poetry, which is cultivated through the traditional Latinx storytelling tradition (Yosso, 2005). This is often explored in the literature as bilingualism, using Spanish and English (Fuller & Hosemann, 2015).

Resistant Capital

This is demonstrated through the adoption of oppositional behaviors that challenge inequality (Perez, 2014). This can manifest in multiple ways, such as potentially working to change a system, through institutional leadership, changing things in the local community, or actively resisting at an individual level (Perez, 2014). Maintaining and passing on cultural wealth is also a key part of resistant capital, which is grounded in resistance to subordination by communities of color (Yosso, 2005). This resistant capital can sometimes manifest as seemingly self-defeating behavior, such as skipping classes, however, acts such as this can be interpreted as opposition to a suppressive educational structure, with a recognition that transformation needs to occur (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001; Yosso, 2005).

Navigational Capital

The last form of cultural capital in CCW refers to the skills and ability of the Latinx community to navigate through institutions not created with communities of color in mind

(Yosso, 2005). This has been described as both navigational capital for oneself and family, as well as resilience developed within familial knowledge (DeNicolo, et al., 2015). While this can be applied to multiple systems (e.g., legal, medical, etc.) for this paper the focus will be on education. Navigational capital can be developed through institutional programs, but there is evidence that it is the people in the lives of Latinos, and not the programs themselves, that make the greatest impact on navigational capital (Vasquez Urias, et al, 2017).

By focusing on the many forms of capital that Latino students bring to the education system, CCW posits that a vastly different experience could emerge for Latinos. Institutes of Higher Education would work harder to include family in the collegiate experience (familial) and spend more resources to help encourage a sense of community for Latinos on campus (social). Spaces would be created where mentorship is fostered, with senior or former students sharing their experiences with new students (navigational). Greater outreach would also occur earlier in life, with institutions reaching out to Latinos to nurture their educational goals and resources provided to help make those goals a reality (aspirational). Institutions would embrace multiple languages on their campus, and professors would learn how to teach in a more engaging, culturally responsive way (linguistic). All these efforts would require constant institutional change, as culture and shifting student demographics are not a static process. Institutions need to be open to hearing the needs of the Latino community and recognize that avoidance or anger may be rebellion against the system (resistance). There are a few programs and institutions that embody some of these elements, but they are often not given the resources or attention

needed to sustain change (Griffin, et al., 2016; McGee, 2016) or may be approaching the Latino community through a deficit lens, rather than celebrating their strengths (Perez, 2017; Yosso, 2005).

While this relatively new theory has been quickly embraced by many scholars, like any theory, it is not perfect. It was difficult to find published critiques of this theory due to its novel nature; this in and of itself is a limitation. As it is situated in LatCrit, it also relies on qualitative studies to provide evidence. This allows for the centering of students of color but shares the same critiques with LatCrit from researchers concerned with reliability (Farber & Sherry, 1997; Posner, 1997; Villalpando, 2003). There have also been arguments that there needed to be more explanation around how these different capitals are mobilized and not just why they are important (Clegg, 2011). Researchers have endeavored to provide that explanation (Liou, et. al., 2011; Perez, 2014; Perez, 2017; Romo, et al., 2019; Saenz, et al., 2017; Saenz, et al., 2018), but studies explicitly using CCW are still relatively limited. Using CCW alone as a framework would provide a strong picture of our cultural strengths, as shown through my reimagined example:

> *During my undergraduate education, I used to volunteer with a program for Latina teen moms at an alternative high school. My aspirational capital passed down by my family, taught me to believe that I could make a difference. I strove to do so for my community, engaging these women in resistance against an unjust education system. Together we strategized on how best to navigate their education, developing a strong social network of Latina students through shared experiences, language, and an emphasis on family for these new moms. In a shared struggle, we*

encourage and uplifted one another, developing strong relationships that continue

to this day. As a program, we worked to instill in their school an idea that Latinx

folx are an inspiration, with so much to offer. Our support for one another helped

to move this process forward, with many of the women expressing that their hopes

for the future have never been higher.

CCW provides a theory for focusing on Latinx assets, using a strengths-based approach. Where it fails, is in explaining why Latinos are falling behind Latinas in so many different educational outcomes and presenting a nuanced understanding of the Latinx experience. CCW seems to contend that these forms of capital are potentially available to all Latinx students, with the larger educational institution's ignorance impeding Latinx educational success (Yosso, 2005). There is no mention in the original CCW theory of disparities seen within our BIPOC communities and how these institutions may treat gender, generational status, or country of origin differently.

It is through a return to the LatCrit framework that this more intersectional lens should be explored, which would bolster both CCW and the research literature. A deeper understanding of how intersectional identities impact the strengths students bring to our education system would reflect the lived reality of our Latinx diaspora. This would better inform the creation of interventions, curriculum development, policy creation, and overall strengthen our ability to create systems that work for everyone, not just a select few. If we are to continue to abide by these theories that inherently push for social justice, we need to collectively heed their call to create change. Continuing to hold CCW to the principles of LatCrit would enable a deeper experience and explanation of the world surrounding us. To

illustrate this, once more I offer a reimagined example from my own life demonstrating the utilization of both theories and how together they might change the narrative:

> *Growing up as a third generation, cisgender male, Mexican American, I was witness to the importance my family placed on community and supporting others. The educational aspirations passed down by my ancestors were realized by my parents and continued through me. Using my education, I sought to do what I could to help others navigate the educational systems by volunteering with a program for Latina teen moms at an alternative high school. Most of the women I met in the program shared my Mexican origins, however I was not someone they immediately identified as being part of their community. Besides the gender differences, many of the young women were first generation with a more acute knowledge of their Mexican culture, with the fluent bilingual skills to match, which I did not have. What did make things easier to connect though, was the shared aspirations we had for ourselves and our community; each of us wanting to expand on our education to give back to our families that have given so much. Together we traded experiences with schooling, with me sharing my navigational knowledge and the women sharing their social and linguistic skills with me. By acknowledging our differences and utilizing the strengths we all brought to the program, we were able to create a community at the school that nurtured us all.*

Literature Review

When searching for articles that had a focus on using both LatCrit and CCW in an education literature database (ERIC), eleven articles were located. These articles were

almost all published within the last decade, with the exception of Perez Huber (2009) and

Valdez, et al. (2010). While CCW is a relatively new theory, it was still surprising that

there were not more articles that mentioned using both theories, considering the vital ties

between the two. Most of the articles used LatCrit mainly to explain the origins as CCW

and the importance of focusing on the Latinx population. Almost all the articles were also

qualitative in origin, which match with the counter-story tenets of CRT and LatCrit; this

was a very common theme throughout, with the use of testimonio often differentiating

methods of CRT from LatCrit.

Interestingly, intersectionality or needing to look at the Latinx population in more

diverse ways than just race was typically mentioned in all the articles. This tenet is so

engrained in the LatCrit research that it would be impossible to ignore when mentioning

LatCrit; yet, when the papers moved beyond the theoretical, the emphasis of an

intersectional lens did not always shift to the analysis section. For example, in Araujo

(2011), Peralta (2013), Martinez, et al. (2020), and Rodela, et al. (2020) each

acknowledged the importance of this work, while incorporating one additional part of

identity when describing their population (migrant farm workers, rural communities,

generational status, and income respectively). This is certainly a strong step and valuable

information towards understanding the experience of the Latinx population but leaves

much unanswered. What is the country of origin of these Latinx folx? Does generational

status or rural living look different for those from different countries? How does income

play a role?

These are puzzling questions to answer when designing a research project, which is made no less complicated by the varying language that we use to describe ourselves. Peralta (2013) and Valdez, et al. (2010) are prime examples of how language can sometimes obfuscate the results. Both do well in using the same language participants used, however when different terms are used, some of which do not indicate country of origin, it becomes difficult to draw conclusions. Participants identified as Latina/o, Mexicana/o, Chicana/o, which while emphasizing Mexico as the country of origin, Latina/o could incorporate a wide variety of cultures and backgrounds. Valdez even acknowledges that these terms are used interchangeable throughout the article, even though they are potentially describing vastly different peoples. Even when using only one consistent term however, Mexicana/o for example, I must acknowledge that even within Mexico, there is an abundance of different languages and culture, which could be yet another point of analysis to consider.

There were a few articles that did this well, which is not an easy task. It is a nuanced conversation, made only more difficult when trying to describe in the auspices of research, which historically pushes for binaries (Gaither, 2017; Kang & Bodenhausen, 2015; Sawyer, et al., 2013). Cueller, et. al. (2017) articulated a model to assess student outcomes at Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) that acknowledges the importance of differing social identities for Latinx students in both the HSI context and the need for this in research. Drawing from both LatCrit and CCW, they also continue the discussion on further expanding upon the strengths in the community beyond the six previously identified. Perez (2016) explores the experiences of three women through the use of

testimonio, utilizing LatCrit and CCW to explore the intersections of sexual identity, Mexican origins, and language. The testimonios provided by these women are utilized to demonstrate how these identities help make sense of the world. Lastly, Espino (2016) shares the experience of low-income, first generation Mexican American PhD students and how the messages received from their families impacts their educational journey. Espino uses these experiences to expand upon CCW and illuminate the concept of educacion; for Mexican families this is the idea that one's education is not only found in books, but the importance of how you treat others and conduct yourself through life.

I applaud these authors that have taken up the challenge to explore the intersectional strengths the Latinx community contains. Unfortunately, these articles are the exception rather than the norm when combining these two theories. Moving our research to highlight strengths has begun to articulate valuable models, expand upon existing theory, and how our identities can shape our world; continuing to hold to the roots of CCW and LatCrit will ensure our work better reflects the lived reality of those around us.

Discussion

LatCrit has provided an important theoretical framework for how I, and others, can view the world. Through LatCrit we can explore ourselves and our multitude of identities in research, better grounding ourselves in the lived reality of our community, and work towards creating change. The influence of LatCrit is felt through the development of CCW, which moves to highlight the strengths of historically marginalized communities that may go unrecognized by white serving social systems, in

this case our education system. The combination of these two theories helped me share my own story and put words to the plethora of wealth I hold for myself and my community. While CCW acknowledges its origins in LatCrit, researchers should continue to hold this theory to its roots, working to identify how the various strengths may show up in this world depending on identity. Continuing to utilize these theories together will work towards creating more research that answers the calls for more intersectional work (Garcia, et al., 2021; Mendez & Cortina, 2021).

This is much easier to accomplish in theory rather than in practice. In my own work I have struggled with how to fully capture the complex identities that I hold as an individual, much less the complexity of others or a community. In one design, or in one paper, it is impossible to capture the human existence. The beauty of this work however is that we are not alone in striving towards this goal. I do not need to accomplish this by myself, nor could I. As long as my fellow researchers, writers, scholars, and community members continue to work with me in highlighting the experiences of others we can continue to create a rich mosaic that better reflects the world around us. There are those such as Cueller, et al. (2017), Perez (2016), & Espino (2016), who are already accomplishing this, but we need so much more.

For an individual researcher like myself, I need to continue to be conscious of what identities I highlight and those I must leave out. In my dissertation for instance, I chose to focus on documentation status, generational status, country of origin, and gender. While these are salient identities to my own life, these do not alone define me or the participants in my study. Time, capacity, funding, sample; these are all potential

barriers in expanding the research to particular identities. I would have loved to have highlighted more, interviewed more individuals, and write a multi-volume book of what was shared. Alas, at some point I needed to graduate, as the luxurious life of an underpaid, overworked PhD student is not sustainable. Even if I can continue with my research indefinitely, I can never represent the full Latinx experience.

I will always have to grapple with leaving out a salient strength or identity that I may not be aware of. Those that I am conscious of though, I will do my best to acknowledge the limitations of the research; in this instance I only was able to focus on cisgender males and females, ignoring the potential strengths of a whole segment of our society. If I am unable to accomplish quality research that can work to illuminate those stories as well, I must encourage others to take up the charge. Not only through words, but harkening back to LatCrit, encouraging others through action (Villalpando, 2004). Whether that be advocacy, mentorship, funding decisions, or even citations, I should uplift the work others have done that I could not. While I am not the first researcher to call for more nuanced, intersectional, explorations of the human condition through research (Gaither, 2017; Kang & Bodenhausen, 2015; Salinas & Lozano, 2019), this paper offers a path to do so for the Latinx diaspora while also highlighting the many strengths that we bring with us.

A return to the roots of the intersectional lens LatCrit embodies can only serve to strengthen the work of CCW researchers. The two must not be forgotten as separate but continued to be used to build upon each other. There is no one theory to rule them all, rather a tapestry of theories woven together with thought, testing, shared experiences, and

time. We need to continue to remember the interconnection of theory and human identity to continue to improve upon our research in the future. Our communities deserve to see their various identities and accompanying strengths highlighted through research; while not possible alone, collectively we can illustrate our strengths to continue moving forward towards a better society.

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Manuscript 2: Gendered Experiences of First Generation, Documented, College Students of Mexican Origin

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Abstract

Recent trends in higher education demographics have largely shifted towards greater overall female representation. This trend is even more pronounced in the Latinx community, where men are falling further behind their peers in the landscape of higher education. While there are a growing number of studies that explore the higher education experience of the Latinx population there is still a paucity of research on the impact of gender on education in the Latinx community. Utilizing secondary data, this phenomenological study explores the gendered experiences of first generation, documented, higher education students of Mexican origin in Colorado. In analyzing the data using the theory of community cultural wealth, aspects of navigational, resistant, and social cultural wealth are highlighted. Findings suggest that while both Latinas and Latinos bring with them a multitude of strengths, family dynamics and informal supports may favor the educational journey of Latinas while Latinos find more support in on campus programming and in developing their social networks. Future studies should further explore the various experiences of the Latinx diaspora in higher education to understand how best to support this fast-growing segment of the population.

Keywords: Latinx, Higher Education, Gender, Community Cultural Wealth

Introduction

Recent trends in higher education demographics have largely shifted towards greater overall female representation (Klevan, et al., 2015). This trend is even more pronounced in the Latinx community, where men are falling further behind their peers in the landscape of higher education and according to Saenz, et al. (2016), are at risk of disappearing. Only 15% of Latinx individuals over twenty-five have a bachelor's degree, compared with 26.2% of White individuals and 22.5% of Black individuals (Llamas, et al., 2018). These disparities only get worse when broken down by gender. Latinas enroll in college at a rate 25% higher than Latinos, every three out of five degrees earned is by Latinas, and, amongst recent college graduates ages 25-29, only 12% of Latinos have a bachelor's degree compared to 18% of Latinas (Saenz, et al., 2016). These gender disparities peaked in 2007 and have not changed since (Saenz, et. al., 2016).

While there are a growing number of studies that explore the higher education experience of the Latinx population (Carey, 2019; Cueller, 2021; Rodriguez, et al., 2021), there is still a paucity of research on the impact of gender on education in the Latinx community (Garcia-Louis, et al., 2020; Saenz, et al., 2018). Many of these studies that do take gender into account, might not illuminate the various intersectional identities that their participants hold (Garcia, et al., 2021). The Latinx community is not a monolith, and while exploring the impact of gender alone is desired, we need more studies that can better reflect the lived experiences of our communities. Generational status, country of origin, and documentation status are all factors that impact education outcomes amongst Latinx students (Giraldo-Garcia, et al., 2018; Murphy & Murphy, 2018; Thangasmy

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&Horan, 2016); why do we not have more literature that considers these various identities?

This paper adds to the literature not only by exploring the gendered Latinx experience, but also contributing more nuance to the existing conversation. This is not a paper about the general Latinx diaspora; this is a paper about the gendered experience of first generation, documented, higher education students of Mexican origin. While this of course does not encompass all the identities that the participants in this paper hold, it does answer the calls for more specificity in our Latinx samples that other scholars have made before me (Garcia, et al., 2021; Mendez & Cortina, 2021). This is a starting point, not the end of this work, and I hope others will continue to join in this call to better specify the lived experience of our loved ones and neighbors. The following literature review largely relies on more generalized information of the Latinx community by necessity; in time we can create more specific information to better serve our population.

Literature Review

The current literature on higher education experiences of Latinx college students predominately focuses on Latinas (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009), resulting in the absence of literature on Latinos. This contributes to a lack of understanding and research for why Latinos are falling behind their female peers. These educational disparities begin early on between Latinas and Latinos (Saenz, et. al., 2016), however, for this paper, disparities will be examined beginning in high school.

Latinx individuals are subject to harsher disciplinary practices in high school, with Latinx students more likely to receive office referrals for discipline and referred to

law enforcement than white students (Welch & Payne, 2018). Harsher school discipline leads to less class time, which translates into decreased test scores, decreased attendance, and decreased perceptions of school safety (Hinze-Pifer & Sartain, 2018; Ritter, 2018). Negative stereotypes, such as associating Latinos with criminal activity, can also contribute to the lower expectations of Latino students (Schmader, et al., 2008; Llamas, et. al, 2018). Low expectations from counselors and teachers can lead them to put more time and resources into students they believe will succeed in college, resulting in fewer Latinos taking honors or AP classes, both strong predictors for college success (Taggart & Crisp, 2011). Combined with the increased likelihood that Latinx students attend underfunded high schools that have fewer resources to offer, due to unequal school funding (Perez, 2017), these disparities continue to be magnified.

Despite these barriers in high school, the high school pushout rate for Latinx students continues to improve, falling from 35% in 1991 to only 8.6% in 2016 (National Center for Statistics, 2018). Along with this increased number of graduates, Latinx students are enrolling in college more than ever before, with 72% of recent high school graduates enrolling in college (National Center for Statistics, 2018). While celebrating the gains made, the issue of college success looms large. Latinx students have the highest college pushout rate relative to their peers, are less likely to enroll in 4-year colleges and are less likely to enroll full time (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009; Llamas, et. al., 2018).

There is limited literature dedicated to the study of educational gender disparities in the Latinx community. The few studies that have been published point to factors such as ascription of criminality to Latinos, with these negative stereotypes contributing to

their increased incarceration rates (Fernandez, 2002; Fuller & Hosemann, 2011). Cultural factors such as machismo may play a part as well. Within the machismo value, men are traditionally encouraged to support the family financially as soon as they can, sometimes at the expense of their education (Arbona & Jimenez, 2014; Lichtenberger & Dietrich, 2017). Lastly, negative experiences on campus have been shown to impact the learning of Latinos, including microaggressions in the classroom, racist campus policies, and campus and curricula that are not reflective of their own culture (Cammarota, 2004; Arbona & Jimenez, 2014; Llamas, et al., 2018; Kendi, 2019).

Saenz & Ponjuan (2009) claim the Latino male is vanishing from higher education, graduating at lower rates than Latinas with little research as to why. With the Latinx population rising and predicted to be the largest minority group in the United States by 2050 (Casellas & Ibarra, 2012), policies and practices need to be in place to ensure equitable access to higher education outcomes for this group. Increased education rates are linked to positive physical and mental health, increased earning potential and job satisfaction, while also serving as a predictive factor for the education rates of children (Corak, 2013, Chetty, et al., 2014, Lleras-Muney, 2018). Without higher graduation rates for these men, the United States will be left with a large segment of the population that will face mounting barriers in developing their potential contributions to their families and society. Thankfully, there are already many strengths that exist with the Latinx community, we need only to use a strengths-based lens to highlight those; for this I choose to utilize the theory of community cultural wealth.

Community Cultural Wealth

There are Latinos that persevere through the educational system. According to Yosso (2005), this is due to the incredible strengths that the Latinx community possess, which are often overlooked by society. It is through the strengths of this community that our people have continued to survive, and it is through these strengths that the Latinx community will thrive. Through her theory of community cultural wealth (CCW), Yosso explores how these strengths can be used to empower Latinx students and encourages a rejection of a deficit model when describing the experiences of youth of color.

Developed in 2005 by Yosso, CCW stemmed in part as a critique to the theory of cultural capital that Bourdieu (1977) posited (Perez, 2014). The original cultural capital theory suggests valuable social capital is based in upper- and middle-class knowledge, leaving those in the lower socioeconomic classes at a disadvantage. Considering these lived experiences, students may need to find a way to acquire this class-based knowledge to be successful in U.S. society (Yosso, 2005). Cultural capital has been utilized when describing differing levels of success across cultural groups, with proponents normalizing upper/middle-class white values and devaluing the knowledge of other groups (DeNicolo, et al., 2015). In attempts to push back against this devaluation of differing cultural knowledge, in CCW Yosso identifies six forms of capital that Latinx students possess which are not yet widely recognized or valued in a U.S. school context. The six forms of capital that Yosso identified are Aspirational, Familial, Social, Linguistic, Resistant, and Navigational (Yosso, 2005).

Aspirational capital is transmitted to Latino children by parents, through teaching them to maintain their personal, professional, or academic goals in the face of real or

perceived barriers. Familial capital refers to the cultural knowledge passed down by the family that carries a sense of community history, memory, and cultural values. This is reflected in the strong family ties amongst Latinos, not only in their commitment to the immediate family but the extended family as well. Social capital is the networks of people that work to help provide resources or information to Latinos that they need to be successful in school. Linguistic capital is the skills and knowledge gained being fluent in multiple languages or communication styles, particularly evidenced through recounting of oral histories, cuentos [stories] and dichos [proverbs]. Resistant capital is transmitted through adopting oppositional behaviors that challenge inequality, which could include organizing protests or assisting classmates with homework. Finally, Navigational capital is gained by individuals as they succeed in social institutions that do not acknowledge or attend to the needs of marginalized communities (Yasso, 2005; Perez, 2014). It is important to note that while these can each be standalone forms of capital, they do often intersect, as will be evidenced by some of the findings in this paper.

Although this is a relatively novel theory, there is a burgeoning field of research in education that has embraced it (Cueller, 2021; Rodela & Rodriguez-Mojica, 2020; Valdez & Lugg, 2010) and this paper hopes to add to this valuable literature. It is one of the few theories that attempt to explain why Latinx individuals struggle in school, theorizing that their strengths are not recognized by the dominant culture (Yasso, 2005). It also aligns with the strengths-based approach that is valued by the social work profession (National Association of Social Workers, 2023). However, what CCW cannot explain is the gender differences amongst the Latinx population. Why are Latinas so far

ahead of Latinos in educational outcomes when they should have the same cultural capital? This paper attempts to explore the gendered experiences of first generation, documented, students of Mexican origin.

Research Design

Sampling Methods

This study utilized qualitative secondary data derived from a project that spanned from 2012 to 2017 (Martinez & Ortega, 2018). This interdisciplinary study piloted by Dr. Martinez, Dr. Ortega, and Dr. Salazar from the University of Denver, examined the relationship between parents, peers, and schools to understand the effect these factors may have on Latinx students' academic/career aspirations. Using a snowball sampling method, this phenomenological, qualitative project included over seventy-five interviews in total with Latinx students, most of whom were enrolled or had graduated from institutes of higher education in Colorado (Salazar, et al., 2016). Participants had an average age of twenty-three, with approximately two thirds identifying as female versus male, and most were attending high school or college at the time of the interview (Martinez & Ortega, 2018).

From the original data, only first-generation students of Mexican origin who identify as documented were selected for analysis. This resulted in a sample of fifteen interviews to analyze, of whom eight identified as male and seven identified as female. For gender, all participants selected either male or female, with none ascribing to a non-binary or other gender identity; thus, the analysis was limited to a gender binary.

Coding Methods

Participant interviews were an hour or more and utilized a semi-structured interview format with respondents answering such questions as "Have you considered leaving college?" and "Do you feel high school prepared you for college?" The first round of coding utilized what Crabtree and Miller (1999) call a template approach. I developed a definition of the six forms of CCW (familial, linguistic, navigational, resistant, social, and aspirational) as proposed by Yosso (2005) which was utilized as the coding template for all interviews [Table 2.1]. I then coded for instances where one or more of the six forms of CCW appeared to influence the students thinking, perception, or experience of higher education. Analytic memos were used throughout this first round and regular reflective discourse with one of the PIs from the original study, Dr. Martinez, was used to improve reliability.

Table 2.1 First Round Coding Definitions

Code	Definition	Example
Aspirational	Maintaining personal, professional, or academic goals in the face of real or perceived barriers (Perez, 2014). Includes instances where students describe being inspired by others to develop or maintain their educational dreams.	"…sometimes they would call me loser, I'd be like 'I got to study, I have to go to college.'…I never ditched with them even though I wanted to because I wanted to belong but I knew this was more important."-Daniel
Familial	Expressing cultural knowledge passed down by the family that carries a sense of community history, memory, and cultural values (Perez, 2014). Includes instances of financial support, verbal encouragement by family members, or describing education as for their family.	"But the one thing I do know about my mom is that she always stressed the importance of education, even at my age, you know, your education comes first, your homework comes first before anything else."-Anna
Linguistic	Describing skills, connections, and knowledge gained by being fluent in multiple languages or communication styles (Perez, 2014). Includes instances of communicating through visual art, music, or poetry.	"I am friends with a variety of people, but I don't seem to connect with as many people as other people do. I feel more comfortable with my roommate because she, that language thing is home. She's Columbian."-Isabella
Navigational	Skills and abilities to navigate through educational institutions for the students themselves or for their families (DeNicolo, et al. 2015). Includes instances where students describe joining a program to assist in their education, or mention	"And the freshman seminar you'd be introduced to ok you're in high school now, use as a planner, here's Cornell style notes, let's take an aptitude test to see what kind of career you might want to go into."-Pancho

	individuals specifically tasked with assisting students.	
Social	Describing the social network and the resources embedded within those relationship (Romo, et al., 2019). Includes friends, teachers, acquaintances, co-workers, or anyone else that is mentioned as supporting a student's success; contributes tangible or emotional resources.	"He really liked it, so I was like ok let's be roommates. So I already had that connection with someone and was like ok. And that was helpful, came in and knew someone and then through VIP they do a summer picnic before for the ones who are accepted. So I go there and I meet Saul, so he was one of the brothers. He showed me all the other brothers…"-Ace
Resistant	Instances where students discussed changing an educational system, taking leadership roles, changing things in the local community, or actively resisting at an individual level (Perez, 2014). Includes responses to racism, discrimination, and creating change on behalf of others.	"Because I felt like I had to work harder than my classmates, almost catching up in a sense. Because I can remember my freshman year I had a hard time transitioning and then I knew I had to work harder than everybody else just to keep pace."- Eduardo

During the second round of coding, I then analyzed the coded excerpts from the first round and applied a thematic analysis (Saldana, 2016), identifying more specific themes that appeared in the data. Each of the six codes using CCW had between three and seven sub themes, such as "Financial Promise" or "Family Encouragement." Themes were then discussed once more with Dr. Martinez, along with analytic memos, to improve reliability. General findings from three of the six CCW codes are reported in the findings section.

Lastly, during a third round of coding I conducted a gendered analysis of the findings. This began by examining each emerging theme for gendered differences in three separate ways. First, the total amount of times quotations coded by gender were considered. For example, for the code "On Campus Connections" 18 quotations were attributed to male participants versus five quotations attributed to females. Second, the overall percentage of coded quotes by gender was examined. Continuing to use "On Campus Connections" as an example, out of 251 coded quotations overall for the males eighteen were attributed to "On Campus Connections or 7.17%, which was then compared to the female percentage. Lastly, the total number of participants who mentioned a code by gender was explored. For "On Campus Connections" seven out of the eight male identified participants had this code come up in their interview compared to four out of seven females. After conducting this gendered examination of each theme, the top six codes with the greatest differences were chosen for further thematic analysis, exploring those six themes by gender [Table 2.2].

Table 2.2 Codes by Gender

Code	Number of Female Identified Quotes with gendered percentage	Number of Male Identified Quotes with gendered percentage	Ratio of female participants with code	Ratio of male participants with code
Navigational-College Preparation Programming	7 (24.14%)	22 (75.86%)	3/7	8/8
Navigational-High School Individual Staff	13 (65%)	7 (35%)	6/7	5/8
Navigational- On Campus Programming	1 (12.5%)	7 (87.5%)	1/7	4/8
Navigational-Financial Situations	3 (21.43%)	11 (78.57%)	3/7	4/8
Resistant-Identity Attacks	12 (60%)	8 (40%)	5/7	7/8
Resistant-Solving Finances	8 (61.54%)	5 (38.46%)	3/7	3/8
Resistant-Resisting for Others	12 (30.77%)	27 (69.23%)	5/7	8/8
Resistant-Trailblazing	11 (55%)	9 (45%)	6/7	4/8
Social-On Campus Connections	5 (21.74%)	18 (78.26%)	4/7	7/8
Social-Schools & Teachers	25 (62.5%)	15 (37.5%)	8/8	6/8
Social-Scholarship Programming	6 (54.55%	5 (45.45%)	3/7	5/8
Social-Sports	3 (30%)	7 (70%)	2/7	4/8

Throughout this process, memo writing, member checking, and conversations with the PI on the original data connection were utilized to ensure trustworthiness. The codes with the greatest differences between gender emerged from three distinct CCW codes, Social, Navigational, and Resistant. The findings from these codes, which include overall findings and then gendered findings in the themes, are reported in the next section.

Findings

While the six elements of CCW appeared throughout the interviews with participants, and each were intertwined with one another, as mentioned in the methods section, three pieces of cultural wealth were of note in this study: Navigational, Resistant, and Social. Within these three, the most relevant differences amongst gender were present. For each piece of cultural wealth, findings will be reported in general, combining all participants, and then specific differences found between the male/female dichotomous gender framework will be explored.

Navigational Wealth

This form of cultural capital in CCW refers to the skills and ability of the Latinx community to navigate through institutions not created with communities of color in mind (Yosso, 2005). This has been described as both navigational capital for oneself and family, as well as resilience developed within familial knowledge (DeNicolo, et al., 2015). This often appeared in the data in a familial context as expressed by Anna:

> *[Discussing her younger sister] I know she's going to hit that point in her life where she's like, gosh, I can't do this, or I feel this because of my race and my class, but at least now she'll have a resource. She'll be able to know that it's ok,*

so I think that's the biggest issue with students of color in higher education is that

you can't shield us from that pain, but making sure that they get through is the

hardest part.

Institutions of higher education, particularly PWI's in this instance, are not systems developed with Latinx students in mind. Resources to navigate this system are not always readily available for our students, and Anna expresses a desire for wanting to be that resource for her younger sister. Anna is wanting to learn how to find success in higher education not only for herself but for her family as well.

Students discussed a variety of ways in which they have developed their navigational capital. College preparation programs in high school, such as AVID or GEARUP, were often mentioned as being integral to both applying and deciding what institute of higher education they wanted to attend. College preparation programs were also credited with helping families decide if college was the right choice for them, as Ace describes after joining one such program "…that's when I started having those conversations with my parents and my mom was like, ok I understand now you're going to college to do bigger things." Participants were mixed however in how impactful college preparation programs were in motivating college attendance, as often students described being encouraged at a younger age by their parents to attend.

These programs provided the knowledge that students needed to successfully make it into college and gave students opportunities they might not have otherwise had. Students expressed gratitude for the various college visits they were able to attend through these programs, in addition to fun activities such as canoeing and even attending

the opera. In addition, what often made these programs special were the personal connections students made with individual staff. These connections were invaluable both formally as part of a program or more informally with teachers or counselors. Margarita expands on the importance of these connections in the following quote: "…I had teachers that worked harder to help me, that's why I've been able to succeed…I feel like just because I've had that extra help all along the way is what made me get here…"

While participants praised their college preparatory programs, there was not as much mention of programs they relied upon to navigate on campus life once they enrolled in higher education. These on campus programs were much more helpful in terms of the social strengths they helped support, which will be discussed in detail in a subsequent section. For the on-campus challenges, participants described turning inward and relying on their own navigational skills to succeed in navigating higher education. Students mentioned being able to figure things out on their own over time, sometimes through trial and error, as Josh describes:

> Josh: And falling behind kills you, I learned that the hard way.
>
> Interviewer: Has that affected you how you approach your work now, meaning you do things differently?
>
> Josh: I definitely don't fall behind anymore…I learned my lesson

Navigational Wealth Gendered

Elements of navigational wealth were discussed evenly between female and male identified participants overall. What stood out most however, was the conversation around college preparatory programs. It was largely Latinos who described college

preparation programs in glowing terms, crediting a variety of different programs with encouraging them to attend college, preparing them for college, and helping with the application process. All Latino participants mentioned these programs as being helpful in navigating their journey towards higher education.

For Latinas, only three out of the seven participants discussed college preparation programs as being helpful to their navigational development. It was valuable to these Latinas in terms of helping to prepare them for college and applications, but the encouragement piece was absent. Latinas generally credited other sources with motivating them to go to college such as family or other high school staff instead of focusing on college preparatory programs. These motivating elements were also present for Latinos, however described in equal or lesser terms, particularly when it came to high school staff.

Social Wealth

Social cultural wealth is comprised of the individuals in one's social network and the resources embedded within those relationships (Romo, et al., 2019). A keen sense of community is often embedded within Latinx students, and we rely on the community to provide resources or information necessary for us to be successful in school (Perez, 2014). This importance of community was perhaps best expressed by Josh:

> *Josh: As soon as I came in I was a part of the VIP program so that was a strong community to have from the get-go.*
> *Interviewer: And what does the VIP program provide you?*

Josh: It doesn't necessarily provide anything for me, it's just a bunch of people

volunteering, but amongst all the volunteers, amongst all the students there's a

community.

Interviewer: A sense of community. Is that important to you to have a sense of

community here?

Josh: It's very important because if you don't have a community you just feel like,

I would just feel like I'm lost.

Emotionally, these connections are vital to reassuring students that we are not alone in

pursuing higher education (Yosso, 2005). Social wealth is also understood to be a

mutually beneficial relationship, as historically, we "lift as we climb" (Yosso, 2005, p.

80). Potentially sharing many of the same social networks as familial capital, this form

also includes other friends, teachers, acquaintances, co-workers, or anyone else that is an

ally, and beneficiary, to a Latinx student's success.

Beyond evidence of the reliance on community, the above quote demonstrates a

potential difference between college preparation programs and higher education on

campus programs. Navigational development was seen much more in college preparation

programs, specifically for Latinos, whereas on campus programs in higher education

institutes served more to develop the social capital of students as Eduardo describes here,

"I think the student alliances helped as well my freshman year. I was really involved with

it freshman year and it was a setting where there were people that I could relate to and I

didn't have to explain certain things to them." This is not to say that college preparation

programs did not contribute to social capital, as students described how helpful those

programs were in connecting likeminded college bound students to one another too. These social connections would not necessarily directly translate to college life unfortunately, with students going to different post high school institutions. Students needed to find ways to develop social capital in their new educational institute and on campus programs were helpful in finding a community.

Students did not come to campus without any social wealth though. There were many relationships that students described relying on, even if they did not occur through campus life. Beyond some connections made with students in high school college preparatory programs, having supportive adults in the lives of these students was critical. Many participants mentioned the impact teachers or counselors made through social connections, saying how it boosted the confidence of students to have a professional at the school believe in them. The recollection of these supportive adults were often similar to how Mia describes an experience with her high school advisor, "…she was like there are scholarships, there is this, there is that, and I'm like ok, but do you think we can get them? And of course, she was phenomenal and said, "Yeah, there's no doubt about it."

When students were able to receive scholarships, beyond the financial aspect of college, they were sometimes credited with assisting in the development of social capital as well. Scholarships such as the Daniel's Fund connected students with each other at the same college and seem to specifically try to foster an on-campus community for students. Alumni from these scholarship programs also played a role in supporting students, sometimes assisting in the exploration of different Universities, or through added motivation to graduate from college.

Lastly, one of the major themes that emerged from the social wealth of participants was the importance of family. With participants in this study being first generation family was often mentioned as not being able to help with schoolwork or college applications due to not having the language access or experience often needed. What family did provide was support and encouragement to achieve in education. Parents would sacrifice financially, share encouraging words with youth, and do what they could to be involved in an education system they might not recognize. Juno described their experience with family as follows "…I don't know if role models is the right word because no one in my family had ever gone to college, but just having adults in my life that were loving and caring enough to encourage me to get an education." The importance of family transcended multiple codes across participants and will be discussed further in the section on resistant capital.

Social Wealth Gendered

Similar to navigational wealth, participants mentioned elements of social wealth relatively the same between genders. There were a few instances in which gender may have played a role in how male and female participants experienced social wealth. While the overall sample did not discuss their involvement in sports as being vital to their collegiate success, those that did shared different experiences between genders. Half of the male participants mentioned sports as having an impact on their success versus less than one third of female participants. Beyond the numbers, how participants discussed sports was vastly different.

The few female participants mentioned their involvement in sports almost in passing. Sports were something to do and looked good on a resume. For males, sports were vital to keeping them connected to their high school and supporting them to pursue college. A couple participants said that their sports coach ensured that they kept up on their academics with Ace saying "…our coach outside and inside of school. And he was always on our ass too, 'you guys got to get your homework done or you're not playing.' And that's how it was." Beyond their parents, this trusted adult was able to further motivate these young men to succeed and seemed to serve as a strong connection to their high school. One participant even described how his social connections made in soccer contributed to finding a community on a college campus by being able to play on a soccer team with students he had played with before.

The other noticeable difference between gender was the way participants described college on-campus programs, such as the Latino Student Alliance or Honor's Society. All male participants mentioned being involved in some sort of on-campus program, and while the program focus varied, they all seemed vital to their college careers. These on-campus programs provided needed resources, motivation, and a sense of community that students needed. Programs such as these were often mentioned in conjunction with a discussion of how different it was to be Latino in a predominately white institution (PWI). Participants would often come from a high school that had mostly BIPOC students, or at least an even distribution, and the transition to a PWI was difficult. Finding other Latinos on campus through these programs helped with the transition and seemed to reduce feelings of isolation as Carlos describes:

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I was thinking I might want to transfer next year because I feel like I don't fit in,

like I don't belong…Towards the end of the year I started getting more involved

in LSA, the Latino Student Alliance and different organizations like that and then

my second year was just really well. I started to get more involved…I'm really

happy that I decided to stay here.

Latinas on the other hand were not as effuse in their praise for college on-campus programs, with only three of the females mentioning these programs as being helpful. Much like with the males, these Latinas mentioned finding a greater sense of community in these programs. The Latinas however, seemed to want more of these programs than simply the social aspect that was provided. One participant found connection through the emphasis on racial equity that was being discussed, as it was a topic she was passionate about. The only report of a negative experience with a program like this stemmed from a female participant who said the program they joined was "disorganized…and people weren't doing anything." For those Latinas who did mention an on-campus program, socializing was helpful but not fully what they were looking for.

Resistant Cultural Wealth

Resistant cultural wealth is demonstrated through the adoption of oppositional behaviors that challenge inequality (Perez, 2014). This can manifest in multiple ways, such as potentially working to change a system, through institutional leadership, changing things in the local community, or actively resisting at an individual level (Perez, 2014). Maintaining and passing on cultural wealth is also a key part of resistant capital, which is grounded in resistance to subordination by communities of color (Yosso, 2005).

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This resistant capital can sometimes manifest as seemingly self-defeating behavior, such as skipping classes, however, acts such as this can be interpreted as opposition to a suppressive educational structure, with a recognition that transformation needs to occur (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001; Yosso, 2005). This doesn't mean students are not interested in educational success but rather performing on their own terms as Pancho describes:

> *I guess it depends on what one would define as a good student. Some people think a good student is one who listens to everything they say and doesn't talk. If that's the case then it wasn't me. I think of a good student as more of someone who understand the content and makes class more enjoyable by occasionally getting out of hand.*

As in the above quote, resistant capital was sometimes demonstrated by students pushing back against stereotypical beliefs, or sometimes fighting racism and microaggressions on campus. Students consistently were able to describe how they either found ways to cope, or even advocate for themselves in these situations. For example, Julieta describes constantly having to correct her professor who would not pronounce her name correctly: "…I told him a million times, every day, and my friends and I had an ongoing joke, like it's *Julieta*, every time and he just kind of skimmed over and he would just call me Julieta, so. Yeah there were definitely people who don't care for that aspect of your culture and kind of assume that you're just there." Julieta's resistant capital allowed her the space to turn this microaggression into a joke and rely on her friends to help her make it through this class.

While this was mainly referred to in terms of facing racism from being on a PWI, students also mentioned having to push back against others in the Latinx community who were concerned about the changes in thoughts and actions students in college may undergo, sometimes referred to as being "whitewashed." Community members or family expressed concern about the loss of culture or more liberal ideas students might gain in harmful ways. Anna expressed having to resist these messages from her family, "…they're just like, I don't even know who you are anymore, but I think it's just because they expect me to be one way or to be more, or the fact that, this is something that they always criticize me for, they say you're way too liberal, Anna. We didn't raise you to be like that." As evidenced earlier, students can derive a lot from their families, but also may need to use their resistant capital to continue their educational journey.

Part of this criticism from family may stem from students often being the first in their family to attend higher education. With the low college graduation rates in the Latinx community, family and friends may not understand what the college experience currently entails. While this is certainly a potential barrier, it also can be another source of resistant capital for students. Students described using that pressure to be the first to attend college as motivation. They wanted to bring this experience and the possibilities that higher education can provide to their families and their community. Anna, who despite push back from her family and feeling isolated on a PWI, still desired to make it through school: "…sometimes I look around the classroom and I still don't see people who look or come from different backgrounds like me, and I'm still like, what am I doing? How did I end up here? So it's still this struggle of inadequacy on a day-to-day

basis, but I think what's important is that I finished and I'll have done it." Even in the face of potential criticism, students may continue on in school due to the legacy they want to leave behind for their family and community as Eduardo discusses:

Interviewer: So you knew a lot was riding on you being successful.

Eduardo: I don't think I saw it that way. I was me, like all the pressure, I didn't feel that way. But I did want to do that, I wanted to break that cycle in a sense, know what I mean?

The last major theme in resistant capital demonstrates the importance of one's familial and social networks. While students did want more for themselves, they often found the will to persevere through oppressive structures by relying on their community. Students would recognize the sacrifice others made for them to attend college, the lofty expectations placed on them, and the success their community wished upon them. This appeared in conversations around family, friends, as well as with other staff members who demonstrated love for their student. Students understood they did not get to higher education on their own, and like Isabella says below, this can be a motivator to want to give back to their community and create more access in an inequitable system:

I had the stuff but I felt that if I were to get this scholarship it would be selfish of me to take away the opportunity of someone else to get money to help them because I understood how hard it was for my parents to think about, like they were stressed out, we want you to go to college, we don't have the money, the money we have will go to you, because this is for you. I didn't want that to be the conversations for other people.

Resistant Wealth Gendered

Once more, Latinos and Latinas described resistant wealth in similar ways. Both genders relied on their community for much of their motivation, finding ways to give back to their community, and create more pathways for access in the future. There were a few notable differences however in the conversations amongst the different genders. Being the first in the family to graduate from college was a motivating factor for both Latinos and Latinas, but the challenges they faced, and how they coped with those challenges were a little different.

For Latinos, they would describe their personal backgrounds and the issues they had being one of the few Latinos on a PWI. The transition from high school to college often brought a lot of personal scrutiny, as well as sometimes feeling the weight of a racist education system for the first time like Carlos describes:

> *I think it was something came up more in college, definitely, just because in high school I really didn't think racially…coming here, just looking at the different type of people that were coming here, especially visually, you don't see a lot of people like yourself. And I was able to see that at my school, so I would be able to by myself, I'd be able to feel comfortable in my skim. But being here you see other people…*

To cope with this transition and unfamiliar environment, Latinos would seek out other Latinos on campus, finding strength within each other to persevere. While Latinas faced many of the same issues, they seemed to place more of an emphasis on how much pressure they were receiving from their family to graduate as well. This was seen mostly

as a motivator, with family pushing them to make it through college, but also could be an extra barrier that Latinos did not discuss as much. Latinos did not seem to have the same level of educational family involvement as the Latinas, for better or worse sometimes. To cope with this family pressure, as well as the transition to a PWI, Latinas translated this more into social action. While Latinos appreciated more social support from other Latinos, Latinas sought more leadership positions on campus, looking to change the broader campus environment more than simply finding ways to cope with it.

Both genders drew motivation for resistance from others and was a strong theme for each group. Family was a considerable influence, with each wanting to make a better life for their family. The main difference that arose when talking about resisting for others, was how participants talked about sacrifice. Sacrifice was a consistent theme for Latinas, from not applying for scholarships to give opportunities to others, taking on more responsibilities at home, to even in once instance, refusing services to avoid having a parent become involved in the legal system. Tony describes a good example of this when her family faced the deportation of her mother:

> *…junior year was pretty tough. And then that's the year when my mom was sent to Mexico too so that was a huge impact because I had to pick up my little sister sometimes from their school which was in Marina Del Rey so that was super far. I want to say about three hours on the bus, so. Yeah, that was the hardest year.*

For Latinos, while one participant mentioned giving up opportunities for his younger siblings, the conversation around sacrifice was largely absent in this sample.

Discussion

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The first generation, documented, higher education students of Mexican origin shared many pieces of community cultural wealth (CCW) they utilized to succeed in higher education. While there was more that may be documented from this sample, this study highlighted resistant, social, and navigational pieces of cultural wealth due to the salience of the themes. Resistant cultural wealth was demonstrated in pushing back both against racism experienced at PWIs and with family and community members who may not have experience with higher education. When loved ones discussed how their education may be changing a student's ideas about the world, while difficult to hear, this was also used as a source of motivation to open opportunities for others. Students were proud of their exposure to innovative ideas and wanted to share them with more Latinx folks. The same individuals who would sometimes lament the new ideas from higher education were also relied upon to help support students through their experience with racism. Students would recall the sacrifices of others in their network to help get them to this institution, which encouraged them to continue in their education to make those sacrifices worthwhile. Students recognized they had a safe and loving community to fall back on even if they did not always agree with their latest ideas.

This theme was often co-occurring with the demonstration of social wealth. Students continuously described how valuable it was to have a staunch support network of people who cared about their success in higher education. This would often include family, but also counselors, neighbors, friends, and teachers. Once arriving on campus, students would often seek out clubs or on campus programming to further connect and strengthen their relationship to students with shared identity or values in education.

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Students created networks that could help insulate themselves from the difficulties of being a student of color at a PWI. Of note, students demonstrated the different value they derived from college preparatory programs and programming once they arrived on campus, with college prep programs providing more navigational wealth and on campus programming valued for the social connections they helped foster.

Overall, this demonstrates how interconnected each of these pieces of CCW are for students, with both resistant and social sharing elements of the final theme described here, navigational wealth. Without their social networks and motivation derived from resistant wealth, students may not have been able to utilize the navigational skills they have developed from their time in the education system. A broad network of people that cared about these students created opportunities to explore funding, understand what the expectations are in higher education, and move students forward towards their educational goals. College preparatory programs were often credited toward building this navigational wealth and supporting students in navigating the transition from high school to higher education.

The programmatic implications from these experiences can be both acute in nature and more broad reaching. First, colleges and high schools should continue to invest in college preparatory programs, especially those that incorporate family and other social networks of students into their structure. Educating not only the students, but the families as well, creates both more sustainable support for students and can be an organic form of outreach for higher education institutes through more resource awareness in the social networks of Latinx communities. College preparatory programs should be

cautioned about not replicating the issues experienced at PWIs, with critics saying the strict eligibility requirements of some of these programs become exclusionary and obfuscate the role societal barriers play on access to education (Giraldo-Garcia, et al., 2018; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Once students are on campus, program should continue to embrace the social aspects of programs, reducing any costs associated with joining as well as involving family networks in their programming. Students should not have to choose between family or higher education but should be given opportunities to bring these key areas of their live together.

This study also set out to explore potential differences between Latinas and Latinos in this population, with the educational disparities between genders being a documented concern (Garcia Louis, et al. 2021; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2018). The general experiences in higher education described were similar between genders, however there were a few exceptions. When investigating resistant wealth, family dynamics were described differently. Latinos did not seem to have the same level of family support for their educational goals as Latinas, instead they relied much more on building an on-campus community to achieve the support they needed to continue in their education. With seemingly greater familial support for Latinas; also came increased familial responsibilities, with Latinas describing sacrifices they made in other areas of their lives to achieve both educational and familial goals. This may be a contributing factor to Latinas seeking out more on-campus leadership positions than Latinos; with a dedicated support network for their education already established, Latinas can move beyond creating community and towards harnessing community towards creating change. This

was further emphasized in the findings on social wealth, with Latinos crediting their educational success more to on-campus programming or sports than Latinas.

Findings on navigational wealth also supported the idea of greater non-institutionalized support for Latinas. Latinos spoke glowingly of their experience with college preparatory programming and how it impacted their education journey for the better. Latinas more often emphasized their informal relationships with family or teachers that helped them to navigate their road to higher education. The potential difference between the assistance high school staff provided to the genders could be attributed to stereotypes on Latino men, with educational staff being found to sometimes be more reluctant to engage with Latinos (Bernal, 2002; Garcia-Louis, et al., 2020). Traditional familial roles could also be impacting these relationships, with Latinos often expected to work early on to support their family whereas Latinas were expected to contribute familial support in other ways (Carey, 2019; Rodriguez, et al., 2021). Based on these findings, educational systems could provide increased sources of funding for students and families, both in high school and once in higher education so all students would have the opportunity to focus on their schooling. Programs should continue to encourage and support Latina leaders as well in creating on-campus change that would potentially open opportunities for greater participation from Latinos.

As a phenomenological study, this is not intended to be illustrative of national trends, but share the current experiences of first generation, documented, Latinx students of Mexican origin in the Mountain West, in response to the calls for more specificity by other scholars (Garcia, et al., 2021; Mendez & Cortina, 2021). There were intersectional

identities that have yet to be a part of this conversation as well, with only cisgender males and females included, LGBTQ+ status and disability status being unexplored here and in the literature. While receiving a little more attention lately, the experience of undocumented students should continue to inform practice, as there are additional barriers they may need to navigate. Future studies should continue to highlight the intersectional identities of students in both scope and geography to move towards a great understanding of the strengths of the Latinx diaspora.

Conclusion

First generation, documented, students of Mexican origin have much community cultural wealth that they bring with them to higher education; navigational, social, and resistant in particularly were highlighted in this study. Often this was built through family units, although those family units could also present with some challenges that could be unique depending on the gender identity of the students. Institutes of higher education do have programs that are currently supporting these young people, but these could be strengthened through the incorporation of more familial programming, increased funding for students, and supporting the ideas produced through the resistant wealth of students. Future studies should further explore the various experiences of the Latinx diaspora in higher education to understand how best to support this fast-growing segment of the population.

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Manuscript 3: The College-Going Experiences of Mexican American Participants Who

Graduated from a College Preparatory Program

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Abstract

Despite educational levels improving in the Latinx community overall, Latinx adults continue to lag behind other racial and ethnic groups. As lower rates of education for the Latinx community have become better publicized this has been met with some gains. However, the increases in educational attainment we have seen fall along gender lines, with Latinas graduating from college at a higher rate than Latinos. Despite these disparities, there is still a lack of knowledge around the intersectional education journey of Latinx students. This phenomenological study explores the gendered experiences of first generation, documented, higher education students of Mexican origin who participated in a college preparatory program created for Latinx students and families. Utilizing the theory of community cultural wealth, aspirational, navigational, and social cultural wealth are highlighted to demonstrate the strengths these students apply to their higher education experiences. Findings indicate that long term, holistic, mentoring from trusted adults were key to bolstering the educational success of students. While experiences were largely similar overall, the gendered analysis suggests Latinas may have increased opportunities to engage in on campus programming that Latinos. Future studies should investigate the experiences of students who did not pursue higher education despite engaging in college preparatory programming.

Keywords: Latinx, College Preparatory Programs, Higher Education, Community Cultural Wealth

Introduction

Depending on a person's identity, higher education might not provide the same level of benefits as others (Edwards & Coates, 2011; Harvey, et al., 2017), however a degree in higher education is associated with a plethora of positive outcomes. A person with a postsecondary education is shown to have higher wages, increased job satisfaction, better physical and mental health, and improved educational outcomes for their children (Chetty, et al., 2014; Corak, 2013; Lleras-Muney, 2018). Unfortunately, not everyone has an equitable access to education, with clear current and historical disparities in postsecondary education, particularly amongst the Latinx community. In 1997, Latinx adults had one of the lowest levels of educational attainment in the U.S. amongst those ages 25 years or older, trailing all other racial and ethnic groups in associates degrees, bachelor's degrees, and master's degrees by percentage of population (Espinosa, et al., 2019). Despite educational levels improving in the Latinx community overall, in 2017 Latinx adults were once again lagging behind other racial and ethnic groups (Espinosa, et al., 2019).

As lower rates of education for the Latinx community have become better publicized, this has been met with some gains, such as 72% of recent Latinx high school graduates enrolling in college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). However, the increases we have seen appear to fall along gender lines, with Latina women (Latinas) seeing more of the gains and Latino men (Latinos) falling behind their peers in the landscape of higher education (Saenz, et al., 2016). In the Latinx community, Latinas earn every three out of five degrees and enroll in college at a rate 25% higher than

Latinos; amongst recent college graduates, this resulted in 18% of Latinas having a bachelor's degree versus only 12% of Latinos (Saenz, et al., 2016). These disparate outcomes peaked in 2007 and have not changed for over fifteen years (Saenz, et. al., 2016). While this gender gap is seen across U.S. society, as women of all races and ethnicities are now outpacing men, Latinos have one of the most pronounced educational gender gaps and trail all other young men of color in their rates of degree completion (Lee & Ransom, 2011).

There are several possible reasons for this educational gap that have been explored in the literature. In high school, Latinx students are subject to harsher disciplinary practices, which leads to less class time, decreased test scores, decreased attendance, and decreased perceptions of school safety (Hinze-Pifer & Sartain, 2018; Ritter, 2018; Welch & Payne 2018). This can be particularly impactful for Latino men as negative stereotypes, such as associating Latinos with criminal activity, can also contribute to lower expectations and harsher discipline of Latino students by school staff (Schmader, et al., 2008; Llamas, et al., 2018). Once in an institute of higher education, postsecondary institutions can be unwelcoming environments, specifically for men of color (Baker & Robnett, 2012), in part due to college campus demographics often being quite different from the high school Latinx students attended (Garcia, 2018). Institutions of higher education often do not have supports in place for Latino students either, as campus resources for students of color are underfunded, limiting access to potentially helpful services (Griffin, et al, 2016).

In an acknowledgment of the growing disparities of Latinos in higher education, institutes have recently begun to take steps towards better support of Latinx students. Most research efforts on these programs however focus on men of color generally, do not focus on the intersectional identities of the Latinx community, or do not engage in peer reviewed research. Some examples of this are the Latinos in Action program, Latino fraternities, and the My Brothers Keep initiative. While each are purported to be helpful, there is a lack of data concerning the impact these programs have on Latinos (Garcia, et al., 2017; Latinos in Action, 2021; Moreno & Sanchez Banuelos, 2013; White House, 2016). There is even less research illuminating more detailed identities that participants may hold, such as documentation status, generational status, and country of origin (Garcia, et al., 2021).

This paper seeks to contribute a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of Latinx students involved in programming that supports their education; more specifically, this phenomenological study delves into the experiences of first generation, documented students of Mexican origin. I not only aim to share more of their lived reality, but also aim to explore possible gendered experiences that can add to the limited literature on Latino men in higher education. I hope to accomplish this utilizing theory throughout this paper that focuses on the strengths these students have rather than deficits; this theory is community cultural wealth (CCW).

Community Cultural Wealth

CCW was originally developed in 2005 by Yosso as a critique of Bourdieu's (1977) theory of cultural capital (Perez, 2014). Bourdieu argues that white, upper- and

middle-class knowledge is treated as valuable capital in U.S. society, and other forms of cultural capital are ignored. If students are not born into a family with this knowledge, they must then develop it in order to succeed (Yosso, 2005). Bourdieu's theory has been used to explain the differing levels of success across cultural groups, with proponents normalizing upper/middle-class white values and devaluing the knowledge of other groups (DeNicolo, et al., 2015).

Utilizing Latinx Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), Yosso sought to challenge the deficit interpretation of Bourdieu's theory in relation to Communities of Color. She centers the lived experiences of the Latinx community, rather than focusing on white middle-class culture. Through her work, Yosso challenges the dominant ideology through a framework that provides liberatory ideas to racial and cultural oppression (Yosso, 2005). Yosso goes on to identify forms of cultural capital that Latinx students possess that are not recognized or valued in a school context. These forms of capital are utilized by Latinx students to survive the oppressive educational system that demands conformity or rejection.

The six forms of capital that Yosso identified are aspirational, familial, social, linguistic, resistant and navigational (Yosso, 2005). Aspirational capital is transmitted to Latino children by parents, through teaching them to maintain their personal, professional, or academic goals in the face of real or perceived barriers. Familial capital refers to the cultural knowledge passed down by the family that carries a sense of community history, memory, and cultural values. This is reflected in the strong family ties amongst Latinos, not only in their commitment to the immediate family but the

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extended family as well. Social capital is the network of people that work to help provide

resources or information to Latinos that they need to be successful in school. Linguistic

capital is the skills and knowledge gained by being fluent in multiple languages or

communication styles, particularly evidenced through recounting oral histories, cuentos

[stories] and dichos [proverbs]. Resistant capital is transmitted through adopting

oppositional behaviors that challenge inequality. Finally, navigational capital is gained by

individuals as they succeed in social institutions that do not acknowledge or attend to the

needs of marginalized communities (Yasso, 2005; Perez, 2014).

  While still a relatively novel theory, it has already been applied in a variety of

studies, particularly in the field of education. In relation to the current study, scholars

have used CCW to explore the cultural wealth of assistant professors (Martinez, et al.,

2017), elementary school students (DeNicolo, et al., 2015), and Latinx college students

(Aragon, 2018; Perez, 2017). This study contributes to this literature by illuminating not

only the CCW that first generation, documented students of Mexican origin have, but

also contributes to the literature around interventions that support the inherent strengths

our community contains.

College Preparatory Interventions

  One of the most well-known college preparatory programs is the GEARUP

program. This federally funded program is designed to support students' long term by

addressing multiple areas of development, generally targeting low-income, first-

generation students (Schaefle, 2018). While widely known, GEARUP overall is difficult

to evaluate as each program site may look different, with flexibility given to each funding

site to implement programs that may be effective for youth in their specific geographic location; although studies have shown participation in these kinds of programs can be beneficial (Lozana et al., 2009; Merriman Bausmith & France, 2012). Critics have suggested that college prep programs such as GEARUP, while appearing successful, have stringent requirements that prevent students who could benefit from participating (Knight-Manuel, et al., 2019). GEARUP also does not incorporate culturally responsive programming, making it difficult to find research about it that is specific to Latinx youth. The few studies that have investigated specific, Latinx level outcomes suggest that a mentoring component included in GEARUP is beneficial to college enrollment and improved test scores (Sanchez Gonzalez, et al., 2019; Schaefle, 2018).

Programs specific to Latinx students have been explored before. A study by Murphy & Murphy (2018) identified multiple Latinx programs designed to improve college enrollment and retention. Programs at Wayne State University, the Puente program in California, success centers at Chaffey College, and career-focused programs at a college in the Northeast all were reported to demonstrate positive outcome measures to various degrees, although not disaggregated by gender or country of origin. Utilizing national longitudinal data from the National Center for Education Statistics, Giraldo-Garcia, et al. (2018) found multiple barriers to high school graduation for Mexican American high school students, with socioeconomic factors, language barriers, and school demographics predictive of graduation. The authors conclude that mentoring programs were found to be positive for most students, although the social context that necessitates these programs must be considered. In the current study, mentoring was

often mentioned by students as being a vital component for their success. These findings will be expounded upon later in this paper, but also necessitate a short examination of the existing literature for Latinx students and mentoring.

Mentoring

Mentoring can be defined as an experienced person (mentor) guiding another person (mentee) in the development of their own ideas, learning, and personal or professional skills (Tareef, 2013). Recent research specifically focused on mentoring with Latinx youth has included a focus on the impact of family mentors (Saenz et al., 2018), faculty mentors (Alcantar & Hernandez, 2020; Alcocer & Martinez, 2017; Holloway-Friesen, et al., 2021), and peers (Moschetti, et al. 2018). Across studies, mentoring relationships were seen to be key to the success of Latinx students, through increasing social capital (Moschetti, 2018), sense of belonging (Alcocer, 2017; Holloway-Friesen, 2021), and nurturing their aspirational wealth (Alcantar, 2020; Saenz, 2018). These relationships were most successful when they were created through authentic connection, common values, and availability (Alcocer & Martinez, 2017; Alcantar & Hernandez, 2020).

Mentoring relationships have been found to have a longitudinal impact on young people beyond the acute mentor/mentee relationship, with students having a positive experience with a mentor being more likely to perceive higher levels of peer support, perceive faculty as understanding, and initiate engagement with faculty (Holloway-Friesen, 2021). While these studies were mostly focused on mentoring for college students, this previous finding provides the possibility that students with positive

mentoring experiences in high school would have developed stronger social or navigational wealth to help them succeed in college. The findings from the current study contribute to the literature around mentoring, with some students sharing how their mentoring experience with the Youth Empowerment Program in high school contributed to their success in higher education.

Methods

Background

The Youth Empowerment Program (YEP) was funded by the United States Office of Minority Health in 2012. Through a partnership with the University of Utah and Salt Lake School District, this multi-year research project aimed to explore the impact of cohort- model interventions on historically underserved youth and their families. Outcomes related to education and health were prioritized, although there was considerable latitude in the grant as to what outcomes were desirable. I was fortunate enough to be involved with this program from start to finish, originally assisting with evaluation of the program as an MSW student, becoming a program volunteer post-graduation, and eventually the project coordinator by the end of the grant.

YEP recruited Latinx students and their families who were enrolled in seventh grade at an urban emergent[2], racially diverse middle school in Utah. Students were recruited based on referrals from teachers and administrators that recognized the unrealized potential of these students, as well as self-referrals. Students and families gave informed consent to participate in this 5-year study, with approval provided by both the Salt Lake

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[2] This term describes a school in a large, but not major, city that contends with a lack of resources, qualifications of teachers, and academic development of students (Milner, 2012).

School District and University of Utah IRB. Overall, forty-eight students and families agreed to participate in the study, the majority of which were first-generation students of Mexican origin. The YEP program included mentoring, homework help, case management services, field trips and campus visits, all in an after-school setting. The funding for the program officially ended in 2017, however several staff members volunteered to work with the students for another year, with YEP unofficially ending in 2018, which was the senior year of high school for YEP participants.

Recruitment

For the current study, YEP students who identified as documented, first-generation, and of Mexican descent were considered following the approval of the University of Denver IRB. Additionally, participants were then contacted based on enrollment in a higher education class. Many students had maintained contact with me since the program ended, with snowball sampling utilized to determine the qualifications of those who had not, which limited the recruitment pool more than originally anticipated, particularly with Latino men. Enrollment was considered as either being a currently registered student in an institute of higher education or having attended at least one class in higher education post high school.

While more Latinas could have qualified, which reflects the imbalance in gendered college attainment in the literature, in an effort to maintain equal representation between cisgender males and females (of note, to the authors knowledge, no YEP students identify as non-binary or transgender) three Latinos and four Latinas were recruited for this study.

At the time of interview, all students were between the ages of 21-23, all were employed at least part-time, with four also being full time students, one a part-time student, and two no longer enrolled in college for the time being.

Measures

Participants were asked a series of questions (Appendix A) in hour-long in-depth interviews conducted and recorded via the Zoom online platform. While participants and the researcher were all located in the Salt Lake Valley, Zoom was used for consistency and accessibility. Questions included examples such as "How does your experience in college compare to the YEP program?" I then transcribed and analyzed the interviews, first utilizing a template approach to coding (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). This included coding for the six forms of CCW as listed previously (see Table 3.1). This was used as a framework to demonstrate the strengths that YEP built upon and how those strengths may have influenced the higher education experiences of students.

The second round of coding consisted of a thematic analysis of the data (Saldana, 2016). This was used to further explore new themes related to students' cultural wealth, with programmatic suggestions also surfacing during this round. The most frequently occurring codes are reported in the next section, which include aspirational, navigational, and social cultural wealth, although all forms of CCW surfaced during analysis. A third round of coding was then applied to understand potential differences between the lived experience of Latinas and Latinos. Frequencies of themes by gender were analyzed, with notable frequencies further reviewed. To be considered for gendered analysis, themes needed to have at least five coded quotations and have approximately a 2-to-1 ratio

difference between genders. Thirteen themes were determined to contain a gendered lived

experience; only findings from the three highlighted forms of CCW are shared in this paper.

Table 3.1 First Round Coding Definitions

Code	Definition	Example
Aspirational	Maintaining personal, professional, or academic goals in the face of real or perceived barriers (Perez, 2014). Includes instances where students describe being inspired by others to develop or maintain their educational dreams.	"And I know I wasn't the best high school kid, but I always knew I wanted to graduate. It was like there was nothing else that I wanted to do. I was not going to drop out. I was not not going to graduate…I knew it was going to happen. I was going to make it happen one way or another."-Amy
Familial	Expressing cultural knowledge passed down by the family that carries a sense of community history, memory, and cultural values (Perez, 2014). Includes instances of financial support, verbal encouragement by family members, or describing education as for their family.	"I wasn't more like talk, it was demands, in a way. But in a parent way they just wanted me to be better than what they are. Right now, it's like since they've been struggling a lot, they want me to get a career that will help me be financially stable. So it's like they were pushing me to go to college for my own good…"-Manuel
Linguistic	Describing skills, connections, and knowledge gained by being fluent in multiple languages or communication styles (Perez, 2014). Includes instances of communicating through visual art, music, or poetry, or stories told by others.	"…he always tells us to stay in school. He didn't get the chance to. He had a lot of different things going on in his life back then, back home, and so he didn't get the chance to really go to school and to do things. He's one of the oldest, so he became caretaker of his family at a young age."-Otto
Navigational	Skills and abilities to navigate through educational institutions for the students	"Then going to Beacon…for me it's another YEP, because that's how I see it.

		themselves or for their families (DeNicolo, et al. 2015). Includes instances where students describe joining a program to assist in their education, or mention individuals specifically tasked with assisting students.	It's another YEP. They provide us with a bunch of resources, a bunch of help. It made me feel like I wasn't alone. So when I knew that I felt that I wasn't alone in there, I knew that's what was meant to be for me."-Sunny
	Social	Describing the social network and the resources embedded within those relationship (Romo, et al., 2019). Includes friends, teachers, acquaintances, co-workers, or anyone else that is mentioned as supporting a student's success; contributes tangible or emotional resources.	"Remember I told you about this club I was in…I became really close to a lot of them, who are also, I don't know, they're people I look up to. And they always told me, 'We're here for you.' They're on the same level as you and other YEP staff, they're very important to me. They tell me a lot of things too. And they supported me a lot…"-Omar
	Resistant	Instances where students discussed changing an educational system, taking leadership roles, changing things in the local community, or actively resisting at an individual level (Perez, 2014). Includes responses to racism, discrimination, and creating change on behalf of others.	"…in high school, whether it was on purpose or not, is that most of those white students were taking honor classes. They'd be in AP language arts, AP history. Most of my classes, the regular classes, just the basic, were full of other minority groups…then going into my first year in college it was like, there's no diversity here it's just me…it was really hard to be able to go and knowing that I didn't belong. It took me awhile to overcome that…and just be like yeah I belong here just like you."-Stacey

Researcher Positionality

I share many of the same identities with my participants, as a documented, cisgender Latino of Mexican descent. However, my experience as a third-generation individual lends a certain privilege to how I experienced the education system. I had the privilege of my family already having navigated the public education system, with aunts, uncles, cousins, and my mom going through the same city and state system I have. Utah is a unique environment to grow up in, especially as a person of color, but I was fortunate enough to have family members that were experienced in navigating through challenges and success. While this research is not my own story, I grew remarkably close to the YEP participants as I was involved in the program from beginning to end. I recognize how their story may be different from mine and am honored to use my privilege to highlight their experiences. I am thankful for the opportunity my ancestors created for me and I hope this is one step towards continuing to create opportunity for those who come after me.

Findings

All elements of CCW appeared throughout the data, with excerpts often having overlapping codes. However, only three pieces of cultural wealth are highlighted in this paper: aspirational, navigational, and social. These were most salient to this paper as they represented the most notable differences between genders. For each subsequent section, elements of cultural wealth are reported in general followed by the potential differences by gender.

Aspirational Cultural Wealth

While YEP students described aspirational wealth as stemming from sources outside of the program, such as family, individual motivation, or culture, the YEP program was often described as a helpful part in nurturing the aspirations of students. As Stacey describes:

I think it was just the mentors just constantly reminding you, reminding us, especially people who came from also similar backgrounds were like 'Oh, we're also the first in our family to go to college and we were able to do this.' Being able to work with mentors from similar backgrounds made me realize, oh, I can also be a role model like that to people in my community.

Aspirational cultural wealth is the ability to hold on to dreams and goals in the face of real or perceived challenges; access to mentors with shared identities made it easier for students to see their dreams as reality. Most of the YEP staff were first generation or Latinx, which reportedly helped to develop connection and foster these aspirational goals. Of note however, students did not often explicitly state the importance of a similar racial or ethnic background from the YEP mentors; as Stacey shares, college generational status was most salient to name.

This could in part be due to the longevity of the program, with Lorena saying the most impactful part of YEP was "…you guys just following us all the way to high school till the day that we graduated…you guys stayed for everything, all our struggles, all our accomplishments...it helped with just everything basically" After being with consistent, trusting mentors for a long period of time, racial or ethnic matching may not have been as salient to these youth. That consistency from long term mentors, who may or may not

have shared identities, helped students to hold onto their dreams through challenges.

Students may believe in themselves more when someone else holds high hopes for them;

as Otto shared, "you guys pushed us…you guys knew that we were able to do these

things so you guys helped push us."

For these students, it was important that the relationship with staff included more

than just a focus on schooling. Students would often articulate that the goal of the

program and their subsequent aspirations was to graduate and go to college. However, as

the focus of their responses demonstrates already, would articulate the importance of

program staff seeing them holistically and being a mentor beyond just academics. What

seemed to be most valued was not how close staff could get students to their academic

aspirations, but staff being willing to follow students on all aspects of their aspirational

journey. Manuel describes this relationship with one staff member as such:

> *Whenever I really did feel down I'd call her or text her and she would basically*
>
> *help me emotionally as well, and school-wise as well is she put in so many hours*
>
> *to help me understand some subjects even when she didn't understand them*
>
> *herself, but she tried her best.*

Aspirational Wealth Gendered

When looking at the potential aspirational differences by gender, two sub-codes

stood out from the rest: individual motivation, and YEP aspirational support. For both

codes, the female-identified students spoke more often about their experiences in these

areas. Individual motivation would often be double-coded in conjunction with familial

capital. Students would stress the importance of holding onto their individual aspirations for their family, evidenced by this example from Amy:

I really did not want to disappoint my parents or grandparents. And I know I wasn't the best high school kid, but I always knew I wanted to graduate. It was like there was nothing else that I wanted to do. I was not going to drop out.

Latinas in this sample may have ascribed more of their aspirational journey to internal, individual factors as they were all still enrolled in higher education; some of the Latinos had paused on their academic journey at the time of this writing. Their aspirational goals around higher education may have changed, whereas with the Latinas they were still enmeshed with higher education.

The YEP aspirational support code included instances where youth mentioned the YEP program in general, rather than subscribing the support to a specific mentor or experience. This may be best demonstrated by Sunny, "…I'm just very thankful for YEP just because I've never really thought of college prior to YEP and I didn't really even think about going to college until my junior year." Both genders stressed the importance of the program overall, however the individual mentorship and attention were more often what came up as being vital to Latino aspirational support. Latinas appeared to be impacted more by the program as a whole and shared more about their individual goals, whereas Latinos prescribed their aspirational accomplishments to one-on-one time with mentors. Regardless, each seemed to have gained something from their time in YEP as these relationships were a helpful resource when students needed to navigate the educational system.

Navigational Cultural Wealth

Incubating dreams and goals of students was an important part of YEP but as Otto emphasizes, students also need the resources and skills to accomplish those goals:

I actually really enjoyed going there and there was always a lot of resources and they made it sound like it was easy to graduate and go to college, which in the end it was pretty easy. But they always laid the foundation for us.

Navigational cultural wealth is the ability for students to make it through an educational system that was not created with them in mind, either through finding their own resources and ways of learning or developing a deeper understanding of the system itself. The connection students had with YEP provided students the space and resources to continue striving towards their aspirational goals.

There was a clear difference between the approach that YEP took in fostering navigational wealth compared with students talking about other after school or on campus programming. Other programs or institutions supported navigational capital, but students would often articulate there was something that did not quite fit their expectations. For instance, when Omar describes his experience with his college advisors, "The advisors, I feel like, they're good people. They helped me with what I needed to do, but I feel like it was only because I would've ask them, not because they were really trying to help, they were just doing their job." Omar appreciates what his advisors provided, however his experience appeared to be more transactional in nature. Students appreciated the care showed by YEP when developing their navigational capital as Sunny shares:

They would go above and beyond to help us with our homework or assignment,
whatever it was. I think not even just homework, I think they were always there
for us for personal reasons as well. I think that was one of the main things that I
really enjoyed about YEP, that we had that connection of a family because it
wasn't always school related stuff…

Providing resources to students appears to be valuable, but the personal connection created while doing so was a consistent theme for the success of these young people. Even when students did not associate their navigational wealth with YEP, they attributed their success to something beyond providing only guidance or resources. This could be something as simple as being acknowledged, as Otto continues "…it was a smaller campus than SLCC and so it was more personal. I felt like they knew who I was. I felt like my professors knew who I was…And so it made things a lot easier, to ask questions, to be more self-sufficient…" Once again, programs moving beyond a simple student or teacher bifurcated dynamic seemed to foster an environment of success.

Navigational Wealth Gendered

In comparing the experiences between genders there were a couple notable differences. While there were not many instances of students ascribing their navigational success to extra-curricular campus supports, Latinas described these programs as being beneficial. These extra-curricular support programs are defined here as being non-institutionalized, which academic advisors or professors would be considered institutionalized, instead being elective programming offered by or in conjunction with an organization separate from their educational institution. Often this was described as

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college support programs such as GEARUP or First-Generation scholars. For Stacey, her program provided just the navigational support she needed, "I feel like being able to go through that program helped me find different resources on campus, find financial aid or different ways of finding financial aid, and getting used to being on campus, the atmosphere, the education."

There was only one instance of YEP Latino students ascribing their navigational success to an on-campus program such as this. It was unclear from this study as to why Latinas may have benefitted more from these extracurricular programs than Latinos, although participants suggested traditional gender roles may play a role, with Latinos expected to work more to support themselves or their family, providing for less time to participate in extracurricular activities.

The other area where possible gendered differences appeared was when students were describing specific navigational supports from YEP. While both Latinos and Latinas shared how helpful the program was in developing their navigational support, Latinas would more often share specific instances of navigational resources provided to them from the program. In this quote from Amy, "…you guys taught us about college applications and things like that, that I also wasn't interested in until after high school. But I mean, I knew how to do it because you guys taught me," she demonstrates a clear example of navigational support being provided to her. These examples are shared by Latinos; however, once again, they did not share specific instances of support nearly as much as Latinas, indicating navigational supports may not have been as impactful or

plentiful for Latinos in YEP. What was consistent between genders though, if not navigational supports, was the importance of a social network for YEP students.

Social Cultural Wealth

Students often attributed their ability to navigate educational spaces and hold onto or achieve their dreams, based on the people supporting them. Students were quick to praise their family, friends, or program staff as Omar describes:

> *Probably, to be honest, if it wasn't for YEP, I don't know if I would've graduated to be honest…You all would always be there to help out, even though I never really wanted to, but everyone was always there for me. And I don't know, that honestly was probably the main reason I graduated was because of the help of all the YEP staff.*

Social wealth is the network of individuals that care about a student and are rooting for their success in both tangible and intangible ways. While undoubtedly students have had some measure of personal responsibility for their success, for these Latinx students, that success would not have come without support from others.

These findings were consistent across all students in the study. Each one spoke to how much they valued having this personal support from their network and from the program; they would go on to look for these types of social connections beyond YEP as well while enrolled in their institutes of higher education. As described in the aspirational section, it was important though that these mentors were consistent, available, and not solely there to support students with education. The value of this type of mentorship, which was present regardless of the engagement of students, was illustrative, per Stacey:

But I think just overall, I think would be just the consistent mentors that we had

that were just there, involved, ready to help whenever we needed help, and

reaching out. Even when we weren't able to attend a meeting, they'd still reach

out and be like, 'Hey, are you doing okay? Haven't heard from you in a while.'

Just constantly checking up made me feel like I had that support, always.

Beyond mentors specific to YEP, the social wealth provided by professors in higher

education was recognized and appreciated by students. In response to a question asking

the most impactful part of college, Manuel replied:

I'd say just the professors in general. Obviously some are really good but some

are, they're just there to make their money, in a way. But when you do get some of

the good professors, it really does help you a lot, 'cause they do put in a lot of

effort to help us…

Having a group of caring individuals, such as YEP staff or professors, surrounding

students bolsters the support that students receive from their loved ones, often providing

motivation to continue with their education as shared by Otto, "It's hard to do things by

yourself sometimes. So her and then especially my dad and my family. When I lose

motivation they're always there to bring me back up and tell me, 'You can do it.'"

Social Wealth Gendered

Findings for social wealth were relatively consistent between genders except for

their experience in higher education extracurricular programs, which reflects similar

findings for the navigational code. Like the responses for navigational wealth, Latinas

found a lot of value in these higher education extracurricular programs. Take Sunny's experience with one program called Beacon:

> *They provide us with a bunch of resources, a bunch of help. It made me feel like I wasn't alone. So when I knew that I felt that I wasn't alone in there, I knew that's what was meant to be for me.*

Stacey also mentioned the social wealth provided by these programs, "Being able to participate in Beacon made me realize, I can also be here. I am here because of my own strengths and hard work. I, just like them, deserve to be on campus."

Of note, the one Latino participant that was still enrolled in a higher education program at the time of the interview also shared similar thoughts about extra-curricular programs to the Latinas. Otto shared how these programs added to his social wealth:

> *…TRIO was for low-income minority students. So that was a nice little thing because it's kids who are all like me in a way, and so we had a lot of good times there with that. And then on the soccer team too, the demographic was very diverse and it was cool. I wasn't the only Hispanic kid.*

While the other Latino participants spoke to the value of professors or mentors, once again emphasizing the importance of individualized time for Latinos, they did not officially participate in these extracurricular programs that Latinas often mentioned.

Discussion

This paper explored the lived experience of seven first generation, documented, former participants an after-school program who are of Mexican origin. The specificity of the sample was in answer to calls from scholars to move beyond research of a monolithic

Latinx community and share our more unique within group experiences (Garcia, et al., 2021). Elements of community cultural wealth (CCW) appeared throughout my conservations with these young people who had experience in higher education. While all six of the original posited forms of CCW appeared in the data, aspirational, navigational, and social were most salient when reflecting on their experiences in both YEP and higher education. This adds needed information to the evidence examining implications for Latinx students in both college preparatory programs and higher education institutes (Garcia, et al., 2017; Griffin, et al., 2016).

Throughout these findings, the importance of mentors was critical to both the development of students personally and as scholars which supports the findings of other studies focused on Latinx students (Alcantar, 2020; Moschetti, 2018; Saenz, 2018). It is vital that mentors consider students holistically, taking time to appreciate students for the inherent value they have as humans rather than seeing them as only students (Alcocer & Martinez, 2017; Alcantar & Hernandez, 2020). The love and care that students felt from their mentors created a supportive familial environment that may have further enabled students to try new things and to take risks when thinking about their aspirations. Having the support of a program and mentor that accepts students regardless of their educational goals created conditions for them to return to their education or to the program itself when they were ready.

It would also appear that students may have gained some value, at least initially, from having mentors that reflected their own lived experience. This was often not referred to as an issue of share race and/or ethnicity, but rather knowing they had mentors

that were also first-generation students who had already succeeded in navigating the educational system. Connecting students to those who have gone through a similar journey before seemed to solidify the idea that college is a tangible reality for them too. Of note, while there were YEP staff that identified as first generation, others were not. This background may have been assumed due to the shared race and ethnicity most staff had with students, as statistically an individual Latinx person is less likely to have attended college than not (Espinosa, et al., 2019). Regardless, future programs should be mindful of their staffing as shared identity with students played a role in supporting CCW in YEP students.

The longevity of relationships staff had with YEP students also was described as bolstering the experiences of Latinx students. These long-term relationships contributed to the connection with mentors as it provided both more opportunities for learning about each other and the knowledge that someone consistently believed in their abilities. Teachers or professors may not always demonstrate the same level of care and affection towards Latinx students, but those interactions seem to have been mitigated by the long-term relationship with another caring adult. Creating and funding programs on both higher education campuses and college prep programs to allow for flexibility in student participation in ongoing programming, versus one time or one-year efforts, may be more impactful for students.

The original study also endeavored to explore potential differences between Latinx female and male students, and while the experiences largely appeared to be the same, a few possible differences emerged. Latino students did not tend to join or attribute

their CCW to extracurricular higher education programs while Latinas more often discussed how important those programs were to them. This may indicate either the need for increased outreach to Latino students or more programming that caters specifically to Latinos. Alternatively, this could also be attributed to the time and cultural expectations between genders. When students were asked to provide a reason Latinos were not graduating at the same rate as Latinas, students would often say that Latinos were expected to work more or earlier in life to support the family, which reflects the cultural value of machismo that has been described in other studies (Cammarota, 2004; Perez, 2017; Saenz, et al. 2017). Due to these expectations, Latinos may not have received the same level of familial support towards their education as Latinas. As with any student, finding ways to ensure students and families are supported financially while attending school is important to graduation, which could be impacted by policies at both institutes of higher education and our larger social systems, with answers to these policy questions beyond the reach of this paper.

Being that this is a phenomenological study, the limitations of this research necessitate caution when attempting to scale the results to a broader level. It should also be considered that as the interviewer I had prior history and connection to these young people, having been intimately involved in the YEP program; while that adds a level of comfort and openness for participants, they may have not been as willing to be as critical of YEP if they spoke to someone not previously associated with the program. The sample size is also smaller than originally anticipated, due to the lack of YEP Latino students enrolling in higher education programs. In a desire to have parity between genders, the

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sample became more limited than originally thought as fewer YEP Latino students enrolled in higher education than YEP Latinas. This may also speak to the Latino students not receiving as much navigational support by YEP staff compared to the Latina students; future research should be focused on interviewing students who did not attend higher education to understand the circumstances and role YEP played in their educational decisions.

While the impact of YEP may be inconclusive for all students, for those that went to higher education it played a key part in supporting their CCW and educational journey. Caring adults, long term relationships, and acknowledging students holistically provided an additional space for students to explore their educational goals. Their experience in YEP created conditions that students would seek in higher education, which they were not always able to find. Regardless, even for students who were not currently enrolled in higher education, the knowledge that they had caring, trusting adults who believed in their educational abilities reflected their own belief that they could succeed in creating the life they want for themselves and their families.

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Appendix A

Interview Schedule YEP

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. This study is exploring the college going experiences of Latinx youth who were a part of YEP. You will be given a pseudonym (a different name) and your identity will be kept confidential. You may choose to stop the interview, skip a question, or withdraw from the study at any time. Before we begin, do you have any questions?

1. What pseudonym would you like to choose for yourself?

2. How old are you?

3. What gender do you most identify with?

4. What race or ethnic group do you most identify with?
   a. Do you consider yourself to be Latina/o/x, Hispanic, Chicana/o/x, Spanish, or something else?
   b. Why do you most identify with that group?

5. Where is your family from?
   a. What is your family's country of origin?

6. What is your parent/guardians' highest level of education?
   a. What do they do for a living?

7. Do you have any siblings?
   a. If so, how old are they?
   b. If older, what is their highest level of education?

8. Tell me about your experience in high school?
   a. What strengths do you have that helped you graduate high school?
      i. Supports?

9. Tell me about your experience in the Youth Empowerment Program (YEP)?
   a. Do you remember why you, or your family, signed up?
      i. What was the goal of YEP?
   b. How involved were you in YEP?
   c. What did YEP do to support your personal strengths/growth?
      i. What did YEP do to support your cultural strengths/growth? explain/ask what are cultural strengths) Come back to that one
   d. What was the most impactful part of the program?

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    i. Did you think about yourself, your community, or the world in any new ways after YEP?

  e. How did YEP support you in achieving your personal goals?

  f. What do you think YEP could have done better?

  g. Anything else about YEP?

10. Are you currently a student?
  a. If so, where do you go to school?
    i. What is your major?
  b. If not, have you ever been enrolled in any college or university?
    i. What was the name of the school?
    ii. How long did you attend [name of college/university]?
      1. What contributed to you no longer attending [name of college/university]?
  c. Were you working while in college?
    i. How many hours?
    ii. Why did you feel the need to work so much?

11. Tell me about your experience in college?
  a. Why did you decide to go to college?
    i. If parents, how did you know?
  b. What strengths do you have that enabled you to attend college?
    i. Supports?
  c. How involved are/were you in college clubs/extracurricular activities?
  d. What does/did your institution do to support your personal strengths?
    i. What does/did your institution do to support your cultural strengths/growth?
  e. What is/was the most impactful part of college?
  f. What do you think your college could have done/do better?

12. How does/did your experience in college compare to your experience in YEP?

13. Do you think your experience in college would [have been] be different if you identified as another gender?

  a. I ask because statistics and research show that Latino men are graduating college at a much lower rate than Latinas and have for quite a few years. I'm wondering if you have any idea of why that might be?

14. Is there anything else that you feel I should know or is important to add?

Conclusion

Over the course of three manuscripts, this dissertation has contributed to the burgeoning literature exploring intersectional experiences of Latinx students in higher education. As the lived experience of students, or any community for that matter, is constantly changing, I do hope that the contributions here continue to expand the way we view and conduct our research regarding Latinx students. Too often our experiences are treated as a monolith in the literature, which may be contributing to the slow progress that is being made towards increasing higher education outcomes withing our community. When creating new theories, analyzing data, or developing new interventions, it is critical that you understand the population you are trying to impact. By treating my experience as a third generation, documented, Latino of Mexican origin the same as the experiences of a first-generation, undocumented, Latina of Guatemalan origin, we are doing a disservice to both of us.

The first manuscript presented underscores the importance of being more critical of what it means to be Latinx in research and provides a framework for how this is accomplished through a strengths-based lens. Through utilizing the intersectional emphasis that Latinx critical theory provides (Stefancic, 1997; Valdes, 1997) in conjunction with the strengths-based lens community cultural wealth (CCW) describes (Yosso, 2005), we have an existing model for this work. I implore researchers to use these theories in conjunction with one another whenever they can to develop research that

better reflects the lived reality of our communities. I am not the first scholar to make these calls for more reflective research of the Latinx community (Crisp, et al., 2015; Garcia, et al., 2021; Lee & Ransom, 2011; Saenz, et al., 2009), but I do hope to be one of the last that needs to do so.

To that end, the second manuscript adds to the literature by exploring the gendered experiences of first-generation, documented, higher education students of Mexican origin. This qualitative study utilizing secondary data uses CCW as not only the lens to approach this work but also throughout the analysis of the interviews. Elements of CCW were coded in the data, with a gendered analysis of the findings occurring in the third round of coding. Findings most salient to the question of the gendered experience were reported, which included navigational, resistant, and social categories of cultural wealth. Family was key to the educational success of students, however seemed to be of greater support for Latinas in the sample rather than Latinos.

This supports other findings that suggest the cultural value of machismo pushes Latinos into the workforce (Cammarota, 2004; Perez, 2017; Saenz, et al. 2017). Students also mentioned that there were current programs at institutes of higher education that recognized and supported their cultural wealth, although the different genders seemed to engage with these programs differently. For Latinas, they would look to engage in programs that supported their resistant wealth, wanting to create on campus change that would better support their community. Latinos on the other hand used these programs, particularly sports, to find and strengthen a social network of support.

As this was a qualitative study, one of the limitations is that this information is difficult to generalize and only showed the experience of these students in one point in time, necessitating further research on this topic. To bolster this literature further, my third manuscript took a similar approach that I outlined in the second manuscript. First-generation, documented, higher education students of Mexican origin were interviewed, with the same methods using CCW and attempting to explore difference by gender. This study however interviewed students that were a part of the Youth Empowerment Program (YEP), an after-school program for Latinx students in Utah that focused on college readiness, amongst other outcomes, which ended in 2018. Study participants were interviewed four years after the program ended to share their experiences with YEP, their experiences in higher education, and how those two experiences might have compared.

While navigational and social cultural wealth findings were reported again, which were the same as in the second manuscript, aspirational wealth was shared rather than resistant wealth in this third manuscript. This owes to the gendered analysis, with aspirational cultural wealth displaying more possible gender differences in this sample; this could be due to the smaller sample size than in manuscript two, demographic differences beyond the shared identities listed, their time in YEP, or perhaps the difference in interviewers and questions. Regardless, students expressed similar findings to the importance of family and having a strong support network. For YEP students, the mentoring connections that were developed in the program were critical to their navigation and social support, along with nurturing their aspirational goals. Even once

YEP ended, having trusting adults in their lives seemed to encourage students to join other programs when they went on to higher education.

Gender differences in this study were not as apparent as in manuscript two. However, machismo was similarly reported as a possible contributor to Latinos graduating at a lower rate than Latinas. Where the gender difference was palpable was in recruitment, as there were fewer Latinos in YEP that attended higher education than Latinas despite the original pool of students being relatively even gender wise. As of this writing, two of the Latinos in the sample had stopped attending school to focus on work, with all 4 of the Latinas continuing in their education. Beyond machismo, findings in this study contradicted manuscript two, in that YEP Latinas were more invested in extra curricular on campus programming for the social aspect, with only one of the YEP Latinos strongly expressing the impact a program like this had on his success. With the two YEP Latinos no longer being involved in higher education, there is the possibility that participating in more accessible programming could have bolstered their educational success. Future studies should continue to investigate the value of these on campus programs for this community, elements of the programs that are effective, and recruitment efforts for students in this sample.

Overall, this dissertation has contributed to the developing conversation of better understanding specific groups within the Latinx community. By utilizing Latinx critical theory and community cultural wealth, I have presented a framework for how this work can be conducted. I then applied this framework in two studies using similar methods in an attempt to illuminate potential gender differences between first generation,

documented, higher education students of Mexican origin. While other work should continue illuminating the experiences of those with other identities, for this group navigational and social wealth were consistently apparent. These strengths were in large part derived from family, although this was not without some complications for some. The connections, love, and support the families showed these students referred to as motivation to create a better life through education. Navigational wealth developed in conjunction with social wealth, as in addition to family, connections made to other caring adults or peers through YEP or other programming was credited with a lot of student success. Tapping into those networks of support bolstered both aspirational wealth and resistant wealth needed to continue with their education.

I continue to be amazed by my community and the strength that we consistently show. I am so incredibly proud of all of my YEP students in particular and hope to have the chance to highlight each of their skills and abilities one day, whether that is shown through higher education or not. I am fortunate to be in a position that enables me to document some of these findings through research, and I hope to continue to do so throughout my career. As a Latino researcher, I do not often see myself reflected in the studies that I read. I do hope that these studies influence programs and policy to distribute more funding for Latinx students, more opportunities for students to engage in programs, increased outreach to students' families, and a focus on sustained, holistic, mentoring relationships. At the most basic level though, I hope students can start seeing themselves more in the literature and have their experiences, both successes and challenges, validated. To our Latinx students, you are here, you belong, you matter; si se puede!

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