

Describing the Development of Academic Identity for Mexican American Adolescents

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It is widely recognized that a high school education is a necessary credential to be able to compete successfully in today's global economy. A high school diploma opens doors to employment, but also has other advantages. By achieving a high school diploma, an individual has shown that they have gained the necessary skills to be a productive member of society. High school is intended to give people the basic skills necessary to navigate the complex society we live in. Unfortunately, some populations of adolescents are less likely to complete high school than others. Mexican American adolescents in particular are less likely to complete high school than any other group (35% of Mexican American adults under 25 have not finished high school as compared to 20% of the general population) (Census Bureau, 2010). Mexican Americans are a substantial (10%) portion of our population, therefore it is troubling to consider the consequences of leaving such a large part of American youth without the basic educational tools necessary to lead a productive, fulfilling life. How students think of themselves academically will affect their ability to receive these educational tools.

The goal of this investigation was to find out how different arenas of an individual Mexican American adolescent's life interact to affect the construction of an academic identity. Academic identity concerns how individuals conceptualize themselves as students. How adolescents conceptualize themselves academically provides them with a guideline for making meaning of experiences, motivation to pursue their goals, and pleasure from their life experiences (Harter, 1999). While they are doing this meaning making, they are being influenced in some way by the relationships they have in a variety of social contexts. Modern adolescents are connected in so many ways to so many people, it is important to understand how all their social contexts influence their development of something as important as an academic self.

The purpose of this project was to understand the essence of the experience of Mexican American adolescents, in terms of how they see themselves as a student. Further, I wanted to investigate what various areas of their lives mean to them when it comes to their academic identity. I proposed that some areas of importance would be the family, peer groups, neighborhood setting, and school environment. Each of these areas did contain actors that played a role in the interviewees' concept of themselves, but the story the adolescents told ended up being much more complex than simply an exchange between themselves and their environments.

One factor that is likely to impact the academic success of this population is their academic identity, or how they see themselves as students, what value they place on education, and how these internal feelings affect their behavior. Academic identity is thought to be an especially important factor for minority students' school success because minority groups are presented as academically unsuccessful in society, and internalization of this message could cause young people to view themselves in line with the broader social representations and behave accordingly by disengaging with school (Gonzalez, 1999). This disengagement might happen because of an inability to navigate the conflict between their ethnic identity and their identity as a student.

When it comes to developing a sense of self, there are certain needs an individual has that require a construction of self. One constructs a sense of self in order to maintain a favorable sense of his or her attributes, maximize pleasure and minimize pain, develop and maintain a coherent picture of the world and to maintain relatedness with others (Harter, 1999). If in order to maintain a coherent picture of their minority ethnic identity an adolescent feels they have to disengage from school, they might do so. There are both global and domain specific self-

evaluations. If certain domains of their identity are in conflict with one another, this may cause the adolescent psychological distress, which could cause them to disengage academically. Also, they could just eliminate the possibility of constructing an identity as a student. This research focused on the specific domain of academic self-concept, how other domains may or may not be in conflict with their academic self, and what these adolescents say about navigating possible conflicts.

Harter (1999) emphasizes that the concept of self is both a cognitive and social construction. During adolescence cognitive abilities begin to develop that support construction of multiple selves. Also during adolescence, there are increasingly more social contexts for an individual to navigate. Adolescents are able to identify that they are different people in different contexts, and are cognitively able to see that their separate selves can conflict. This conflict can be a source of stress, especially in middle adolescence. It is not until late adolescence or early adulthood that they are able to integrate their separate identities into a coherent sense of self (Harter, 1999). These social contexts are related to the way a student conceptualizes themselves academically. At the outset of this investigation, I expected to find that social contexts were especially relevant because of the social nature of Mexican and Mexican American culture.

Early adolescence is when adolescents first recognize that they have different selves in different situations (Harter, 1999). However, in early adolescence there is not a recognition of any conflict between these different selves, therefore it is not problematic. Middle adolescence, around early high school years, is a time when these inconsistencies of self become more problematic. This study focused on the high school age group because that is a time when these conflicts come to the forefront. It is possible that for these adolescents, an understanding of self in the academic domain that is different from sense of self in the peer or family domain may

create conflict that causes academic performance to suffer. As stated before, individuals will maintain whatever identities allow them to harbor a favorable sense of their attributes. Since self-worth in one domain may be more influential to overall self-worth than self-worth in other domains, adolescents may conserve the concept of themselves in those domains that are important to them (Harter, 1999). For example, if academics is an important domain for me, then if I am a good student, I am a worthwhile person. Perceptions of self-worth are an important aspect of identity to consider because self-worth may affect academic outcomes. Middle adolescents are preoccupied with which one of their multiple selves represent the “real me (Harter, 1999).” Therefore if they do not perceive themselves as able academically, they may, in order to preserve a favorable self-concept, disengage from school. Navigating multiple selves may prove especially difficult for minority adolescents who have to navigate their own culture as well as the dominant culture. Because of the unique identity challenges of middle adolescence for minorities, this may be a time when adolescents start to shy away from a positive sense of academic identity because of their inability to integrate it with their other concepts of self.

As adolescents progress towards the end of their high school years, they are still navigating multiple selves, while also beginning to envision possible future selves (Harter, 1999). This is especially important when considering the academic realm. When adolescents start envisioning their futures, much of what they see as possible is dependent on their academic success. It is also dependent on what models they have seen for success. This is relevant to Mexican American adolescents because they may not have seen many models of Mexican American people in positions of power. Therefore, they may not envision positions like that for themselves. Often, adolescents (as well as adults) envision an “ideal self,” including what they

would like to become in the future. It is possible that this ideal self is shaped in part by social actors in an adolescent's life. If they perceive themselves as unable to succeed academically, they are at risk for not reaching their potential. Also, when expectations from others have been internalized, and the actual self does not live up to the ideal self, psychological conflict can arise (Harter, 1999). This in turn could affect school performance.

Prior research has identified a number of factors that affect the development of an academic identity for high school students including family, peers, neighborhood, school environment and generational status. This study maintains space for the adolescents themselves to name how the different social arenas in their lives are related to their academic identity. Since many Mexican American students are not succeeding in the school system as it exists today, it is necessary to have a deeper understanding of this population.

This study sought to explain how different realms of influence in a Mexican American adolescent's life are related to their identity development in terms of academics. Also, this study sought to explore from the words of the adolescent how these realms are related to each other, and how adolescents perceive those interactions are affecting their academic identity formation. The main question asked in this study is: How do Mexican Americans construct their academic identity and how do various social domains influence this construction? Specifically, the study explored:

1. How do Mexican American adolescents conceptualize themselves as students?
2. What factors, such as peers, family, neighborhood and school environment, contribute to the students' construction of their academic identity?
 - a. What is the actual content of the messages from these contexts?

3. How do adolescents negotiate and make meaning from the messages received from these contexts?

a. Do adolescents perceive conflict between these messages?

b. How do they manage this conflict?

It was expected that a variety of factors would emerge as contributing to the development of this aspect of identity, such as friends, family, adults in the school and community. It was the intent of this study to ask what parts of Mexican American adolescents' worlds are important for them in relation to their academic identity without assuming that particular groups would be more influential than others. As mentioned before, the interviews led to a much richer picture than was expected when conceptualizing the research questions. As the study evolved, the questions of what areas of life were influential for them fell to the background, and the influences that they deemed important became clear.

Although this study focused d exclusively on Mexican American students, due to a lack of literature specifically on Mexican American adolescents, the review of the literature includes studies that focused on Latinos overall, as well as other populations of Latinos. The review of similar populations is appropriate because of some similarities across Latino ethnicities. However, this researcher acknowledges that it is problematic to lump all people from South and Central America and the Caribbean under the umbrella "Latino." This is why this particular investigation focused ed on one sub-group, Mexican Americans.

This study used the phenomenological approach as a method of understanding the essence of the experience of constructing an academic identity. Phenomenology focuses on the individuals experience as interpreted by the individual. It entails hearing directly from the participants, and then checking in with them periodically during the analytic process to assure that the researcher

is staying true to the participant's experience. Phenomenology also necessarily acknowledges the role of the researcher, and the researcher's experience in conducting the study. As a researcher, I came into the research with a set of ideas that were confirmed, discredited, challenged and validated all in the process of performing the study.

Literature Review

Background and Significance

Past studies concerning the academic lives of Latino adolescents have focused on peer groups (Azmitia, & Cooper, 2001; Berndt, & Keefe, 1995; Berndt, Laychak, & Park, 1990; Delgado-Gaitan, 1986), family influence (McNeal Jr., 1999), school environment (Lee & Burkham, 2003) and neighborhood (Gillock & Reyes, 1999) individually as possible mechanisms for influence in these children's lives. All of these areas of an adolescents' life are important to their development of identity, specifically academic identity, however little research has investigated how Mexican- American adolescents' perceive these areas work together to help construct an academic identity. These studies inform several possible pathways of influence in the development of academic identity for Mexican American adolescents, and as of yet few studies could be found that asked the adolescents themselves to describe how social relationships in their lives influence the construction of an understanding of themselves as students. This study set out to describe how those relationships shaped these young people, and in the process found that these relationships were more nuanced, and perhaps less important than originally thought.

Because of the phenomenological approach, I was able to hear directly from the individuals, and focus in on the essence of experience from those who experience it. Identity theories inform how social domains can influence identity construction. Between these two

frameworks, I was able to situate my idea of how Mexican American adolescents' environments shape their views of their academic identity before beginning the research. In the following section, I will review the literature, then I will discuss how the study intended to describe the interaction of these social domains and their relationship to the construction of academic identity.

Identity

Adolescence is a time of identity exploration and formation (Quintana, 2007). Identity formation is a process that is influenced by membership in social groups (Fuligni & Witkow, 2005). By some it is considered the way one presents oneself in the context of social relationships (Davidson, 1996). It cannot be ignored that identity is constructed alongside social and institutional influences. Academic identity, like other aspects of identity, is tied to politics, economics and personal circumstances (Davidson, 1996).

Many studies talk about the formation of an ethnic identity, but less about academic identity. We can draw similarities in influences on the development of ethnic identity with possible pathways of influence on academic identity. Racial and ethnic identity development involves locating oneself in terms of membership in a racial or ethnic group (Quintana, 2007). Academic identity may involve similarly locating oneself in an academic community. The way in which one defines oneself comes from experiences with other people, and situating oneself in social categories (Devos & Cruz Torres, 2007).

It is possible that ethnic identity and academic identity are at times competing aspects of oneself. Oyserman and colleagues (2006) discussed the idea that school focused identities, which they termed "possible selves" were difficult for adolescents to maintain if they saw their school self as being incongruent with their ethnic or racial social identities. Identifying with social groups reinforces the integration of the group's values into one's identity. In this study, I

intended to find out how participation in and interaction with social groups would create conflict or stress, and how it would be resolved. In the end, the conflict I sought was not present in the way that I thought it would be, and the influence of relationships was far more dependent on the adolescent's interpretation of those relationships than the actual interactions that occurred.

Significant others were mentioned over and over again as part of these young people's academic lives, and to begin thinking about these actors, it is helpful to look at some relevant research on the topic.

Significant others and identity. A study of 43 adolescents, grades 9-12, by Quintana, Castañeda-English and Ybarra (1999) found that parent socialization predicted ethnic identity development. Parental ethnic socialization was associated with children's ethnic knowledge in at least one other study (Quintana & Vera, 1999). They found that both parent socialization as well as normative development influenced the formation of ethnic identity in adolescence. If parents influence ethnic identity development, we should consider how the family might influence academic identity development.

Other studies have found that identification with important people in one's life do influence one's own identity. A study by Devos and Cruz Torres (2007) found that identifying with someone who you feel is high achieving is related to one's own sense of being a high achiever. Again, this study was conducted with college-aged participants, so the results may not translate for high school students. It is important that we recognize, however, that the social relationships one has really impact how individuals conceptualize themselves. Previous studies have documented the importance of relationships in Latino families in particular (Azmitia, 2001). Throughout the process of engaging with these young people, however, I found that there was a different way of thinking about commitment and loyalty to family than what is often

presented in the literature.

Identity and school. As researchers in education, it is important that we not buy in to the old idea that as time goes on, more students of color will construct more “mainstream” identities (Davidson, 1996). We cannot assume that the dominant culture’s expectations of how one should succeed in school is the only path to success for minority students. In Ann Locke Davidsson’s book *Making and Molding Identity in Schools* (1996), she emphasizes that in the past, students of color have been expected to abandon their cultural identity in order to assimilate to the path of success dictated by dominant society. In reality, a student’s culture does not have to be in direct tension with their ability to identify as an academically successful person. Some studies have shown that ethnic identity is in opposition to academic identity, while others have found the opposite. The adolescents interviewed in this study showed how it can be true that you have to distance yourselves from minority stereotypes while also embracing your ethnic identity in order to succeed academically.

A study by Fuligni and Witkow (2005) described how strength of association with one’s ethnicity influenced academic motivation and achievement. They looked at Mexican, Chinese and European students in the U.S. They found that Mexican students (as well as Chinese) had higher ethnic centrality than European students. Students with stronger ethnic centrality had more positive academic attitudes. The question remains then, how are Latino students showing a strong sense of ethnic identity, which should, according to this study, be associated with better academic attitudes, and not performing up to par with European students? Before doing interviews, I believed that perhaps there is something about strongly identifying as Mexican, or Latino, that conflicts with identifying as a strong student. Authors Fuligni and Witkow (2005) suggest that to better understand the connection between academics and identity, we need to

assess the adolescent's own interpretations of how their identity is constructed. Through the interviews, I began to see how some people could interpret the identities of the students I interviewed as being un-Mexican, whereas a closer examination reveals that not to be the case at all.

Other studies contradict what Fuligni and Witkow found. For example, one study by Devos and Cruz Torres (2007) found that the more Latino college students identified with their ethnic group, the less they identified with academic achievement. Since these students were college aged (from 18-31 years old), it is likely that the disconnect between academics and ethnicity came somewhere during high school or even before. This is why it is important to hear from adolescents still in high school. I thought that if we can locate the point at which a disconnect between Latino ethnicity and academic achievement begins to form, we might be better able to intervene. After considering the actual results, it became clear that there may not be a disconnect between Latino ethnic identity and academic achievement, but that there are several ways to "be Latino," and that the way that some adolescents identify may be more academically useful than others.

When considering identity, how one thinks of oneself presently is only one aspect of the equation. In addition to a present day concept of self, adolescents are motivated by the possibility of what they may become. A study by Oyserman, Bybee and Terry (2006) looked at an intervention for how adolescents envisioned their possible selves. In three low-income Detroit middle schools, they held an intervention where they helped students to envision their possible selves as well as the ways they could achieve them, as well as helped students to create a connection between those possible selves and their current social identity. Their study was based on the idea that one of the things related to a lack of school success for these students was

the fact that their social identities, including ethnic identity, were at odds with their positive conceptions of possible selves. They found that through their intervention, they were able to help students attain the goals they needed to meet to achieve their academic possible selves. In addition, the results lasted over at least two years. This study could help us understand that even when social identities conflict with academic identity, there are ways of bridging the gap between them.

The schools where minority students find the most success are those where cultural or ethnic identity is synonymous with academic achievement (Davidson, 1996). Another study looked at how an academic outreach program facilitated academic and cultural identity (Rodriguez, Jones, Pang & Park, 2004). This paper explained how culturally competent models of education could facilitate identity development. The authors found that in their summer program, where all races and ethnicities were respected, held to the same standards, and encouraged to assist one another, the students gained a stronger sense of self. Identity construction can be fostered by academic environments, and it was my purpose in this investigation to see what kinds of culturally competent experiences Mexican American students have had (or not had) and how those experiences have affected their academic identity. Since Latinos are not doing as well as other groups in the current school situation, perhaps the cultural competence is an aspect that would help this group to succeed. Utilizing a phenomenological approach to investigate Latino students' perceptions of the contexts important to their academic identity was a way to hear from the adolescents themselves if they find that schools are lacking in this aspect, and how it could be improved if in fact it is lacking. The sample in this study made it clear that in their environments there were vast examples of a need for greater cultural competence in both adult and peer realms.

When considering the construction of an academic identity, I began by researching how other identities or “selves” that an adolescent has may conflict. In Phelan, Davidson and Yu’s book *Adolescents’ Worlds* (1996), they describe examples of when academic identity is in conflict with other identities and examples of when it is not. In their model, they describe a mixture of typologies of how the different domains of student’s lives interact and how they negotiate transitions between domains. One of the typologies is that the lives of students inside and outside of school are congruent, and without conflict between the two, these students manage very well. Another typology is that the worlds inside and outside of school are different, and in that case some students manage the conflict between the two well, and others either manage it poorly, or refuse to manage it at all. When the world outside of school is so different from the world inside school, some students reject a school identity as even a possibility. In some cases, even when the worlds in and out of school seemed congruent, there were students who had trouble managing an academic identity. In this study, I assumed I would hear about some of the same conflict, and investigate how it was negotiated, but the students I interviewed would challenge the idea that there had to be any conflict in the first place.

Peer Groups

Social relationships with peers may be especially important to Latino adolescents. In a two-year longitudinal study by Way, Cowal, Gingald, Pahl and Bissessar (2001), the friendships of 389 adolescents of different ethnicities were studied. Latinos were found to be more likely than Asian American and African American students to have “ideal” friendships. Due to my own assumptions and history with the social nature of Latino culture, this result was not surprising. Therefore, it seemed particularly important that we pay attention to the influence of peer relationships on the academic lives and the academic identity of Latino adolescents.

Previous research has shown that peer groups are important socializing agents in the academic lives of adolescents. For example, Kindermann (2007) found evidence that academic engagement was more strongly related to peer groups than to other social influences. This finding, although significant, does not explain to us how peer groups interact with other areas of adolescent life. Other research has shown that the connection that an adolescent feels to their peer group has an influence on how they conceptualize themselves academically (Azmitia, Ittel, & Radmacher, 2005; Berndt & Keuhno, 1995; Berndt, Laychak, & Park, 1990). It was the intention of this study to let the adolescents tell how their peer group influences them, yet in the search to answer the “how” of peer influence, a more complex story of connectedness and individual agency unfolded.

I also reviewed research that had focused specifically on peer influence for Latino adolescents. Bámaca and Umaña-Taylor (2006) focused on peer pressure resistance in Latino adolescents. They issued questionnaires to 564 adolescents ranging in age from 13 to 19 years old. They investigated ethnicity, generational status, resistance to peer pressure, emotional autonomy from parents and self-esteem. They found that peer pressure resistance for Latino students depended strongly on generational status and emotional autonomy from parents. The 2nd and 3rd generation immigrants were more likely to have greater emotional autonomy from parents, and therefore rely more heavily on peer influence for shaping their behavior. This is a great example of how social domains can interact. The family domain had an effect on the peer domain in this study, with a decrease of influence in one creating an increase in the influence of the other.

Association with deviant peers may be more common for Latino adolescents living in tough economic conditions. This association could possibly account for some any stress that led

Latino adolescents to experience psychological distress. The conflict between the peer domain and what is expected in the academic domain may cause distress that affects academic performance. In a study of 300 Latino, European and African American adolescents, Barrera et al (2002) investigated this link. They questioned 300 adolescents and their parents. Adolescent participants ranged in age from 11 to 15 years old. They investigated objective indicators of economic status, perceived economic hardship, stress outside the family, association with deviant peers, and internalizing and externalizing symptoms. They also looked at parents' depressive symptoms and parental support. They found association with deviant peers to be related to both externalizing and internalizing behaviors. This may include negative school behaviors such as truancy and poor grades.

The peer group can serve as an important source of emotional support when it comes to academics. Peer support and academic guidance is more important for Latino adolescents than Latino children (Azmitia & Cooper, 2001). However, Latino adolescents also see peers as a greater challenge than do younger youth. Azmitia and Cooper (2001) studied 106 Latino and European American early adolescents about peer resources, and peer encouragement or discouragement of school. Peer encouragement or discouragement of school was related to grades in previous research (Azmitia & Cooper, 2001). Because peer support is known to be influential on academic achievement, it is likely that it also will have an impact on academic identity formation.

It is hard to deny, in light of this research, that peers are important to academic identity, however a focus specifically on Mexican- American adolescents can give us more insight into the mechanisms for peer influence in this group. How peers influence the construction of academic identity remains yet to be determined. Phenomenology allows for us as researchers

and educators to ask questions about the essence of this process of constructing an academic identity. By hearing from adolescents, I sought to infer some of the mechanisms for how different social domains influence their academic identity. In searching for the keys to these mechanisms, however, it was just as important to the phenomenological process to let the questions evolve, and be open to leaving these questions unanswered, while finding answers to questions I did not even know to ask.

Family Influence

Family relationships can also contribute to academic outcomes. Parental support is associated with more academic achievement in Latino youth (DeGarmo & Martinez, 2006; Henry, Merten, Plunkett & Sands, 2008). It makes sense that the support of a significant other such as parents would also influence academic identity formation as well as academic achievement. Parent's previous experience with education could be a possible factor in their shaping of their child's academic identity. Also, how much the family microsystem interacts with the school microsystem could have an effect on how an adolescent conceptualizes himself or herself academically. Another pathway of influence is the amount of monitoring a family does of an adolescent. With more monitoring, the possibility for peers to influence academic identity is diminished (Henry, Merten, Plunkett & Sands, 2008).

As proposed earlier, greater parent-school involvement has been found to lead to higher GPA (Martinez Jr., DeGarmo & Eddy, 2009). The study by Martinez Jr., DeGarmo and Eddy (2009) surveyed three samples of Latinos. One sample was 314 students from four school districts. The second sample was 116 participants in a Latino Youth Summit, and the third sample was 130 parents of Latino youth. Utilizing these samples, Martinez Jr. and colleagues gathered data on such variables as ethnicity, satisfaction with school, involvement with school,

discriminatory and unwelcoming school experiences and school performance and social support from peers and parents. They found parent support to be especially influential on GPA. However, just knowing that parenting affects GPA may not give us the whole picture of how the mechanisms of influence work. A study like this hints that parent-school involvement would be influential in academic identity formation but does not allow the adolescent themselves to tell us how or why families might be important to their schooling. This study allowed the students to define what parent support of academics looked like, and it ended up being less about direct parent to school contact, and more about role modeling and encouragement.

A study by Alfaro, Umaña-Taylor and Bámaca (2006) surveyed 324 9th and 10th grade Latino students from 5 schools regarding parental support. The results suggest that fathers' academic support led to higher motivation for boys, and mothers' academic support led to higher motivation for girls. They asked about academic motivation, perceived academic support, generational status and parents' educational attainment. Although this gives us insight into the differences between girls' and boys' academic motivation, it does not tell us why mothers are more effective for girls or why fathers are more effective for boys. While the interviews in this study allowed for analysis of differences between females and males, the data did not naturally go in that direction, so that area of interest remains to be investigated.

In addition to support generally, the specific way in which mothers talk to their children about decision-making was found in at least one study to have an effect on academics (Tenenbaum, Porche, Snow, Tabors & Ross, 2007). When mothers encouraged children to have agency in the decision making process, they were more likely to stand firm in their convictions against the pressure of outside influences. In a study by McNeal (1999), parent involvement overall, including monitoring, reduced truancy and dropping out of school.

Families can also influence school through the cultural values they transmit. This is a particular area of interest when it comes to the development of an academic identity. If Mexican American students are seen as an underachieving group by society, this may impact the way students negotiate their identity as both student and Mexican American. Relationships between cultural values and negative stereotypes can be inferred to influence academic identity.

It has been found that students with high orientations towards traditional Mexican values have higher GPAs than those oriented toward Anglo values. There is a positive relationship between ethnic identity affirmation, which may be influenced by parent socialization, and school performance (Supple, Ghazarian, Frabutt, Plunkett & Sands, 2006). Interestingly, those with the highest GPAs are those that have a high orientation to both Mexican and Anglo values (Gonzales, et al, 2007; Lopez, Ehly & Garcia-Vazquez, 2002). This biculturalism may serve as a means for accessing resources available in schools while still maintaining a positive cultural identity. Bilingualism has also been linked to more school success in another study by Rumberger and Larson (1998). They studied 574 students and looked at their academic achievement, educational engagement, and educational commitment. They attributed their finding that bicultural students fared best to a kind of cultural advantage in contrast to the oft discussed socioeconomic advantage often cited in literature around Latino students academic achievement.

One can assume that all students of Mexican American origin have some degree of biculturalism. The world perceives them as different from the mainstream; therefore they have to negotiate a way to maintain their identity while still being able to navigate mainstream America. Their biculturalism can be fostered or hindered by the socialization of their families, among other actors. In the results of this study, the reader will notice that the adolescents have a

complex yet elegant way of negotiating this balance.

The family domain is one social arena that may be influential on the construction of an academic identity. Parent-school involvement, parents academic support, the way parents talk about decision-making and the cultural values they transmit are all components of the relationship between family and school. The relationships an adolescent has with their family could influence their identity in different ways depending on the interpretation by the individual young person.

School Environment

Many of the studies on school environment focus on discrimination, or a lack of fit between Latino culture outside of school and the environment present in American high schools (DeGarmo & Martinez, Jr, 2006; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Cooper et al, 2002). Latino children are more segregated in schools than even African American children (Quintana, 2007). When Spanish is highly valued in the school, there may be a lower drop out rate (Michael, Andrade & Bartlett, 2008). If being Mexican American is at odds with being a successful student in school, how might that shape the academic identity of the Mexican American students? It could be that it is harder for students to reconcile their Mexican American identity with their student identity when their language and culture is not seen as valued within the school setting. A caring environment and a staff comprised of bilingual individuals may be especially beneficial to Latino students (Michael, Andrade & Bartlett, 2008). In Michael, Andrade and Bartlett's 2008 study, they investigated a high school in New York where Spanish was explicitly valued. After three years of ethnographic research, they came to certain conclusions about why this school was so successful. One of their main findings was that the respect for Spanish language was an invaluable asset at this school. Also, they found that teachers and students in this school

developed authentic caring relationships. Students at this school were exposed to teachers and administrators who were bilingual. Having role models that were fluent in both Spanish and English, and who regularly engaged competently in their communities, was invaluable to the students. This may have helped them construct a strong academic identity because of the possibility of a personal connection to the school.

More Latino than non-Latino students report finding barriers to their engagement in school activities (Martinez Jr, DeGarmo & Eddy, 2009). It can be speculated that part of these barriers is discrimination, while another part is a sense that being Latino is a barrier in itself to accessing academic resources. Schools may not offer the contextual cues necessary for Mexican American students to identify that they are capable academically (Oyserman, Bybee & Terry, 2006). When the idea that Mexican American students are unsuccessful in school is easily accessible, it is difficult for those students to envision themselves as contrary to that belief. Minority students may get less information about themselves as academically competent, and therefore their behavior may reflect that lack of academic encouragement. Through the phenomenological process, I was able to hear from the adolescents that things I expected to be barriers were interpreted differently by them than the literature would lead me to believe.

The ways in which high schools are structured have been demonstrated to be a major influence on the academic achievement of Latinos (LaRoche & Shriberg, 2004). Academic track placement can have a large effect on the outcomes for the many Latino adolescents who are English Language Learners. In fact, track placement can be a larger predictor of academic success than English proficiency (Callahan, 2005). The influence that placement has on Latino students depends, as always, on the larger context. In schools with high immigrant populations, ESL placement is beneficial, but in schools with low immigrant populations, ESL placement is

detrimental, perhaps because of the stigma attached to it in that environment (Callahan, Wilkinson & Muller, 2008). Only one young person from the group of adolescents in the current study was an ESL student, and therefore the impact of ESL remained outside the realm of analysis.

Teacher's relationships with their students are important to all students, and perhaps especially Latino students. Teachers' academic support is shown to be associated with higher motivation for Latino students in several studies (Alfaro, Umaña-Taylor & Bámaca, 2006; Martinez Jr., DeGarmo & Eddy, 2009). We do not know however, what support looks like, and how the students interpret supportive actions on the part of teachers. "School support" as defined by DeGarmo and Martinez (2006) is associated with more academic achievement for Latino students (DeGarmo & Martinez, 2006). DeGarmo and Martinez (2006) studied 278 Latino students from 6th to 12th grades, and 116 Latino students between 7th and 12th grades. Between their two samples, they measured academic well-being and social support. Not only did they see school support as being good for academic well being, they also saw that discrimination in the school was associated with lower academic well-being.

A lack of a caring environment in school can lead to high school drop out for Latino adolescents (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009). This made sense to me going into this investigation, again because of the literature I had read as well as my own history with Latino populations, and therefore my assumption of the relational culture of Latinos. It is well known that Latino families place a great emphasis on closeness and relationships. These studies led me to expect to find that Latino adolescents would also place an emphasis on relationships in other realms of their life, including school. Given the above reasons, I expected that these relationships would be sure to impact the way adolescents construct their academic identity.

Neighborhood and Larger Context

The socioeconomic status of the area in which an adolescent lives can also be an important part of developing a sense of self for adolescents. In particular for many Latino adolescents, the neighborhoods they live in are disproportionately poor and under resourced in comparison to other groups. Low SES (as well as high mobility) may account for the fact that even when Latino students have social capital in school, research has found that they still do not experience academic success at the same rate as their non-Latino counterparts. The economic conditions in which a child is raised can threaten parenting, as well as being associated with lower school quality, and exposure to adverse peer groups (Barrera et al, 2002). Being in a neighborhood where an adolescent does not see many academically successful role models may hinder their ability to think of themselves as academically capable (Oyserman, Bybee & Terry, 2006). When minority adolescents envision their possible selves, they may have difficulty envisioning a positive academic self partly due to the accessibility of negative images about their ethnic group. Many [Mexican American](#) adolescents may have trouble not only envisioning themselves as academically successful individuals, but also may have difficulty integrating an academic sense of self with the images of their ethnic group that are reinforced in their neighborhoods and in society in general. In the present study, most of the participants were not from low SES neighborhoods, and therefore the expectations that I had as a researcher based on the literature were not found to be true. It is still useful to understand some of the research around neighborhood effects for Latino adolescents however, as a way to situate the issues surrounding academics for Latino students.

A study by Battle and Pastrana, Jr., (2007) found socioeconomic status to be 10 times more powerful than race in predicting 12th grade outcomes for Latino youth. Since [Mexican](#)

American students are disproportionately low SES, it is possible that this arena of their life has a large impact on their development. The things that go along with low SES may be very important concerning the development of their academic identity. Low SES neighborhoods tend to have a low availability of jobs for those who do complete high school and few role models of academic success. The lack of promising options for their future is certain to impact the possible selves a Mexican American adolescent envisions for himself or herself.

High SES Mexican students have greater school social capital than lower SES Mexican students (Stanton-Salazaar & Dornbusch, 1995). The impact that SES can have on school social capital is there, but we do not know how it functions. Is it because there are less academic resources in an economically disadvantaged neighborhood? As the results of the present study will show, the effect of the neighborhoods and communities that these young people are living in is more subtle and complex than a count of tangible resources.

Another study found that low neighborhood quality was significantly related to low reading achievement for Latino youth (Eamon, 2005). The authors suggest that it could be the case that neighborhood quality may have to do with the physical environment or the social environment. The actors present in this environment represent another possible domain of influence on the construction of an adolescent's academic identity. Also, it could have to do with the fact that low SES parents may be working more, may have more single-family homes, or may be less educated. Simply the perception of living in a high-risk neighborhood can be detrimental to academic achievement of Latinos (Henry, Merten, Plunkett & Sands, 2008). All these things could interact with neighborhood quality, and the intention of this investigation was to uncover those subtleties.

These studies led me to expect that there may be some significant ways in which the

neighborhood microsystem could affect academic identity. These studies point to the idea that one of the most likely factors is the SES of the neighborhood. As youth were interviewed in this study, more was expected to come to light on the exact mechanisms of this influence on the construction of their academic identity.

Between peers, family, school and neighborhood, there are many opportunities for relationships to relate to the construction of an academic identity for Mexican American adolescents. The current study left a space for the adolescents themselves to talk about these domains, as well as to tell us what were the important factors, if not the issues hypothesized at the outset of the investigation. In the current study, interview techniques were used to ascertain an idea of how adolescents perceive their worlds to affect their construction of academic identity.

Methods

Methodological Approach

To capture the everyday experiences affecting the phenomenon of constructing an academic identity, the phenomenological approach was well suited to this investigation. Phenomenology is suited to identifying the essence of a human experience from the point of view of the individuals of concern (Creswell, 2009). The goal is to focus on how the participants view their experience. It is all about how the individual understands and makes meaning of their lives. I conducted interviews with the purpose of identifying the process of constructing an academic identity (Creswell et al., 2007). I looked at how they perceived the actors in different social domains to have affected how they conceptualize themselves as students and their place in the academic realm. I looked at how their interactions in different social domains were related to the “self” that they project in school.

Phenomenology is usually based on a “small number of subjects through extensive and prolonged engagement (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). By conducting interviews with the adolescents and checking in with them to confirm my interpretations, I was able to analyze their experiences. Phenomenological studies “seek to explore the experience and allow the person’s experience to speak so that it may be understood (Usher, 2001).” As experts on their own construction of identity, the adolescents allowed me a chance to understand their experiences through their eyes. The philosophy behind phenomenology challenged me as a researcher to let the data from the interviews tell the story, even as I wanted to frame the results around my own preconceived notions from readings and experience.

Participants

I conducted in-depth interviews with 12 participants from a variety of high schools within the Twin Cities Metro area. The participants ranged in age from 14-16, with half in 9th grade and half in 10th grade. Six participants were male and six were female. All participants reported getting good grades. More than half the sample reported getting mostly As and Bs, with only one student reporting a C average. They all attended public school. Half of the students attended school in the city, half in the suburbs. All identified as Mexican American. All the students but three reported English as their first language, with Spanish being the first language of those three. Further, all were born in the United States, except for two who were born in Mexico.

I recruited participants using snowball-sampling procedures. I posted flyers for the study in locations around Saint Paul and Minneapolis near schools, recreation centers and on highly trafficked streets in Mexican neighborhoods. Once I identified some students, they were my main resource for other possible students. I asked students to contact me via phone or email.

After a student contacted me, I met with him or her at his or her home and then the student's parents were asked to sign a document giving me permission to interview their child(ren). This consent form outlined the procedures of the interview as well as the purpose of the study. It included a notice that the interview data collected would not be shared with them. Also, I asked students to sign an assent form before the beginning of the interview.

Procedures

Interviews were open-ended, so as to allow the participants to bring their own views in their own words into the interview. Because previous research has focused on peers, neighborhoods, families and schools as important agents of influence in academic success of adolescents, the interviews also focused specifically on these contexts (Phelan, Davidson & Yu, 1996). This does not imply that all of these areas would be important to the participants' sense of academic identity, but that there was space for them to be brought up even in the context of their lack of importance. If these did not arise through the natural flow of the interview, they were probed for by the interviewer. As always with qualitative work, I hoped to discover the "who, when, why and how" of each of the contexts that the participant saw as relevant, as suggested in Charmaz (2006). It was important to me to understand who the actors were in their social realms and how the young people interacted with these actors. However, the young people ended up not emphasizing the individual actor's importance as much as their own interpretations of the things people said and did around them.

The interview was tape recorded, with the tapes being destroyed after the study was complete. Interviews were conducted in English or Spanish, depending on the preference of the participant. I conducted the interviews in the participants' home, or in a place of the participants choosing. I transcribed all interviews and translated to English when necessary. If any concepts

did not translate well, they remained in the original language. I conducted new interviews until redundancy occurred and the researcher felt that saturation had been met. This occurred after interviewing six participants of each gender. For the Interview Guide see the Appendix.

Check backs consisted of phone interviews with each of the participants by the researcher. These interviews were not audio taped but the interviewer took extensive notes. The student's perspective on the progress of the description of their experience was noted and addressed in following revisions of the write-up. If they saw gaps or disagreed with my interpretations when I described the process of constructing an academic identity, I rewrote the description as suggested by the youth.

Analyses

For my analytic process, I followed the suggestion for phenomenological research, which is to analyze significant statements. I transcribed the interviews as well as listened to the tapes several times to holistically understand the construction of academic identity. These "first order" interpretations assisted me in coming up with "second order" interpretations, or the interpretations generated by the researcher (Thorkildsen, 2005). "First order" means that it comes directly from the interpretation of the source. "Second order" involves the researcher's perspective on the first person interpretations of the experience. In this interpretation the researcher acknowledges that they are necessarily affected by their own biases and not as true to the voice of the participant as the participant themselves. The first analysis led to a grouping of significant ideas into the a priori categories I had set out to look for: neighborhood, school, family and peers. Surprise! I had found exactly what I was looking for. As I reflected on the phenomenological process more, I realized that I had not done a good job of removing my preconceived notions and biases, and that further review of the interviews needed to be done to

see what the *adolescents themselves* were telling me about important factors contributing to their academic identities.

Notes were made of content as well as connections between different aspects of the transcripts. Then I reducedd the information to significant ideas, or “meaning units (Usher, 2001).” These meaning units were shared with the participants for reflection. I then combinedd these units into themes before writing a description of the construction of an academic identity, the way different social domains influence that construction and how understand conflict or lack thereof between those domains. This assisteded me in building a description of the essence of the phenomenon of constructing an academic identity as a Mexican American adolescent.

Through interviews, I was able to explore what issues adolescents saw as important agents of influence on their academic sense of self. I codeded for markers of how adolescents conceptualize themselves as students. I also codeded for what arenas and what actors in their lives have shaped this conceptualization. After coding the interviews and writing a summary, I went back to the participants to verify that I hadd found key elements of their development of academic identity. I describedd to them the themes that I hadd gleaned from the data they hadd provided. As I went through each theme I asked them to confirm or disconfirm whether the theme was relevant to their experience. I madede any changes they suggesteded before continuing with the final write up of the project.

Finally, I wrote a prototypical example of the essence of the experience across participants. I wrote a description of the process of the effects each social domain hadd on their thinking of themselves as a Mexican American student. I again returneded to my participants with the final write-up in order to make sure that the results were their own words, and that I hadd not interjected my own ideals into the process. The purpose of this check-back was to assure the

credibility of my study as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) who emphasize the importance of “trustworthiness” in qualitative research. Part of assuring trustworthiness is being able to assure that the findings are true to the voices of the interviewees that contributed to the study.

Because of the subjective nature of the analysis, it was necessary that as part of the process I acknowledged my position as an African-American graduate student and the possible influence that may have on conducting interviews with Mexican American adolescents.

As an African-American female who grew up in a white middle-class neighborhood, I am an outsider to this population. However, I have developed my own assumptions about the Mexican American adolescent population through a variety of experiences. First, I attended a bilingual school from kindergarten through 12th grade. All of my teachers were Latino, and many of my classmates were as well. I am fluent in Spanish and have a degree in Spanish Studies from the University of Minnesota. My experiences shaped my opinion of Latinos. I tend to think of their culture as highly relationship oriented. I also see it as a less individualistic culture than American culture. Herein lies my interest in this population, as well as my biggest barrier during the analysis. I saw that my Latino, especially Mexican American, peers were not succeeding as well as some others that have received the same schooling as they, and I wondered ed why that is.

Secondly, I worked with Latino high school students in a charter high school in the Midwest. At this school, I noticed that the one complaint that many students had from the schools they were in previously was the lack of a connection with their friends, teachers, and community at school. These observations have led me to be interested in how school and other environments interact, how the relationships in each of these realms affect young people, and how the youth themselves react to the interplay of all these arenas. In conducting my analyses,

however, my own biases needed to be set aside as much as possible in the development of an understanding of the construction of academic identity for Mexican American adolescents.

Results

The purpose of this study was to identify and understand the experience of constructing an academic identity from the perspectives of Mexican American adolescents. The following discussion focuses on the findings from interviews with the participants. This section starts with a description of one student in depth, as a way to familiarize the reader with the kind of young people that were interviewed. This is followed by a summary of generalities that arose from the responses to the more open-ended questions that began the interview. The final section outlines the themes that arose in the interviews by category.

As stated above, I went back to the participants with my categorization of these meaning units, and removed any that the participants found to be unimportant. For example, I had originally included “pressure to succeed” as an important category, but in going back to the participants, several pointed out that they did not intend to convey pressure in the quotes that I had derived that category from. I had taken their descriptions of social atmosphere at school or words they had heard from family members and labeled it “pressure,” though it was not how they had perceived it. Through categorization of these themes I then wrote a prototypical example of the essence of the experience, and again went back to participants to verify that I had captured their experience from their point of view, and had not interjected my own lens and my own biases.

Prototypical example: The Case of Ronald

Ronald is 16 years old, in 10th grade at a public school. He typically gets As and Bs in school. He and his family came to the United States when he was 4 years old. He speaks both

English and Spanish fluently. He lives in the suburbs with his parents and his younger sister in a comfortable home. They had recently moved to a “nicer” neighborhood after Ronald’s parents felt their previous neighborhood was deteriorating.

Ronald describes his school as “pretty good” but notes that there has been “an increase in violence.” He has not ever been involved with the violence at his school, as he is goal oriented in his desire to not let anything deter his academic success. Throughout the interview, Ronald emphasizes his focus on success. Ronald is all about “taking care of business” at school, he doesn’t stop to talk to friends between classes. He is on the varsity soccer team, and was named all-state honorable mention. Like other students I interviewed, Ronald had experienced harassment based on his ethnicity. “Since I’m Mexican, people will say like, racial slurs to me.” Also, like other students that I interviewed who shared the same experience, Ronald minimizes the harassment as a blip on his radar, claiming that it does not deter him from his goals. “Whatever they say, I just keep like, going on.”

Ronald feels compelled to be different than what people expect from a Mexican kid. He said that a lot of the other Mexican kids at his school act like gang-members, and that he has to go out of his way to pre-empt people’s judgment of him. “Other people might see me and say like, well he’s Mexican and then think ‘he’s the same as them.’”

Ronald finds inspiration for success in the modeling of his parents and his soccer coach. His coach has modeled a hard-work ethic, as have his parents. His parents have built their own business from the ground up, and now own a chain of restaurants. He has been told that if he works hard, he could even be more successful, since he is getting the head start of an education that they didn’t have.

Ronald surrounds himself with kids like himself in their interests and academic performance. His friends are athletes, and get mostly good grades and take advanced classes, and they are of a variety of ethnicities. He says he had one friend that wasn't as enthusiastic about school, and that he had to let that friendship go because of the negative influence.

Ronald constructs his academic identity by putting together pieces from his relationships in various areas of his life, his own ideas of what it means to be Mexican, as well as what he thinks others expect of him based on his Mexican-ness.

Construction of Mexican American Academic Identity: Themes emerging from open-ended questions

In this next section, I will present interpretations gathered from the interviews with all the students. I began the section by discussing a summary of the themes that emerged in the more open ended beginning of the interview. I did this because I was interested in learning from the young people the factors that they spontaneously raised based on the open-ended questions regarding the construction of their academic identity prior to any specific contextual prompts from me. As a reminder, the questions for this section of the interview were the following:

1. Walk me through a typical school day.
2. How would you describe yourself as a student?
3. Walk me through a positive experience that you have had in high school. How has that impacted the way you think of yourself as a student?
4. Walk me through a negative experience you have had in high school. How has that impacted the way you think of yourself as a student?

5. What does being Mexican- American mean to you when it comes to how you think of yourself as a student?

6. Who do you look up to as an educational role model and why?

a. How does this person compare to other people in your everyday life?

7. Do you think education is important? Why or why not?

8. What do you like most about school?

9. What do you like least about school?

The responses to these questions kept focusing around the people in their worlds.

Relationships were a recurring theme throughout the interview, starting in this open-ended section. When just talking about their school lives, adolescents spontaneously raised the following types of issues: how they interact with friends as well as the wider peer group, how teacher-student relationships or a lack thereof affects their perception of school, and how other adults such as family members and coaches also contribute.

Even in describing the step-by-step layout of their typical day, students focused each piece around a relationship. They described the beginning of their day by with whom they rode to school. They each had a unique way of starting the day, whether that be by meeting with friends by the lockers, checking in with a favorite teacher, or social time in the cafeteria. Many students cited talking with friends or being with friends as the thing they liked most about school. Most positive and negative experiences that participants described had to do with a kind of relationship.

The beginning of the interview also focused on the student's perception of the importance of education. This was further developed by having them describe any educational role models in their life. Although every participant said they did indeed think education was important, these open-ended questions allowed me to understand why they felt education was important and who had influenced that overall feeling. Students named a variety of types of relationships as being important. For some it was teachers that showed them education was important, for others, it was friends or family that encouraged them or modeled for them. One student even cited his girlfriend's dad as being his role model. He said, "every time I'm having troubles in school...her dad tells me, like gives me some inspirational advice." Similar encouragement came from a variety of actors for each participant.

The other concept that arose in this section is the complementary theme of agency. Although these students brought up relationships over and over again, they also described how they themselves were directing their lives. Some participants in this study raised the issue of their own self-influence. They directed with whom they chose to develop relationships, how they chose to connect or not connect with teachers, and how they directed their education. They described an understanding of themselves as actors in their environments, not just blank slates being acted upon and filled with ideas by their outside influences. For example, several students included getting good or bad grades as a positive experience or negative experience. These participants were quick to point out that they were the ones responsible for their good or bad grade. They attributed their good grades to hard work. For this group of participants, a bad grade was often cited as an exception to the rule, and a very negative experience, attributed to their own lack of prioritization, or temporarily giving in to the temptation of hanging out with friends when they could have been studying.

Constructing a Mexican American Academic Identity: Contextual Influences and

Relationships

In the next section of the results I will describe the themes that emerged from an analysis of the full interview—including the targeted prompts regarding the role of different contexts. The main questions I posed at the beginning of the research study were “How do Mexican American adolescents conceptualize themselves as students?” and “What factors, such as peers, family, neighborhood and school environment, contribute to the students construction of their academic identity?” Throughout the interviews, I discovered that two students could have similar experiences in one context, such as school, and yet have completely different experiences within another context, such as their families. Similarities in experiences in one context did not necessarily predict similarity in experience in another. The commonalities as well as the contrasts are discussed within each section.

Theme 1: Relationships and connectedness . Several relationships were highlighted in the interviews as being paramount to the participant’s school experience. Peers and friends were mentioned often, but also relationships with teachers, family, coaches, and community members appeared as influential in these kids’ construction of an understanding of themselves.

Peers. From the start of this study, I assumed that the peer group would emerge as a prevalent source of material for constructing academic identity. This assumption was the result of literature reviewed by this researcher stating that the peer group is of utmost importance in the adolescent years (Azmitia, Ittel, & Radmacher, 2005; Berndt & Keuhno, 1995; Berndt, Laychak, & Park, 1990). The peer group was mentioned by participants often in regards to both the social realm of school as well as academics. Students reported spending a lot of time talking with friends, and also discussed the larger peer group.

PI: So what do you do when you first get to school?

Isabel: Hang out with my friends until we have to go to first hour.

Later in the interview:

PI: What do you like most about school?

Isabel: Most...Talking to my friends...Before school, after school, between classes, in class.

Other students responded similarly to the same question:

PI: What do you like most about school?

Christian: Probably just...socialize or just see people you usually don't see.

Ronald: Just going there and seeing people. The social aspect.

The fact that students report spending so much time talking to one another could lead the researcher to assume that the influence would be obvious. However, the students point to specific influences other than just sheer amount of time spent together. The quality of the relationships make a difference. The participants more often mentioned friends as influential than the peer group at large. Their interpretation of influence is directed in specific interactions.

PI: Is there anyone else you look up to as a role model? Like an educational role model?

Marcos: My friends. I study with my friends, and we're really good students. They help me.

Other students also replied to this question by pointing out friends' influence:

PI: Is there anyone else you look up to as an educational role model?

Christian: One of my friends, is like, the nicest kid in school, and I think that's part of being good at education too, is getting along with everyone, other kids, teachers, everyone.... Most of my friends, we all know that doing good in school gives you the best future.

Ryan: All my friends, they want to do good in school. We always talk about school, and all of my friends get As and Bs.

These participants have built a piece of their academic identity from actual conversation with friends and peers regarding school, as well as direct observation of their friends.

Teachers. Most students interviewed also recognized that their teachers shape the environment they are learning in, and therefore influence how they feel about school. The following are spontaneous quotes that arose in conversation:

Isabel: I think teachers help you like school. They keep you focused, keep your eyes on the books.

Christian: I really look up to like, my art teacher, because she's really good, and she helps me sometimes, with art.

When asked specifically about teachers, some students stated that teachers were important:

PI: Can you tell me how the teachers, it sounds like you like them, how does that affect how much you like school?

Ryan: It affects it a lot, there's this one class, where I'm not really a big fan of my teacher, and I just dread that class.

Alonzo: Well, if I like my teacher, and he knows how to help me, it gives me a better attitude about the class. Or if they aren't very good at teaching, I'm like, "Ugh." It just makes it hard to enjoy.

PI: Do your teachers affect how much you like or dislike school?

Adora: If you have a bad teacher, it makes you not motivated to do well in his class, but if it's a good teacher, you want to get your work done, and you don't want to look bad.

The comments above confirm that there is a difference in how much a class is liked depending on whether they like versus dislike the teacher. However, a qualification of like versus dislike does not give us a rich description of *how* a good relationship with a teacher shapes their sense of themselves in the academic world. The following comments show that when a student feels as if there is an actual relationship with a teacher, they are able to describe how that relationship affects them in greater detail, as opposed to saying that they either "like" or

“dislike” that class. The following excerpt is from an interview with a student that spontaneously mentioned her teacher as an important part of her day:

Ella: When I get to school...I just put my coat away and go talk to the art teacher.

PI: Before school? How come?

Ella: I'm just really into art, and he's, his room is right next to my locker, and he's entertaining, and he says these compliment that just make your day.

These quotes came from students when asked about what or whom they liked best at school:

Maria: (My favorite teacher) is my history teacher...cause he's really nice, he takes his time with me. He goes slow enough so I can understand.

Adora: Science is really fun, because that teacher, she's been teaching for a long time, and she knows how to talk to kids and stuff...The teacher, she's really fun, like sometimes she won't care, she won't be really strict, but other times, she can be strict.

The participants interpret these teachers as being “fun” or “nice.” This researcher can take a broader view however, and see that there is another level to having a teacher that is “fun” or “nice.” What shows in these comments is that when a teacher actually talks to a student one on one above and beyond expected classroom activities, they become a part of how the student makes sense of the academic world. This interaction implies an important relationship, and although the students may not have interpreted these interactions as demonstrating this, these

relationships are an essential part of feeling a connectedness to the school, and having an ability to position themselves as part of that school's community.

Family. Family relationships were also predicted to be of high importance in identity construction at the beginning of this research study. In the Latino culture, the tradition of *familismo* encourages people to put family first. Indeed, in the interviews with participants, family members were consistently mentioned as having an effect on how a student thinks about school. This effect could be direct words from family members, or inspiration drawn from the examples they have set and modeling value for education. Through their relationships with family members, these students gained another way to feel connected to academic life. When asked about motivation, one student pointed towards family:

Isabel: My family pushes me to stay out of trouble, go to school, you know?

Another conversation about family is quoted below:

PI: So what do you think is your biggest influence at school?

Nina: My mom.

PI: Why is that?

Nina: Well she always works really hard, so it makes me want to work hard too.

PI: Does your mom talk to you about school?

Nina: Yeah.

PI: What does she say?

Nina: Like that you have to go to school every day, that you should try your best to get

good grades...

PI: So what do you think is your biggest influence at school?

Nina: Probably just the thought of my mom, and how she wants me to get an education. She always tells me how important it is, and I think like, how she would react to my grades.

Other students also pointed to family as motivation:

PI: Does your family think education is important?

Cristina: Very, very important . My mom can't stress it enough. Every time she calls me she asks how I'm doing, and then immediately asks if I did my homework. Every single time before she hangs up she reminds me that I have to try hard in school.

PI: So what do you think is your biggest influence at school?

Maria: I mostly want to make my mom proud.

Students gave the following answers in response to a question about role models:

PI: Who do you look up to as an educational role model?

Isabel: I look up to my older brother

PI: Why is that?

Isabel: He's just so smart...Like he helps me and stuff...like anything I don't get I can just go to him, and he explains it to me and then I get it.

PI: So how does your mom role model for you?

Maria: She just always tells me to do good in school, and she's in school too.

Family members not only made direct statements encouraging academic participation and success, they also modeled academic behavior, and even helped these students with academic work. All the above quotes show that the participants were able to identify a clear connection between questions of academic influence and educational role modeling with references to their family. In this case, the student's first-order interpretation is that the family has a direct influence on their academic ideals and successes. My original interpretation was that these direct influences are integrated into the adolescent's concept of themselves as academically capable and successful students. However, upon closer examination, I can say that the students make the connection between their family member's behavior and their academic success, but I cannot say that their academic success is necessarily related to a strong academic identity. There is a stronger sense of the students' identity when they talk about their own role in shaping their academic lives.

Theme 2: Agency. As mentioned in the analysis of the open-ended part of the interview, students were clear about their role in directing their academic lives. Several students spoke about themselves as being their own source for motivation or influence. Although their ideas may be influenced by their experiences and interactions with the world around them, it is important to acknowledge their concept of self as an influence, since that is their lived reality. This concept is evident in the following excerpts:

PI: So what do you think influences you most at school? Is it friends, teachers?

Marcos: Myself. I like to show others who I am. I determine how I act and how I do in school.

Phillip: My family is serious about school, but I really look inside myself for inspiration....I would say I'm my biggest influence.

PI: So what do you think influences you most when you are at school?

Christian: I think of more, like, I got to do this, because I have to have that good future, be able to get a good job and stuff.

When prompted to talk about how a relationship affected them, some participants remained clear that others were not responsible for their behavior. They insisted that they were ultimately self-driven:

PI: Do your teachers affect how much you like or dislike school?

Christina: Not really. I've never had problems with teachers. It's not their fault if I'm failing or something.

Phillip: Teachers are there to encourage kids, but I've never been one that needs encouragement.

These students' first order interpretation is that they are their own motivation. My second order interpretation is to argue that these students gathered their view of themselves as self-directed and agentic because of the encouragement of some other actor in their lives. This could be from a parent who has encouraged them to be self-sufficient, or some American ideal about independence that they have internalized. However, I cannot make assumptions about the source for their view. Their interpretation is that they are their own biggest motivator or influence, and it is a necessary part of the phenomenological research process to acknowledge that this is their lived reality.

Theme 3: Minimizing racism. One of the unexpected findings in this research was the amount of racism that these students were subjected to by adults and peers alike. The acknowledgement of blatant use of racial slurs by other high school students surprised me. Many of the students I interviewed stated that hey had been called names related to their race and ethnicity. What also surprised me was the way these adolescents reacted to the name-calling: by dismissing it. Almost every student who mentioned experiencing this racism stated that it bothered them at one point, and that they had learned to live with it, or started dismissing it as friendly joking.

Even though all the students interviewed in this study had overall positive experiences and reported success in the academic world, and reported having positive relationships and strong senses of themselves as agents in their own lives, they also reported experiencing consistent racism in a variety of relationship contexts. While many participants reported the positive interactions with peers included in the previous section: friendships, people to talk to in class, support - many also reported that in the larger peer group, they experienced direct insults based on their race and ethnicity.

Many students reported being teased for their race and ethnicity within the school context. I thought that the students who reported having trouble with teasing at school would also report that they disliked school, however, the teasing was often rationalized as not being serious. Minimizing the seriousness of these insults may be a way for the students to preserve their positive sense of self. One student brought up teasing several times in different parts of the interview:

Phillip: Inside school, students kind of tease, like to be funny, but they don't disrespect you at all. They'll tease here and there, but it's not like, anything serious.

PI: Can you tell me about a negative experience that you have had in school?

Phillip: Um, the teasing. Constantly.

PI: Teasing about...?

Phillip: Mainly heritage. And appearance.

Other students also reported being victims of racial comments:

Ronald: I'm Mexican, people will say like, racial slurs to me and everything. Not always. But they say it, and, not clear. But I understand them. And then it's just like, okay.

Ryan: A negative experience was that a lot of kids would make fun of me, call me racial names like wetback and stuff, beaner. At first it bugged me, but whatever,

they still do it now, but mostly just joking. Now it doesn't bug me, but then it did.

These students regard the teasing as nothing serious, and yet brought it up immediately as a negative experience in school. This is a good example of the difference between the student's interpretation of a situation and the researcher's. The students may truly believe that this harassment and racism is only mildly inconvenient for them. However, their reports led me to believe that while they state outwardly that the teasing is not serious, it was indeed important in regards to their school experience. I followed up with Phillip after the initial interview, and he explained that while the teasing bothered him at times, it was "just part of high school," and wouldn't affect his long-term goals. Making their experiences of racism into "just part of high school" in their minds is a protective strategy that allows them to continue to feel agency, and to feel in control of their academic success.

Theme 4: Mexican identity. Many of these students have a very clear idea of what they considered their Mexican identity. They learned to value education and hard work through the examples set in their homes by their families. The quotes below arose in conversation about the importance of education during the interview:

Ronald: My parents have always told us, they've told me and my sisters that as long as we do well in school, you will get everything that you guys want from us, and it will get you further in life, so that you won't have to work really hard like to get by. You can just study, get a good job, but still have enough to have a family, and support it.

Alonzo: My dad is like a really big influence because he is like a sergeant. Because he came from Mexico, and had to work his way up, and he worked his butt off. He was the valedictorian in his high school, and he went to the state University. And then he got a scholarship, so he knows that I live here, and I have a good opportunity here, so he wants me to make the most of it. And both my parents went to college, so I'm supposed to too. Carry on tradition.

The students quoted below repeated a similar motivational message from her parents in regards to education:

PI: So can you tell me if there's anyone that you look up to as an educational role model?

Adora: I think that would be my dad. Because he told us that we kind of have, like the good life. Like we get to go to school, and we get to do sports, and he didn't get to do that...And he's always telling us that if we do good in school that everything is going to be good for us in the future.

Each of these quotes came from students whose parents have immigrated from Mexico. They have internalized their parents' work ethic as representative of their culture. However, these same students recognize that to the non-Latino members of their school and community, being "Mexican" often means being delinquent, irresponsible, and/or dangerous. They see these stereotypes, and find ways to define themselves as Mexican without being like the stereotypes they know other people hold.

The few students that I interviewed who lived in neighborhoods that were less affluent, and had higher Latino population, consistently stated that they purposely did not associate with the kids in their neighborhood because of how they perceived the other kids' disregard for education. The kids I interviewed saw other Mexican American kids fulfilling the stereotypes they were working against, and wanted to make sure not to be associated with them.

PI: Do you know anyone that thinks it's not important to get an education?

Isabel: ...all the kids in my neighborhood. Cause they're all busy gang bangin and stuff, doin drugs, getting pregnant. They wanna be hard, they wanna be Latin Kings and stuff. It's all so stupid.

Another student also commented on the lack of connectedness to people in her own neighborhood.

PI: Do you think the neighborhood you live in affects how you think of yourself as a student?

Marcos: No, I don't really like, hang out with anyone in my neighborhood. Most of my friends live in a different area, and I don't think about my neighborhood much.

The neighborhood environment, and other Latino students in their neighborhood, presented a source of conflict for some students with their own sense of themselves as Mexican, as agentic, and as wanting to do well in school. For these students, distancing oneself from peers that fit the negative Mexican stereotype was a way to preserve their academic identities.

Most of the students interviewed however, came from predominately White, middle class or upper middle class neighborhoods, and viewed the neighborhood as being made up of people who, like themselves, expect academic success. For example, one student commented on what he felt was the expectation in his community:

Christian: I mean everyone in this city gets through high school, almost everyone goes to college.

These students recognized that the expectation in their community was to be respectful and academically successful.

Several of the interviewees mentioned that they wanted to differentiate themselves from other Mexican students in their schools. Several participants in this study talked about not wanting to be seen in the same light as other Mexican kids. They were aware that these “other” Mexican kids were seen as poor students, or worse, as troublemakers. The following comments from the individual interviews serve as an example of how these kids perceive Mexican kids, as well as how they believe others perceive Mexican kids:

Isabel: ...like everyone thinks all the Black girls and Mexican girls are going to get pregnant.

Ronald: I do what I do, like I get good grades, and I hang with good kids, so once people see that, they know I'm not like them (in reference to the other Mexican kids).

Ryan: If you don't graduate high school, people know. If I didn't finish, they would probably think it's because "he's Mexican" or something.

This finding shows that these participants, who had a strong sense of academic belongingness, also had a strong sense of distance from their Mexican peers. The distancing is a necessary preservation mechanism for their own identities. It allows them to identify themselves as different from those kids they see as fulfilling the stereotypical Mexican teenager stereotype. However, it does not necessarily mean that they do not identify strongly with their Mexican heritage, it just shows that they do not identify with what their community views as being stereotypically "Mexican." These kids are redefining for themselves what it means to be Mexican American, based on a strong work ethic and value system, rather than on what is expected by their communities.

Summary

No one context of these students' lives emerged as singularly relevant to their construction of academic identity. The common theme throughout interviews is that these participants take messages and experiences from a variety of contexts in their everyday lives and make meaning of those messages and experiences. Their interpretation of what other people say and how they influence their concept of themselves.

While students raised the issue of their broader relationships and sense of agency during the open ended section, when specifically probed about particular contexts in their lives, students also discussed the mechanisms by which they construct an understanding of themselves as part of a school system and an academic identity. They described actual direct conversations that parents and teachers had with them, role modeling that came from coaches and siblings, and how

they thought of themselves as creators of their own identities. They also described how they came to understand direct and subtle messages of racism and how they cope with that. They showed where different messages of what it means to be Mexican come from, and how they accept, reject or integrate those messages into their own identities.

Relationships were essential to their perceptions of themselves and their academic lives, and therefore their academic identity. Friends and peers were mentioned often in the school context. The participants saw friends as a positive part of being in school. Just having friends at school was seen as a reason to feel good about school. In some cases, friends were a more direct influence on academics, playing the part of study buddies, or role models.

Teachers were also often mentioned as having the power to make the school experience positive, as well as negative. Many of the participants stated that their like or dislike for a teacher made them like or dislike a class, but some students pointed at specific relationships with teachers as having importance in their participation within the school. This connection with teachers affected how students viewed the school as a friendly or unfriendly place in which they do or do not belong. This is an important piece of constructing a sense of who they are as a student.

In many instances, familial relationships influenced construction of academic identity through direct conversations with family members about education. Parents told them to do well in school in order to succeed in later life. They reflected on family value for education as a driving force when they were in school.

The students interviewed described their own role in developing a sense of themselves as students. They described themselves as self-motivated. They stated that even within their relationships, they made decisions about how to let those relationships affect them or not. The

participants made choices about how they would interpret messages from each of the actors in different domains in order to integrate those messages into their identities.

Their ability to make their own choices on how to interpret relationships is demonstrated in the section about minimizing racism. They received direct and indirect negative messages about their race and ethnicity, and chose to perceive those messages as unimportant. The students that were interviewed in this study found ways to cope with the negative messages that they heard regarding their heritage. This protected their sense of themselves as academically capable and successful individuals.

Finally, the participants were able to find a way to construct an academic identity that was not mutually exclusive with their Mexican identity. Family members modeled what it meant to be Mexican. Participants mentioned seeing their families work hard, either in school, or in other ways, as an example of how they could work hard in their own academic lives. The vision of what it looks like to have success through hard work can allow these adolescents to picture themselves in successful roles – an essential part of figuring out their own identity in general, but in particular in regards to seeing themselves as students.

While the world outside their homes often reflected a negative image of what it meant to be “Mexican,” these students were able to distance themselves from that perception. They created that distance by physically separating themselves from peers that they saw as representing that negative image. They also created that distance by emotionally separating themselves through identifying how they showed people that they were not like the “other” Mexicans.

Discussion

In this study, I interviewed 12 Mexican American adolescents, and found that they had a variety of experiences constructing an academic identity. In examining these experiences, I found that the adolescents were influenced by the domains previously hypothesized: friends, teachers, family and neighborhood. The results also pointed to the fact that these participants often saw the “self” as being an important source of influence.

The unexpected themes that emerged in analyzing these interviews were how much relationships affected their identity construction, how their sense of agency related to that construction, how they experienced and made sense of racism, and how their Mexican identity was integrated into their Academic identity.

The Challenges of the Phenomenological Journey

Throughout this process, it knew that I was learning something. However, it was not until the study was done that I realized that this study did not just teach me more about Mexican American adolescents and their academic identities. While reflecting on what the journey of this study looked like from start to finish, I realized that I learned a lot about myself, and that I had changed as a researcher in the process.

Going in to this study, I believed that Latino culture was relationship based. It was a characteristic I found to be admirable, and it made me gravitate towards conducting this study in the first place. This belief was also a stereotype. Through talking with these adolescents, my idea about what the importance of relationships would be for this group of young people had changed. Relationships were important for them, yes, undoubtedly. However, their own sense of agency and the choices that they made were just as important, if not more so. The independence portrayed by these kids caught me off guard at first, and I probed them throughout the interviews to find out from whom had their sense of agency and independence come from. I

insisted that they had to have seen independence modeled somewhere, or that they had heard that it was important to be their own person from some other actor in their lives. Again and again the adolescents insisted that it was from within themselves that they were driven. They said over and over that their biggest motivation was themselves. It took a while for me to remember that the whole purpose of using phenomenology was to let the voices of the participants be the truth, and that I set out not wanting to distort that truth with my own ideas.

I experienced a similar challenge when discussing racism with these young people. They brushed off comments from peers that would have sent me in to a frenzy. I felt offended for them, and outraged! I questioned, were they not mad about the slurs tossed around in their learning environment? Surely they must be upset, I thought. They are pretending not to care because they want to appear strong or cool. Again, I had to catch myself and remember that if the adolescents said that the racial slurs don't bother them, I had to believe them. It was my job as a phenomenologist to believe them, and to transmit their message without changing it to suit my thoughts and emotions.

As a researcher, I realized how easy it is to fall into a pattern of finding what you want to find in the results of your study. I also found how easy it was to bring my own biases into the research, even when I made explicit intentions of setting them aside. I am now more aware of the need to step back from the research at several points throughout the process in order to not only recheck the data, but to recheck your intentions, your methods and the results.

As a person, I have become a better listener. I believe that I did listen to these young people in the most sincere way that I knew how at that time, but I now have built a skill for *really* listening. Part of my own frustration as an adolescent was that I often felt that adults were not listening to me, or telling me that I did not really mean what I said, know what I was doing,

or know how I felt. Here I am, an adult now, and I had started to do the make the same assumptions about young people that I had promised myself I would never do. I now think more when talking to a young person about assuming how much they know about what they really mean, think or feel.

Connections to Previous Research

Previous research discussed in this study has pointed out how defining oneself grows from interactions with other people and finding a way to situate oneself into social categories (Devos and Cruz Torres, 2007). The overall impression that I got from interviewing these students is that the how they define themselves in the academic realm is a combination of direct statements from important actors in several areas of their life, as well as actions of their role models, and messages from the cultures within their homes, schools and society at large.

Oyserman and colleagues (2006) pointed out that if the school self was incongruent with the ethnic or racial identity, one of these identities would be difficult to maintain. The results from this study partially support that finding, but expand on it. These students saw their academic selves as incongruent with how *others* perceived their ethnicity, but not necessarily incongruent with their *own* understanding of their ethnicity.

Harter (1999) proposed that individuals construct a sense of self in order to maintain a favorable sense of their attributes. Previous research has suggested that students who identified strongly as Mexican found conflict with identifying as a strong student (Fuligni and Witkow, 2005). We certainly see this in the way that these participants have chosen to integrate what it means to them to be Mexican in their academic world in opposition with what they perceive as expected of Mexican adolescents.

In particular, I thought it was interesting that these students recognized that people of their race and ethnicity were seen by society as academically unsuccessful, as predicted in a study mentioned earlier by Gonzales (1999), but for the students interviewed, they worked to differentiate themselves from that representation, rather than be defined by it.

Previous research has shown that in adolescence, there is a conflict in the representations of “self” in different contexts. Only in later adolescence do all the “selves” that appear in different contexts become coherent. This may be a reason why the participants reported wanting to distance themselves from other people’s perceptions of “Mexican.” All of the interviewees were in middle adolescence. Perhaps later, they will come to integrate the way of being Mexican that they see at home with an ability to still present themselves as Mexican to their communities.

Another way of thinking about this negotiation of self may be that the participants rejection of being identified as Mexican in the school realm is a tool for navigating that school’s culture while still holding on to the values that they see at home as being truly Mexican. Previous studies have shown that being “bi-cultural” and having the ability to navigate both one’s own ethnic culture as well as the dominant culture is the most advantageous way for minorities to succeed academically (Gonzales et al, 2007; Lopez, Ehly & Garcia-Vazquez, 2002).

When it came to the relationships that were influential for the students interviewed, the results support the categories set forth in other literature reviewed previously. Family relationships, as expected, were confirmed as having great influence on the adolescents’ concept of self. However, previous research has often focused on direct parent involvement with school and academics (Martinez Jr., DeGarmo & Eddy, 2009). In this study, the respondents were more influenced by their parents’ messages about the value of education, and their modeling of

work ethic than influenced by direct interaction such as participating in school functions or helping them with homework. Interestingly, Tenenbaum, Porche, Snow, Tabors and Ross (2007) found that young people with mothers who encouraged their children to have agency in decision making processes were more able to stand firm in their convictions against outside influences. This may be connected to the results from this group that suggest that these students have a strong sense of agency, which may have helped them to stand firmly against negative peer pressure.

In the peer social realm, there was support for the results of Devos and Cruz Torres' study (2007), which showed that identifying with someone one feels is high achieving is related to one's own sense of being a high achiever. All of these academically high achieving students interviewed reported that their friends were similarly high achieving. This also [provides](#) support for other studies discussed in the literature review by Azmitia, Ittel and Radmacher (2005), Berndt and Keuhno (1995) and Berndt, Laychak and [Park](#) (1990), which all contributed to an understanding that peer groups have an influence on how adolescents conceptualize themselves academically.

Previous research by Rodriguez, Jones, Pang and Park (2004) examined how culturally competent models of education facilitated identity development. None of the students interviewed reported experiencing congruence between what it meant to be Mexican outside the home compared to what it meant to be Mexican to their own immediate family. These students may have had an easier time reconciling their Mexican identity with their academic identity if this was facilitated by their educational systems. What's interesting about this sample is that even with the lack of a culturally competent school system, they have achieved academic success. This is somewhat in line with the research described in Phelan, Davidson and Yu's

book *Adolescent Worlds* (1996), where students have to navigate different worlds in and outside of school, and either do so well or refuse to even try. In this sample we see that they are navigating these worlds well in terms of academic success, but perhaps not so well in terms of constructing a coherent identity.

Martinez, DeGarmo and Eddy (2009) found that more Latino than non-Latino youth reported finding barriers to their engagement in school activities. The racism reported by the sample in the current study illustrates one of those barriers. Previous studies have shown that discrimination in school was associated with lower academic well-being (DeGarmo and Martinez, 2006). However, the participants in the current study are academically high-achieving. This may partly be accounted for by the positive support of their academic identity from teachers that many of these participants reported. The same study just mentioned by DeGarmo and Martinez (2006) found that school support to be good for academic well-being.

With the interviews conducted, the neighborhood these adolescents' lived in did not turn out to be as important as previously thought. When neighborhood seemed to be influential, it was mostly in the context of students who lived in neighborhoods where there were many possible distractions having to overcome or ignore the negative influences around them. Several students did mention the influence of neighborhood in the context that there were certain expectations for academic success for all the kids in their area. The lack of discussion of neighborhood may be attributable to the fact that most of the participants in the current study lived in stable, middle-class areas, whereas most of the research on neighborhood influence for Latinos focuses on the concentration of Latinos in socioeconomically poor and under resourced areas.

Limitations of the Study

With this small sample of students, the focus of the research was to get a rich description of how these relationships were viewed by the adolescents and integrated into their own sense of academic identity. Because of the size of the sample and the concentration of participants in the Twin Cities area, this study was not meant to generalize to the greater U.S. population of Mexican American adolescents.

The group that I interviewed were mostly high achieving, well-rounded students that were engaged in their school life. Most of them lived in economically advantaged homes and neighborhoods. This might account for part of why the results for these students as to their academic success is not representative of the broader research that has shown that Latino students, specifically Mexican American, are the lowest achieving ethnic or racial group.

Areas for Future Research

What would the interviews have looked like if I had interviewed Mexican American students that were not as engaged in academic life? What are the differences between the Mexican American students interviewed and those who are not in school at all?

Further research could continue to focus on the relationships experienced by Mexican American adolescents who are not as high-achieving in school. One possible hypothesis is that if the students from this study are constructing a positive sense of self through their interactions with friends, it may be a similar but opposite pathway of peer influence for those students who disengage from academics, form a negative academic identity, or do not identify with school at all.

Although relationships are sure to be key, some of the other unexpected themes that arose from these interviews may be more helpful in discovering ways to understand Academic Identity in Mexican American adolescents. For example, more investigation is warranted into this

concept of agency, and how it might be a critical factor in these adolescents' understanding of themselves in the academic world. A larger study might be able to determine a pattern between academic achievement in this group and their sense of agency as determined by some measure.

Also, the navigation of Mexican identity as perceived by the adolescents themselves and as represented in the outside world deserves more exploration. Even these high achieving students in predominantly socioeconomically stable neighborhoods reported seeing negative expectations from people in their community for Mexican Americans. They see these messages, but have found a way to distance themselves from them rather than internalize them. It is possible that those students whom I was not able to interview that have not had such success in academics may not have been able to tune out these messages.

Through the interviews I found that many students had a specific idea of what kind of Mexican American student they did not want to be. This means that there are specific differences in those Mexican American students that are not integrated into the academic life. Knowledge about those students would provide valuable information on how they identify with, or have distanced their identities from, academic life.

Although I have covered a broad range of possible pathways to constructing a sense of academic identity for Mexican American adolescents, there remains much more work to be done. More needs to be done to see how these identities are formed in students that have a broader range of academic success. Further investigation is needed into the relationship dynamics of the broader population of Mexican American adolescents, as well as more in-depth analysis of the racism between peers, sense of agency, and the perception of stereotypes by society as a whole.

Implications for Working with Mexican American Teenagers

In the beginning of this thesis I spoke about academic identity as a concept encompassing how one conceptualizes himself or herself as a student. I pointed out that how adolescents conceptualize themselves academically provides them with a guideline for making meaning of experiences, motivation to pursue their goals, and maximize the pleasure they get out of their life experiences (Harter, 1999). For the adolescents interviewed, there is a different pattern of influence for each individual. Some described getting a lot of input into their construction of academic identity from one area, others had more even integration across domains.

For youth workers who may interact with Mexican American adolescents in the schools, this study shows that there are many reasons why a student may engage in the school setting. Their academic identity may be shaped by influences that are not accessible to the people working with them in the schools. Although each student I interviewed constructed their academic identity in a different way, there are similarities between these overall academically engaged adolescents. The relationships in their lives contributed to that sense of themselves as a student, and their ability to situate themselves in academic life. Not only was there the continuous theme of relationships as a positive influence on their academic identity, there was also a recurring theme regarding where there may have been negative experiences that could have hindered their ability to identify with school and academics. This included a negative image of Mexican American students in school as well as experiences of racism.

For those who work with the greater population of Mexican American adolescents in the schools and elsewhere, it is important to acknowledge that there may be subtle and blatant racism that these kids are receiving that they may not outwardly talk about as disturbing. It is disturbing for those who work with these youth because it shows that the environment in the schools is not safe for Mexican American adolescents. Feeling physically and emotionally unsafe in school is

certainly a barrier to identifying with school. As the interviews in this study show, these adolescents may state that the racism they encounter is unimportant or that it does not affect them, but it may be more disturbing than they even consciously realize.

The interviews reviewed in this study showed me how much these Mexican American adolescents work to define themselves academically. The finding about overt racism in the schools and in the communities these kids live in was discouraging. However, I also got a window into the protective mechanisms these kids employ to have academic success despite the negative messages they receive. Through these interviews, the students voiced recognition of the Mexican stereotypes while rejecting that as the only way to be. These kids redefined for themselves what it means to be Mexican American through their own construction of an academic identity, built with positive messages from an array of support people in their lives, as well as from within themselves.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

Walk me through a typical school day.

How would you describe yourself as a student?

Walk me through a positive experience that you have had in high school. How has that impacted the way you think of yourself as a student?

Walk me through a negative experience you have had in high school. How has that impacted the way you think of yourself as a student?

What does being Mexican- American mean to you when it comes to how you think of yourself as a student?

Who do you look up to as an educational role model and why?

How does this person compare to other people in your everyday life?

Do you think education is important? Why or why not?

What do you like most about school?

What do you like least about school?

What do you think it means to be a good student? Do you consider yourself a good student?

What things might get in the way of you being a good student?

Tell me about your friends.

How would friends at school describe you?

How would your teachers describe you?

Do you participate in any clubs or after school activities? Tell me about them.

What or whom do you think influences you most at school?

How do your friends feel about school?

How does your family feel about school? What's the highest level of education in your family?

Who has the highest level of education? Is it a parent or a sibling?

How does that affect how you feel about school?

How do the views your family has about school compare to the views your friends have about school?

What do teachers and/or administrators in your school say about education?

How does that compare with what your friends and family say about education?

How does that affect how you feel about school?

In what ways do teachers and/or administrators at your school make you like/dislike being there?

Do you think finishing high school is necessary for reaching your goals? How do you know?

Do you think your neighborhood affects how you think of yourself as a student?

Is there anything else you want to tell me?

VITA

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