Editorial

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The Journal of Border Educational Research wishes to thank The Texas A&M University System Regents’ Initiative for Excellence in Education for their vision and support from The Journal’s inception. It has been our hope that The Journal would become a venue for teachers to share ideas, issues and stories that help us meet the goal of providing every student an expert teacher full of energy and dreams. The Journal is for educators who want to talk about who they are and what they do. In a letter to the Regents’ Initiative for Excellence in Education several years ago I described why teachers teach in the following way:

I have been contemplating taking on the challenge of getting a tattoo. My daughter assures me this is the “In Thing” to do, even for a person of my advanced age. My problem is that I haven’t decided for sure the subject of my body art (tattoo), but I’m leaning towards Popeye because of his philosophy of life. His motto has marked me from childhood. As you probably remember, he would say, “I am what I am” (pronounced “I yam what I yam”). This statement was both an affirmation to himself and a proclamation to the world. To himself it said “I accept what I am” and to the world it said “accept me for what I am”. More subtly stated is his gentle acceptance that his life has meaning. In every comic book issue Popeye had a clear benevolent purpose, a self imposed sense of importance. “I gots ter rescue Swee’pea! Lucky I alweez brings spinich fer emerjensees.” There’s no self doubt there and no insecurity. This appears to be significant to me because I want to embrace who I am and maybe I’m afraid that others will reject me if they really know what makes me ME. This is especially true for me in the area of teaching. Like my Uncle O. C. teaching and classrooms have been the one constant during my life. I have not been away from the classroom for longer than the months of summer for the past 42 years. I can almost breathe and eat chalk as my only sustenance. In many ways teaching is what I live for, it’s what I do and it’s who I am.

We invite educators to submit works that will authentically reflect their own vision and successes in helping students develop. I hope you enjoy The Journal!

Latino College Students’ Perceptions of their Ethnicity as a Challenge and Resource to their Future Opportunities:
A Comparative Study in Texas and California

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Abstract

Over 50% of all Latinos in the U.S. live in California and Texas. Educators, researchers, and policy makers are increasingly concerned with how to improve educational access and occupational mobility of Latinos in their communities. Latino youth who successfully manage to make it through the K-12 academic pipeline and gain admission into a four-year university continue to face the risk of high dropout and low graduation rates. Building upon both developmental and social identity theories, the present study examines the extent to which demographic, relational, and contextual factors and strength of ethnic identity contribute to first-year Latino college students’
perceptions of their ethnicity as a challenge and resource to their future opportunities. This study contributes to understanding of the complexities of ethnic identity development and its impact on college adjustment, examining within-group variability of Latino college students in Texas and California. Implications of these findings and suggestions for enhancing retention and graduation rates of Latino college students in both Texas and California are discussed.

Over 50% of all Latinos in the U.S. live in California and Texas. Educators, researchers, and policy makers are increasingly concerned with how to improve educational access and occupational mobility of Latinos in their communities. Latino youth who successfully manage to make it through the K-12 academic pipeline and gain admission into a four-year university continue to face the risk of high dropout and low graduation rates. For example, in California approximately 25-30% of the Latino students who enter four-year universities drop out within their first two years (CPEC, 1998), and the average Latino graduation rate lags behind the rest of the student population on many university campuses (UCSC Office of Planning and Budget, 1999). In Texas, of the 15,672 Latinos who entered four-year public colleges and universities in 1990, only 19% obtained their Bachelor's degree after six years (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 1998). In light of the various laws and regulations concerning issues of affirmative action and diversity in Texas and California, many Latino students are questioning how their ethnicity has an impact on their ability to attain their future educational and career goals.

Ethnic identity is a salient aspect of identity development for Latino adolescents, particularly as they make the transition from high school to college (Ethier & Deaux, 1994; Saylor & Aries, 1999). Developmental identity theorists conceptualize ethnic identity as a process by which adolescents and adults explore and make decisions about the role of ethnicity in their lives, and emphasize the importance of developing of a strong, positive, and coherent sense of ethnic identity over time (Erikson, 1968; Phinney, 1992). Social identity theorists conceptualize ethnic identity as a process by which individuals define themselves in relation to the various group(s) to which they belong, and tend to focus on how or why an individual’s ethnic identity might vary across contexts (Stephan, 1992; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Both perspectives contribute to understanding how ethnic minority college students’ ethnic identity may be related to their college adjustment.

Research on the relationship between ethnic identity and adjustment to college reveal inconsistent findings. Ethier and Deaux (1994) found that first-year Latino college students who developed a stronger sense of ethnic identity reported decreased perceived threat and increased positive adjustment in their transition to college. In contrast, Saylor and Aries (1999) found that first-year ethnic minority college students’ strength of ethnic identity did not contribute to college adjustment. Other research indicates that first-year Latino college students’ strength of ethnic identity is associated with both perceptions of their ethnicity as a challenge and a resource to future opportunities (Teranishi, 2001).

It is important to consider the extent to which other demographic, relational, and contextual factors are associated with first-year Latino college students’ perceptions of their future opportunities. Building upon both developmental and social identity theories, this study examines the extent to which demographic, relational, and contextual factors, and strength of ethnic identity contribute to first-year Latino college students’ perceptions of their ethnicity as a challenge and resource to their future opportunities in Texas and California. Within-group variability of Latino college students’ ethnic identity and perceptions of their future opportunities is explored. Implications of these findings and suggestions for enhancing retention and graduation rates of Latino college students in both Texas and California are discussed.

**Methods**

**Participants**

Participants were 174 first-year Latino college students living and attending school in California (N= 87) and in Texas (N = 87); their mean age was 18 years old (SD = .85, Range = 18 to 24). The Latino college students in California (49 females, 38 males) attended a public university on the West coast of approximately 11,500 students, which were predominantly White (44%) and Asian American (31%), while 14% were Latino. In contrast, the Latino college students in Texas (55 female, 32 male) attended a public university on the U.S.-Mexico border of approximately 4,000 students: 94% of the student body was Latino. In California, 30% were first generation immigrants, 42% were second generation children of immigrants, and 28% were third generation or higher. In Texas, 26% were first generation immigrants, 24% were second generation children of immigrants, and 50% were third generation or higher. In both...
Texas and California, over 80% of the students were code-switchers who spoke both English and Spanish across various contexts.

In both Texas and in California, the majority of the participants were of Mexican-descent. In Texas, 45% of the students described themselves as Hispanic or Hispanic American (N = 39), 31% identified as Mexican American (N = 27), 15% identified as Mexican (N = 13), 4% identified as American, 3% identified themselves as Latino/a, and the remainder identified as Chicano and African American. Seventy-five percent of the students were U.S.-born (N = 65), and 25% were born in Latin America (N = 21). In California, 74% of the participants described themselves as Mexican (N = 64), 10% were mixed-heritage Mexican (N = 9), 6% were Salvadoreño (N = 5), 2% were Colombian (N = 2), 2% were Peruvian (N = 2), and the remainder were Guatemalan, Cuban, Puerto Rican, Ecuadorian, and Bolivian. Seventy percent of the students were U.S.-born (N = 61), and 30% were born in Latin America (N = 26).

There were differences in social economic status between students from California and Texas measured by their parents' education and occupations. In California, on average participants reported that their parents' highest level of education was some high school, and they worked in semi-skilled occupations. There appeared to be a bimodal distribution for parental education and occupation: Approximately 22% had one or two years of college while 13% had a 4-year college degree or higher. About 13% of the parents were clerical or sales workers while approximately 20% of the parents were higher executives, business managers, and administrative personnel. In contrast, in Texas, on average participants reported that their parents' highest level of education was some college, and they worked in professional occupations. Approximately 25% of the parents had graduated from college, and 32% were business executives.

Measures

Participants were asked to complete a survey assessing their demographic, relational, and contextual factors, strength of ethnic identity, and perceptions of their ethnicity as a challenge and resource in attaining their educational and career goals.

Demographic Background Factors. Students described their demographic background information, including their gender, generation of immigration, ability to code-switch (ability to speak Spanish and English across contexts), and socioeconomic status (parental education and occupation). For purposes of analysis, gender was dummy coded: males were ‘0’ and females were ‘1.’

Relational Factors: Number of Latino Peers. Number of Latino peers was assessed using a measure adapted from Gurin, Hurtado, and Peng (1994). Students were asked to rate the number of male and female Chicano/Latino friends on a 5-point scale ranging from ‘none’ to ‘all.’ Number of Latino peers was calculated by summing students’ ratings of male and female Chicano/Latino peer affiliations and obtaining the mean.

Contextual Factors. Students were asked to rate the number of Latinos in their high school and their neighborhood where they grew up on a 5-point scale from ‘none’ to ‘many.’ For purposes of analysis, location of residence was dummy coded: Students living in California were coded ‘0’ and those living in Texas were coded ‘1.’

Strength of Ethnic Identity. Phinney’s (1992) 14-item Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) was used to assess strength of ethnic identity. The MEIM includes three subscales: 1) sense of belonging (5 items; e.g., “I have a strong sense of belonging to my own ethnic group”); 2) ethnic identity achievement (7 items; e.g., “I have a clear sense of my ethnic background and what it means for me”); and 3) ethnic behaviors (2 items; e.g., “I am active in organizations or social groups that include mostly members of my own ethnic group”). Respondents rated items on a 4-point scale from 1 ‘Strongly disagree’ to 4 ‘Strongly agree.’ An ethnic identity score was calculated by summing across the 14-items and obtaining the mean. Because the three subscales were highly correlated and factor analysis produced one factor, subsequent analyses only used the total score. Cronbach’s alpha reliability was .89, which is comparable to Phinney’s (1992) findings with diverse college students (alpha = .90).

Perceptions of Future Opportunities. Students’ perceptions of their future opportunities were assessed utilizing a measure adapted from Cooper et al.’s (1994) Bridging Multiple Worlds Measure. Students were asked to rate the extent their ethnicity caused them challenges in attaining their educational and career goals. The measure was rated on a 4-point scale ranging from ‘Causes no difficulties at all’ to ‘Causes many difficulties.’ A composite score was developed for perceptions of challenges by summing the scores for the two items assessing perceived difficulties in attaining educational and career goals and obtaining the mean. Cronbach’s alpha reliability of this two-item scale was .84.

In addition, students were asked to rate the extent that their ethnicity provided them with resources
in attaining their educational and career goals. The measure was rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 ‘Not helpful at all’ to 4 ‘Very helpful.’ A composite score was also developed for perceptions of resources by summing the scores for the two items and obtaining the mean. Cronbach’s alpha reliability of this two-item scale was .78.

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine demographic (gender, generation, and ability to code-switch), relational (number of Latino peers), and contextual factors (number of Latinos in high school, number of Latinos in neighborhood, and location of residence) as predictors of students’ strength of ethnic identity. The regression model was significant (F (7, 166) = 8.33, p < .001; R = .51, R^2 = .26), accounting for 26% of the variance explained. Gender (Beta = .19), ability to code-switch (Beta = .27), location of residence (Beta = -.43), and number of Latino friends (Beta = .27) significantly contributed to predicting students’ strength of ethnic identity. Being female, code-switching, living in California, and having many Latino friends were associated with higher strength of ethnic identity.

A second multiple regression analysis was performed to examine demographic, relational, and contextual factors and strength of ethnic identity as predictors of students’ perceptions of their ethnicity as a challenge to their future opportunities. The regression model was significant (F (8, 165) = 3.18, p < .002; R = .37, R^2 = .13). Location of residence (Beta = -.36) was the only significant predictor of students’ perceptions of ethnicity as a challenge to their future opportunities (t (165) = -3.97, p < .001). Latino college students from California perceived their ethnicity as a challenge in attaining their future goals.

A third multiple regression analysis was performed to examine demographic, relational, and contextual factors and strength of ethnic identity as predictors of students’ perceptions of their ethnicity as a resource to their future goals. The model was significant (F (8, 165) = 1.95, p < .05, R = .29, R^2 = .09). Location of residence (Beta = .19) was the only significant predictor of students’ perceptions of resources (t (169) = 2.39, p < .05). Latino college students from Texas perceived their ethnicity as a resource in attaining their future goals.

**Discussion**

Demographic, relational, and contextual factors predicted Latino college students’ strength of ethnic identity: Being female, code-switching across contexts, living in California, and having many Latino friends were associated with higher strength of ethnic identity. In contrast, location of residence was the only significant predictor of students’ perceptions of future opportunities: Latino students from California perceived higher challenges, while Latino students from Texas perceived higher resources in attaining their future educational and career goals.

**Strength of Ethnic Identity**

Findings are consistent with other studies examining first-year Latino college students’ strength of ethnic identity during the transition to college. Ethier and Deaux (1994) found that while in the beginning of their first year of college, Latino students’ ethnic identity was associated with their family and strength of cultural background; however, by the end of their first year, it was associated with their involvement with Latino peer groups and organizations on campus. Similarly, Saylor and Aries (1999) found that ethnic minority college students who participated in ethnic peer groups and organizations during their first year in college developed a stronger sense of their ethnic identity. Findings from the present study are consistent with these findings suggesting that having Latino peers in college is associated with a stronger sense of ethnic identity.

Latino students in California reported having a stronger sense of ethnic identity than Latino college students in Texas. One explanation may be that many of the Latino students from California grew up in predominantly Latino neighborhoods and communities, and were making the transition to a university that was comprised of predominantly White and Asian American students. Ethier and Deaux (1994) argue that for first-year Latino college students who move away from home to attend college, the salience of their ethnic identity is likely to increase, particularly for those making the transition from a predominantly Latino home community to a university where they are a minority.

**Perceptions of Ethnicity as a Challenge**

Latino college students in California also reported having higher perceived challenges in attaining their educational and career goals than students in Texas. This may be due to (1) limited educational and occupational mobility and attainment of Latinos in California, (2) the likelihood that these students have encountered racism and discrimination, and (3) the lack of Latino role models in California. Findings support Ogbu’s theory that involuntary minorities who were incorporated into the United States through slavery, conquest, or colonization may experience challenges in attaining educational and occupational mobility...
Ogbu argues that some Latino children who see their parents and grandparents struggle to move up in society and remain in lower class status may develop an oppositional identity, rejecting the American educational system and notions of upward mobility. In addition, because Latinos in California are exposed to increasing diversity, they are likely to encounter racism and discrimination due to prejudice, ignorance, and lack of openness to cultural differences. Latino students in California are also likely to perceive more challenges in attaining their educational and career goals due to the lack of Latino role models and few Latinos in the jobs and careers that they wish to pursue.

Perceptions of Ethnicity as a Resource

On the other hand, Latino college students in Texas report having higher perceived resources in attaining their future opportunities than students in California. This may be due to the fact that (1) Latinos are the majority in their college and home community, (2) they are able to obtain financial aid, grants, and scholarships to attend college, and (3) they are exposed to many Latino role models and people in the careers they wish to pursue, including Latino professors, lawyers, doctors, and professionals.

Nevertheless, there continues to be low retention and college graduation rates for Latinos in both Texas and California. Perhaps it is the lack of cultural capital or exposure to educational resources because they are the first in their family to go to college. Some young Latina women may encounter conflicting goals and expectations between maintaining traditional gender roles (e.g., desire to get married and have children) and attaining their educational and career goals. Some Latino students’ parents encourage their children to stay home and help run the family business, which they hope their children will someday take over when they retire. Other Latino youth who come from lower income families may find it difficult to juggle the demands of going to college and having to work.

It is important to consider the different reasons for the low retention and graduation rates for Latinos in Texas compared to those in California. Latino youth in California are likely to move away from home to go to college, and the ethnic composition of their university is significantly different from the ethnic composition of their high schools and neighborhoods they grew up in. For example, among the California 10th graders, Latinos account for 32% of the student population, while among the first-year college students, Latinos are less than 14% of the student population (CPEC, 1998). This may contribute to higher perceived threat and difficulty adjusting to their new college community, which may cause them to drop out.

In contrast, Latino youth living on the Texas border are likely to live at home and attend college in their home community where the ethnic composition is predominantly Latino. For Latino college students in Texas, being from a community where their neighborhood and college is predominantly Latino may contribute to higher perceived resources in attaining their future goals; however, their high dropout and low graduation rates continue to persist.

Educators, researchers, and policy makers must explore different ways of increasing retention and graduation rates for Latino college students in Texas and California. In California, it is important to help those who enter the university system to be able to persist in a predominantly White middle class university and feel confident in pursuing their educational and career goals. In Texas, on the other hand, it would be important to explore ways of increasing the university eligibility rate of Latino high school students, and to get students to start thinking earlier about their educational and career goals so they can take the required high school courses and college entrance exams. In both California and Texas, Latino youth who are the first in their family to go to college are likely to receive limited guidance from their parents and family members. These youth need additional support and encouragement from their teachers, peers, and role models to develop their educational and career goals early on, and to learn about the necessary requirements not only to get into college but the benefits of graduating and obtaining their college degree.
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