

"They Just Don't Understand That's the Way Most of Us Are":

Identity Management of Latin@ Youth en Arizona

by

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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study contributes to the literature on Latin@ youth in the US by focusing on the experiences of Latin@ youth in Arizona and their identity management practices. The data from 9 months of field observations and 11 unstructured interviews provides a vivid picture of the youth's daily encounters. Using a thematic analysis this study reveals the youth's experiences in occupying predominantly white spaces, managing privilege, and managing negative stereotypes. The youth's involvement at El Centro, an Arizona nonprofit organization, provided them a safe space in which they created a familial environment for themselves and their peers.

DEDICATION

To the *jóvenes* of El Centro whose stories inspired this research.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 1996, when I was 7 years old, I was brought to the United States when my parents were presented with the opportunity to provide a better life for my brother and me. We were young and my parents saw this as the perfect moment for us to learn to speak English by immersing ourselves in U.S. society. Like many other immigrant youth, I grew up connected with my Mexican roots and culture and often found myself struggling to navigate the border between being a Mexican immigrant and fitting into American society. Issues of language fluency, legal status, and cultural norms were not unusual and caused me to become hyper-conscious of my status as an immigrant. However, the lightness of my skin allowed me to blend in with my white classmates. My identity is something I've been seeking to make sense of for many years. This became most recently evident after finding a series of research papers I wrote in middle school and high school, all which dealt with my experiences as a Mexican immigrant in this country. My identity became more complicated when I reached my senior year of high school, after my family was denied residency in the country. It was 2006, the year that immigrants, including myself, rallied around the nation demanding immigration reform.

Politics of Arizona

Brenton et al. (2011) argue that the United States has seen an increase in legislation targeting immigrant populations after the Sept 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center. After these attacks, the news media shifted its focus to border issues. Such coverage utilizes language that formulates a politics of division and promotes an “us” vs. “them” mentality (Brenton et al., 2011, p. 664). Brown (2013) posits that opponents of immigration have become skilled in “rhetorically manufacturing and seemingly legitimizing all manner of fear, resulting in paranoid immigration debate and discourse”

(Brown, 2013, p. 64). Such discourse is then manifested in legislation which seeks to ‘secure the border.’ This type of legislation can be seen most evidently in states located on the U.S./Mexico border, such as Arizona. Unfortunately, this debate is lacking compassion and consideration for those who exhibit the most vulnerability. Among those who suffer most from such rhetoric are young Latin@s¹.

Within the last decade, Arizona has seen a significant increase in anti-immigrant legislation targeted specifically at Latin@ immigrants. The increase in such laws began in 2004, when voters passed Proposition 200. This law constrained undocumented immigrant access to state health care and education services (Aguirre, 2012). Additionally, it implemented a voter identification clause, requiring all persons provide proof of citizenship when voting. Because evidence is lacking that noncitizens were voting, critics of this law argue that it seeks to foster distrust and doubt, and highlight the distinctions between those who are entitled to vote and those who are not (Ochoa O’Leary, Romero, Cabrera & Rascon, 2012). This law collaborated with existing narratives which sought to construct immigrants as suspicious and therefore dangerous. The following year, nearly 30 anti-immigrant bills which sought to discount immigrants from work, education, and political life were introduced to the state legislature (Ochoa O’Leary et al., 2012). An example of this came in 2006, which proved to be a detrimental

¹ The term Latin@ will be utilized throughout this research to describe individuals of Latin American origin. Koss-Chioino and Vargas (1999) argue that using this term allows for the inclusion of a variety of groups with different cultural traditions. In contrast, the term Hispanic refers specifically to the Spanish European legacy and excludes indigenous communities of the Americas and/or African roots. Additionally, the term Hispanic is political in nature. It “reflects the political struggles between major parties to win elections” and “identifies neither an ethnic group nor a minority group” (Gimenez, 1997, p.235). Because of the political nature of the term Hispanic, I have chosen to use the word Latin@ when describing the participants. Though the participants of my study all identify as Mexican, they recognize that their identities differ from those who reside in Mexico and sometimes felt uncomfortable utilizing that word when describing themselves. This was particularly the case with the participants who were not fluent in Spanish. The confusion the participants felt was often a topic of conversation, as they felt the terminology available did not always speak to their experiences. As a result, many used the word Latin@ to define themselves as it speaks to their national origin. The @ is used to make the term gender neutral.

year to immigrants seeking education, as two initiatives were passed by voters. The first was a voter initiative which declared Arizona's official language as English. The second, Proposition 300, which received support from more than 70 percent of voters in Arizona, prevents undocumented students from paying in-state tuition and from receiving state financial aid (Cooper, 2009). Additionally this proposition restricted adult education programs to legal residents and citizens (Gonzalez de Bustamante, 2010).

In 2010, the state of Arizona became the epicenter of the immigration debate when state lawmakers introduced Senate Bill 1070. Commonly referred to as the "show-me-your-papers law," SB1070 was designed to keep undocumented immigrants out of Arizona (Chin, Byrne Hessick, Miller, 2010). This law created state crimes for undocumented migrants who failed to carry alien registration and who sought employment unlawfully. The most infamous provision in SB1070 required law enforcement to investigate the immigration status of an individual who has been stopped, detained, or arrested when there is reasonable suspicion that this individual is unauthorized. Many feared this provision would allow race to be a determining factor and promote racial profiling. Thousands of people gathered outside of the Arizona State Capitol to protest this bill and to send a message to the Arizona legislature. However, soon after this bill was introduced numerous other states drafted similar legislation (Chin et al., 2012). Although aspects of this law were struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court, the introduction of such legislation contributed to the politics of exclusion which had already become prominent in the early 2000s.

The politics of exclusion only intensified a few weeks after SB1070 became law, when Governor Brewer signed HB2281, which targets ethnic studies programs in the Tucson Unified School District. Ochoa O'Leary et al.(2012) state that schools who offer courses that promote the overthrow of the government, promote resentment toward a

race or class of people, are designed for individuals of a specific ethnic group, and advocate ethnic solidarity face up to 10 percent loss of their state funding. Advocates of such programming saw this as an attack on the Mexican-American community, as research demonstrates the positive effects this programming has had on students. Ochoa O'Leary et al. (2012) found Mexican American Studies classes to be successful at addressing the educational needs of low-income students. All students, regardless of racial and ethnic background, eliminated their achievement gap after taking Mexican American Studies classes, and graduated at rates equal to or higher than those who were not enrolled in such courses (Ochoa O'Leary et al., 2012, pp. 104-107). The increase in such legislation, and my own experiences in seeking to belong in this society, have led me to question how the sociopolitical environment of Arizona affects the identity management of Latin@ youth in this state.

Latin@ Youth

Because of the increase of Latin@s living in the United States, researchers have taken on the task of studying Latin@ youth identity (Bejarano, 2005; Cammarota, 2008; Gonzalez, Stein & Huq, 2012; Koss-Chioino & Vargas, 1999; Perez, 2012; Pizarro, 2005). Gandara and Contreras (2009) analyze the social setting in which Latin@ youth grow up, finding that social and economic forces limit each youth's agency. They posit that children of immigrants experience increased levels of economic hardships in comparison to native-born families. These hardships are manifested through limited access to medical services, regular school changes as a result of frequent relocation, and housing segregation. (Gandara & Contreras, 2009, pp.55-60). As a result, Latin@ youth are less likely to be exposed to developmental activities such as extracurricular activities. Flores and Chapa (2009) postulate that children of families who recently immigrated to the U.S. could encounter different educational barriers than U.S. born Latin@s. These

include not having culturally similar role models, biased messages regarding access to higher education, and even translated materials to assist in planning for college (Gonzalez, Stein & Huq, 2013).

Focusing specifically on undocumented youth, Perez's (2012) work provides an in-depth look at the experiences of undocumented youth living in the United States. Through his work, he examines some of the major setbacks this population encounters including: legislation prohibiting financial assistance, barriers to higher education, and socioeconomic status. Erisman and Looney (2007) assert that this population is more likely to live in poverty than their classmates. Without financial assistance, paying for higher education is nearly impossible. Despite such challenges, Perez (20012) finds that undocumented students remain engaged in school and extracurricular activities, which fuels them to remain optimistic of future educational endeavors.

Bejarano's (2005) research, which analyzes the construction of Mexicana/o and Chicana/o identities, is grounded on Gloria Anzaldua's work on the borderlands. Anzaldua provides a vivid description of the border:

The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta*² where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country--a border culture.

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. (p. 25)

The physical border of which she speaks is one that all Mexican immigrants are familiar with, as choosing to cross that border from the Third world to the First shapes our lived

² An open wound

realities. Those of us who are familiar with this *herida*³ know the pain that comes with managing ourselves on either or both sides of this border. The emotional residue is a result of this management, and the recognition that we belong in neither side fully. It is in this space that people face both affirmations and contradictions about their identities at the same time (Bejarano, 2005). Her research, which embraces borderland theory, analyzes language practices, group borders, and social hierarchies. She found the experiences of Mexican immigrant and Mexican-American/Chicano youth vary greatly. In an effort to distinguish themselves from one another, these two groups engaged in the creation of distinct styles and language practices. Her work highlights the different experiences Mexicana/o and Chicana/o youth have in managing their identities. Both groups, though different, are subjected to a school setting where social class and ethnic/racial distinctions in society are reproduced by their peers and their teachers (Bejarano, 2005, pp.4-10).

The hostile education environment described by Bejarano was also present in Cammarota's (2008) work, Diaz-Greenberg's (2003) research, and Pizarro's (2005) work. Cammarota's ethnography took place in California and heavily emphasized the negative experiences Latin@ youth encounter in their lives, including encounters with apathetic educators and racism within the school system. Pizarro (2005) posits that even when racial/ethnic discriminatory incidents are rare, they become a significant aspect of the identity formation of many students. The youth that participated in Diaz-Greenberg's (2003) work highlighted the poor distribution of power present at their school, and stressed the fact that their voices are silenced because educators fear the power these students may gain by using their voices. She found these students longed to have a voice, to be treated with respect and dignity and to have their cultural identity and language

³ Wound

acknowledged and affirmed. One of the main concerns the participants of her study expressed was the preservation of their culture. However, this was neither recognized nor incorporated into the classroom (Diaz-Greenberg, 2003, pp.61-77). As a result, an exclusive environment is created that leaves out Latin@ students.

Diaz-Greenberg (2003) argues in an effort to blend in, Latin@ students embrace the dominant culture present in their schools. These youth are expected to abandon their cultural/ethnic roots and assimilate to American values in order to become “good citizens” (p. 3). As a result, many struggle to regain their voice in the schools they attend. In contrast, Cammarota (2008) posits that because assimilation isn’t sufficient to alleviate tensions, youth engage in cultural organizing. He defines this as the process through which individuals determine the most appropriate approach for daily interactions. This enables them to garner cultural resources from both subordinate and dominant sources, and maintain autonomy in their identity formations. His work provides a focus on the influence of the political economy in California, where his research took place, and the opportunity the youth have in practicing assimilation through their jobs at a local restaurant. The majority of research on Latin@ youth identity emphasized the negative encounters Latin@ youth have in the educational system. Several recurring themes were identified in the literature including: low expectations (Bol & Berry, 2005; Cammarota, 2008; Flores, 2007; Tenebaum & Ruck, 2007), school punishment (Morris, 2005; Noguera, 2003; Peguero, 2012; Peguero & Shekarhar, 2011), and discrimination (Benner & Graham, 2011; DeGarmo, & Eddy, 2004; Martinez; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). The following section will provide an overview of the challenges Latin@ youth encounter in the U.S. school system.

Low expectations One of the significant barriers that Latin@ youth experience in the education system is the low expectations placed upon them by their teachers.

Research has demonstrated that teachers hold lower expectations of Latin@ students than of their white counterparts (Bol & Berry, 2005; Cammarota, 2008; Flores, 2007; Tenebaum & Ruck, 2007). Bol & Berry (2005) conducted a study in which 379 middle school and high school teachers responded to a survey asking what factors they believe attribute to the achievement gap. The quantitative and qualitative data from this study indicates that teachers are more likely to attribute this gap to student characteristics. Some of these characteristics include work ethic, peer pressure, laziness and lack of discipline (Bol & Berry, 2005). By attributing the achievement gap to student performance, educators fail to critically examine their own teaching methods and ideologies, and instead assume Latin@ students do not possess the skills needed to be successful (Flores, 2007). This is echoed by Cammarota (2008) who asserts, “Underlying the lack of caring rampant in the school system is a racist assumption that Latin@s and most students of color are incapable of academic achievement” (p. 121).

Alfinio Flores’ (2007) work asserts that students whose ethnic or cultural background differs from that of their teachers are often put in situations where the teacher assumes deficit in the students. With the growing number of Latin@ students and the majority of educators around the country being White, this poses an unfavorable and unjust situation. As a result of these assumptions, it is likely that the teacher will provide Latin@ students with less challenging work, sending the student a message that the teacher does not believe they are capable of performing at the same level as their White counterparts. The low expectations generated by teachers result in fewer opportunities for students to learn tougher material (Flores, 2007, p. 33).

School Punishment Aside from managing low expectations from their teachers, Latin@ youth are hindered from being successful in school due to disproportional punishment. Noguera (2003) argues that our approach to school

punishment is similar to that of crime in society. Officers, or school officials, seek to remove “bad” individuals in order to sustain an environment of safety and order for those who choose to follow the rules. Utilizing suspension or expulsion as forms of punishment for students can easily be justified by schools with the argument that these practices are necessary in order to maintain an adequate learning environment that will benefit the majority of students. By doing this, school officials are able to remove those individuals who disturb the creation of this learning environment without questions asked. When students are perceived to challenge the social order and stand in opposition to the educational system, they become targets in the eyes of school officials (Noguera, 2003, pp. 342-346). Recognizing the word *perceived* in the previous sentence is imperative in understanding who misbehaves most frequently and who is perceived to be a greater threat to a learning environment.

Peguero & Shekarhar (2011) conducted a comparative study analyzing school punishment and misbehavior of Latin@ and White students. After surveying 7250 students, results found no statistical difference in the level of student misbehavior between Latin@ and White students. Despite the fact that students reported the same levels of misbehavior, Latino & Latina students have a higher likelihood of school punishment than their white counterparts (Peguero & Shekarhar, 2011). In another study conducted by Morris (2005), an ethnographic approach was utilized to examine the ways in which a private school reproduces race, class and gender through bodily discipline. Through his analysis, Morris found that teachers interpreted Latin@ students who projected a “street” or “gang like” persona to be more dangerous and needing more discipline than other students. These students were constructed as exotic, untrustworthy, and connected to gang activity (Morris, 2005). The construction of the

Latin@ identity as untrustworthy or poorly behaved predisposes teachers to punishing these students more frequently and with more ease.

Peguro & Shekarhar (2011) assert that although never stated officially, school officials generally operate under the assumption that students who are on a negative educational path will break more rules and therefore will have to experience more extreme forms of control. The results of Morris' study suggest that Latin@ students who embodied a "gang like" persona were perceived to be challenging the educational environment created. This perceived challenge may cause teachers and staff to assume a lack of interest from the Latin@ students. The application of this unspoken guideline places Latin@ students in a position more likely to receive punishment. These students, who experience punishment more frequently than their classmates, are less likely to be successful in an educational environment because the consequences of such punishment for racial and ethnic students are educational disengagement, failure, and alienation (Morris, 2005; Noguera 2003; Peguro, 2012; Peguro & Shekarhar, 2011). The consequences of such punishment are detrimental, as they hinder Latin@ students from receiving adequate education, forcing them instead into suspension or expulsion. For many of those who become part of the cycle of punishment, complication with law enforcement and the criminal justice system are inevitable (Noguera, 2003). Whether intentionally or not, by punishing Latino students at disproportionate rates, school officials increase the likelihood of such individuals encountering law enforcement and joining the cycle of punishment.

Discrimination at school Latin@ students often report experiencing acts of discrimination in school settings and in other public places (Benner & Graham, 2011; DeGarmo, & Eddy, 2004; Martinez; Rosenbloom & Way 2004). This type of treatment can, in turn, encourage mistrust between school staff and students. The cases of

discrimination reported place teachers and police officers as those who most frequently engage in discriminatory behavior (Rosenbloom & Way 2004; Anyon 1997). The discrimination experienced by students is manifested through hostile relationships they have with those in position of authority (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). These claims are supported by stories depicting harassment on the part of police officers at school. Benner & Graham (2011) found an increase in the reports of discrimination from Latin@ students across the first two years of high school. In these scenarios, students are treated more like criminals than as part of the student body. This discrimination may lead to a perpetual cycle of acting out, as students feel that they will continue to be targeted because of their race/ethnicity. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, the treatment of these individuals by those in positions of authority sends a message of distrust and suspicion.

Rosenbloom and Way (2004) argue that acts of discrimination in school are often subtle, leaving students feeling uncertain as to whether their experiences were examples of discrimination. The uncertainty felt by Latin@ students in these encounters makes it virtually impossible for Latin@ students and school officials to enter into a relationship of mutual trust and respect. Distinction must be made between individual discrimination and institutional forms of discrimination. While a student may discriminate against another student, institutional discrimination calls us to examine the structure, in this case the school, from which the discrimination is experienced.

The literature concerning Latin@ youth reveals the damaging environment they consistently encounter in the U.S. school system. While immigrants face additional challenges than U.S. born Latin@s, both groups' experiences are impacted by their identities. Through data from interviews and observations, this study explores the difficulties the youth from an Arizona nonprofit organization face in their high schools,

and the way in which their involvement in this organization contributes positively to their growth as students and individuals.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

In an effort to gain in-depth understanding of how individuals make sense of their realities (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006), an ethnographic qualitative design utilizing participant observation and interviews was chosen to explore the experiences of Latin@ youth in the sociopolitical environment of Arizona. Conducting ethnographic field research allows the researcher to paint a vivid and colorful picture for readers, as this methodology provides detailed accounts of the life and activities of participants. My role as a participant-observer (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008) allowed me to participate in the youth's activities rather than only observing at a distance. I chose to conduct individual unstructured interviews with the hopes of creating a space for the participants to describe their experiences without interruptions. Doing this allows for a conversational style often resulting in richer data (Valentine, 1993). Additionally, unstructured interviews grant the participants of a study the opportunity to provide explanations and details of their lives with their own language, rather than demanding they choose a "prepackaged response" (Perez 2012, p.14) that may not fully capture their experiences.

Participants

Participants for this study were recruited through the youth group of a local nonprofit which will be referred to as El Centro. Prior to this study, I acted as a volunteer at El Centro with the hopes of mentoring Latin@ high school students. The nine months I spent getting to know the youth inspired me to tell their stories. At the time of my research, the youth group at El Centro consisted of 20 participants total, 14 females and 6 males. Eighteen of these participants attended Wild Flower High School, a predominantly white school located just a couple of miles from El Centro. The other two participants attended East Mountain High School, a school with the reputation of

serving predominantly Latin@ students. The youth who participated in this program ranged in age between 14-19 years. Of the 20 participants of this youth group, nine were undocumented. Every member of the youth group was fluent in English, while only 2 were not fluent in Spanish. The youth group sessions were always conducted in English, but incorporated the Spanish language, as this reflected the natural speaking habits of both the members of the youth group and the facilitator. The youth group officially met once a week from 4-5 pm, but most of the youth typically arrived at El Centro one hour before and left one hour after the meetings were over. During this time they were usually spending time with their friends or focusing on their school work. All 20 members of the youth group agreed to partake in this study.

Of the 20 participants involved in the youth group, 11 participated in the interviews. Because the best interviews occur with participants who want to share their stories (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006), participants self-selected for this portion of the study weeks after my announcement. Because of our pre-existing relationship, the youth felt comfortable approaching me to talk. Some expressed discomfort in being interviewed, but were comfortable participating in the observations. The 11 participants with whom I conducted an interview were those who expressed an interest in being interviewed and sharing their stories. Nine of the youth interviewed attended Wildflower High School, while the other two were students at East Mountain High School. All of these participants were high school juniors or seniors.

Procedure

Parental permission forms were made available in both English and Spanish to meet the language needs and preferences of parents (see appendix C and D). Because the majority of the youth lived just a couple of blocks away from El Centro, I was able to walk the neighborhood to meet many of the parents and tell them personally about my status

as an immigrant and my research interests. Establishing this common ground created a more comfortable space in which parents had the opportunity to voice their concerns and ask any questions. Each time I knocked on a door, I was greeted with a smile and invited to come in. This process allowed me to become more connected with the community. Those parents with whom I was unable to meet received the consent form through their children and were given my cell phone number in case any questions or concerns arose.

After parental permission forms were signed and submitted, I held a special meeting with the youth group in order to share information about my research project. An assent form was provided to each participant which explained my research project in detail (see appendix B). At this time, the youth were invited to ask any questions before agreeing to participate. Many were aware of my status as a student and were eager to participate in a graduate level research project. Due to the preexisting relationship between the youth and myself, it was imperative for me to assure them that if for some reason they did not want to participate they would not be punished and our existing relationship would not be harmed.

My time as a participant-observer was spent providing academic assistance to the youth, sitting in on youth discussions, facilitating debriefing discussions, and having one- on-one conversations with the participants. I spent between 3 and 6 hours each week for a period of 9 months at El Centro and at community service events at which the participants volunteered. Because of our pre-existing relationship, many of the participants felt comfortable enough to approach me when they had a problem they needed to discuss or resolve. Each time I visited El Centro, I carried a small notebook with me where I took field notes. I also utilized my cell phone to jot down short sentences so that my note taking did not interfere with the naturally occurring events

and conversations since use of cellphones is commonplace for this group of young people both generally and during their time at El Centro. I revisited my notes shortly after to provide more thorough explanations. The developmental aspects of ethnographic methodology allowed me to identify emergent themes from my observations to raise during interviews. These included language, ethnic identity, and identity management at home, in the community, and at school.

Interviews were conducted in a private conference room on a different part of the nonprofit's campus, where numerous community agencies come together to provide services for this particular community. This conference room was chosen in an effort to provide a private environment where the youth felt safe and comfortable speaking with me since the majority of the participants had also visited this space in the past, making it a familiar environment. All of those who volunteered to be interviewed were provided with a thorough explanation of the purpose and methods utilized for this study. At this time, I also re-emphasized that they could choose to discontinue and withdraw at any point during the interview and our relationship would not be harmed.

At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked to give general information about themselves. I chose to begin the interviews this way because it was evident that the participants were nervous. This allowed them to begin the interview process by providing information about something they didn't have to think much about. Additionally, this first answer gave me insight as to which topics each teen felt comfortable discussing and provided an unofficial guide for the interview. As a result, no interview followed the same structure or utilized the same questions. However, each interview touched on the themes previously identified in the field notes. Although some participants became emotional during their interviews, none chose to withdraw from the study. In fact, numerous participants expressed a sense of gratitude and appreciation

suggesting the interviews helped them work through some unresolved issues. Laura, Cristina and Alejandra each sent me a text message the night after their interview was conducted to express their gratitude. Other members of the group, like Jose and Julia thanked me for taking the time to listen to their stories. The length of interviews ranged from 45-105 minutes. Each participant's anonymity was ensured through the removal of any information that could specifically identify that individual and the assignment of an identification number which was later changed to a pseudonym. Each interview was recorded digitally and transcribed utilizing software which slowed down the audio recording. Verbal utterances and nonverbal communication such as laughing and crying were noted in an effort to recognize and capture the mood and emotions that contextualized the talk. The way that each interview was transcribed is meant to accurately reflect the way in which the youth spoke, which meant factoring in their pace, vocal inflections, and the stream of consciousness nature of their speech.

Analysis

Notes from each youth group session and community service events were reviewed weekly. Doing so allowed me to gain insight and understanding of the events I was noting, and allowed me to identify themes and concepts which rose from the data (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). The general themes of language practices, discrimination at school, and identity management at home and in school were identified early in the field notes and continued to be present through the observations. The individual interviews were used to corroborate the patterns and themes that emerged from the observations. I transcribed each interview and jotted down initial thoughts that developed through this process. The transcriptions were read numerous times in order to establish their accuracy (Fielden, Sillence & Little, 2011). A thematic map was created in order to provide order to the dozens of themes initially identified. Doing so allowed me

to visually connect themes that shared commonalities and that could be collapsed under one single category.

Limitations

The methodology chosen for this study was meant to provide in depth, detailed explanations of the experiences of Latin@ youth. While conducting field observations seemed to be successful, the unstructured interviews may have limited the participants in telling their experiences. With many of the interviews, I noticed the youth were eager to tell their stories. Many emphasized the fact that they had never opened up to anyone like they did during the interview. As this became more apparent, I realized utilizing a *testimonio* methodology would have allowed each participant to share their stories without limitations. As a mentor to the youth, I recognize that this methodology may have acted as a tool for reflection for each participant, allowing them to think critically about their experiences.

My interactions and observations were surely influenced by my identity as a light-skinned privileged Latina. Through my observations and interviews, the color of my skin and authenticity as a Mexicana was often brought into conversation. Some of the youth would comment on my “Latina attitude” and our shared cultural values, while others who didn’t know me as well were shocked to find that I am a Mexican immigrant who is fluent in Spanish. This may have caused some participants to be suspicious of my presence and less comfortable sharing their experiences with me.

Context

My relationship with most of the participants in this study began nine months prior to my research when I began volunteering at El Centro, which is located next to another agency which also provides services to the local community. My interest in volunteering had nothing to do with a potential research project, but instead was an

opportunity for me to mentor high school youth. The focus of this particular youth group is to decrease underage drinking and binge drinking in their immediate communities. This particular issue has been identified by community leaders and the local police department as a priority. The program is based on values of collaboration, inclusivity, diversity, openness, creativity, and harmony. For those who live in this neighborhood, El Centro is known by the community as a place where Latin@s are able to receive personal and educational support,

My first week volunteering was tough. The fact that I looked like a white, American, 17-year-old girl made the youth suspicious of me, a fact they later joked about during conversations. Most were surprised to find that I, too, was a Mexican immigrant. Many were hesitant to speak with me and instead remained at a distance. As the weeks went on and I observed and participated in their weekly youth group session, the group began to trust me. I found myself spending numerous hours assisting the older teens with their school research papers. Between conversations of topic sentences and sentence structure, the youth would casually mention the encounters they had with their classmates and teachers. Many spoke of their struggles in trying to fit in at a “school full of white people.” When the group came together for their weekly session, the topic of ethnic and racial identity often came into the conversation. *What does it mean to be Mexican? How do Mexicans act? Do we belong here?* When I chaperoned them to community service projects the debriefing conversations often challenged them to consider these same issues. Soon, these questions became part of everyday conversations. Many wondered how their ethnic identity and legal status would affect their future plans of attending college and joining the workforce.

The numerous conversations I witnessed led me to wonder: How do these youth manage their Mexican/Chican@/Latin@ identities in a sociopolitical climate like the one

present in Arizona? This question is one I have been grappling with all of my life as an immigrant living in Arizona. However, my struggles with ethnic and racial identity have happened behind closed doors, a privilege I am afforded due to the color of my skin and my ability to pass as Caucasian. The youth of El Centro do not have this privilege and are forced to deal with such questions in their everyday lives.

During one of my first youth group sessions as an observer, I sat in on a conversation regarding ethnic and racial identity. When Miguel, the facilitator of the youth group, asked the participants who considered themselves Mexican, I witnessed every member of the group raise their hand. Some of the participants, particularly those who were not born in Mexico and those who did not speak Spanish fluently raised their hand reluctantly. A conversation followed in which the youth shared their thoughts regarding the label and their comfort in using it to describe themselves. Although some hesitated to use the label because they feared their inability to speak Spanish excluded them, every person identified as Mexican. Through my research, I will utilize the word Mexican when referring to the identity of the youth in order to honor their self-identification. However, there are several instances in which the word Latin@ is used. These are cases in which the youth discuss their experiences in predominantly white spaces and in dealing with negative stereotypes. While they identify as Mexicans, their descriptions discuss encounters in which they were the only nonwhite individuals present. The only time the word Hispanic will be used in this study is when the youth themselves utilize it to describe themselves or others.

Organizational Description

My initial research proposal focused on understanding the ways in which Latin@ youth manage their identities in their everyday lives. I sought to learn about the struggles they face in occupying spaces where they do not feel they belong. For the first few

months, I desperately tried to separate El Centro from the youth's experiences, as it was only meant to be the place where I recruited participants for my study. However, through my observations and interviews the significance El Centro has in the lives of the youth became central to understanding how its participants manage their identities. El Centro eventually emerged as a finding in my research. This section is meant to provide some context about El Centro and the surrounding community.

El Centro The nonprofit organization under which El Centro falls was founded in the late 1980s through a community collaboration. It was created with the purpose of providing prevention services to schools located within one specific school district. Since the time of its creation, it has expanded its services to multiple school districts around the Valley and is now offering prevention programs in the workplace and in the community. These programs include those which focus on social competency skills, drug and alcohol awareness, and parenting programs. El Centro was created nearly two decades ago in an effort to broaden prevention services outside of the school system, and to administer services specifically for Latinos in this community. The vision of El Centro is to empower the residents of the surrounding community with the knowledge necessary to improve the health and safety of families while building resilience. This is accomplished through a series of initiatives aimed at women, men, children and adolescents. These initiatives focus on community development, family substance abuse prevention, and leadership programs and include English language classes, health programs and community workshops. Additionally, specific initiatives are aimed at women and men with the goal of teaching them how to advocate for their family's healthcare and educational success.

The moment I walked into El Centro, I was greeted by a beautiful mural which covers a large wall located at the entrance of the building. This mural is vivid in color and

was created by people of all ages who frequent El Centro. The images and words depicted on this art piece represent the values held by those residing in this neighborhood, including references to family relationships, *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, and love for the community. Markers of cultural identity and language practices can also be seen. The constant need to negotiate between a Mexican and American identity is manifested on this wall through each brush stroke, along with the struggles and joys experienced by this community. Despite the fact that this mural was created in 2005, it is at the heart of El Centro and continues to be relevant to the lives of those individuals who visit this space. Next to this mural lies a table fit for toddlers along with a set of toys appropriate for this age group. A large television and different video games are available for the youth of El Centro to utilize, and are located near the computer station where any member of the community is welcomed to come.

One of the main reasons the services offered by El Centro are sought after is the fact that the staff providing these services are a reflection of the community being served. El Centro's staff team is composed of 4 individuals who originate from different regions within Mexico and speak fluent Spanish. This allows them to offer these services in their native tongue, within their native culture, and through their native customs. The friendly and welcoming attitude often associated with Mexican culture is manifested in this space through daily hugs, kisses, and *cotorreos*⁴. Entering El Centro is like entering your *tia's*⁵ house; as soon as you walk in, every person in the room greets you with a smile on their face, a kiss on the cheek, and a question about your day. Prior to the start of my research, when I was a volunteer at El Centro, I was able to engage with the staff and develop friendships with each of them. Their authenticity and genuine interest in the well-being of the community made their work that much more remarkable. I often witnessed each

⁴ Chatter or jokes

⁵ Aunt's

of them put extra hours into their day or pay out of pocket for supplies needed for special events or meetings. It is evident that this job is not just a paycheck for them, it is an opportunity to support their fellow *paisanos*⁶.

La Vecindad⁷ The neighborhood surrounding El Centro can be described as a transient immigrant community. The majority of its residents are of Mexican origin and have traveled to the United States in search of a better future for themselves and for their families. Bejarano (2005) posits that in order to preserve their youth's language and cultural practices, immigrants often organize into networks. These networks provide support to both immigrant youth and adults. This is a high-density residential area with numerous apartment complexes, duplex and multi-plex rental properties, and single home rentals with multiple families residing together under one roof. Many of these families are in the country without legal documentation, a fact which shapes every aspect of their experience in this country. The lack of proper documentation and English language ability leaves them with few employment opportunities that require very little formal education. As a result, they are often forced to take lower-wage jobs in the hospitality and resort industry or domestic work. Many must work multiple jobs to make ends meet. In this neighborhood it's not uncommon to hear *cumbias*⁸ and *corridos*⁹ coming from front doors. Spanish is the language most often heard spoken on the street. The homes are filled with pictures of *La Virgencita*¹⁰, and the local *paletero*¹¹ roams the neighborhood selling traditional Mexican snacks. It is important to note that the population of Latin@s in this neighborhood has decreased within the last few years as a

⁶ Compatriot

⁷ Neighborhood

⁸ A type of music commonly heard throughout Mexico characterized by a fast beat and often played during parties or family functions. Typically celebratory in nature.

⁹ Traditional Mexican folk songs that tell a story.

¹⁰ La Virgencita is used as a term of endearment for La Virgen de Guadalupe.

¹¹ A person who sells paletas (Mexican popsicles) or ice cream from a pushcart.

result of harsh anti-immigrant laws in the state of Arizona. Quintana (2010) reports that while harsh anti-immigrant laws in the state of Arizona were meant to encourage undocumented immigrants to self deport to their home countries, a number of them have chosen to relocate to neighboring states. Many families residing near El Centro have chosen to move back to Mexico or to other states which are perceived to be more tolerant of immigrants.

Three blocks north from *la vecindad* where El Centro is located lies an entirely different world. This world is white, full of million dollar homes, fashion boutiques, and high end restaurants. All a person has to do is cross one single road to go between *la vecindad* and this affluent section of town. A few miles south of El Centro is where Wild Flower High School is located. Surrounding Wildflower High is another part of the city that is notorious for fine dining and expensive homes. Each day, the youth of this community must shift from one world into the next, managing their identities in places where they are often the only Latin@s present.

El Youth Group El Centro's youth group is meant to offer its students a set of strategies and skills that enable them to deal with difficult choices. In order to recruit participants to El youth group, Miguel, the youth programmer, walks through the neighborhood and invites the youth that he sees on the street. Most of the youth have never been involved in any extracurricular activities and would not typically volunteer their time to a leadership development and community involvement program. However, being personally invited by Miguel creates an opportunity they normally would not have. Because of Miguel's continues employment at El Centro, he has become very familiar with the families residing within *la vecindad* and is able to approach the youth with an existing credibility. The group takes an approach which defines leadership as a complex system involving the skills, abilities, and knowledge of both the leader and the follower,

and the context in which they interact. This means that each member of a group has both the potential and responsibility to be a leader, contributing her/his unique skills, perspectives, and ideas to make the group effective. This approach seeks to broaden traditional definitions of leadership by recognizing this as a process that allows all types of youth to bring their unique personalities to the position. In the first youth group session, the teens are introduced to numerous concepts which set the foundation needed to tackle issues of *identidad*¹², drug and alcohol prevention, and leadership. First and foremost, the teens are reminded that their involvement in this youth group is entirely voluntary and that they have the option of opting out if they so choose. The group's facilitator, Miguel, sets the premise that participants will never be forced to do anything, but will be asked to trust the facilitator and process. The *jóvenes*¹³ are warned that belonging to this group will require them to keep an open mind, as many of the activities and conversations will push them to reconsider the ideas they currently hold.

As a team, participants are asked to create a set of conditions which guide what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior during the youth group meetings. Some of these conditions include showing respect, listening when others are speaking, and keeping an open mind. Rather than telling students how they should behave, they are given a hand in creating this environment for themselves and for each other. Once these conditions are agreed upon by the group, they are printed and posted on the wall of El Centro to act as a reminder for the remainder of the year. Lessons regarding the youth's agency in changing thoughts which lead to positive actions, expectations, and trust and respect are also covered in the first session. Each session is concluded with acknowledgments. During this time, the youth are invited to recognize the work and effort of one of their fellow friends. This recognition occurs publicly, in front of the entire group and requires

¹² Identity

¹³ Young people.

each student to step forward and speak directly to the individual they are recognizing, stating the reason as to why they've chosen to acknowledge them. This is meant to create an open environment which validates the power of words and allows the youth to participate in open *comunicación*¹⁴ between each other. These basic tenants are revisited each and every session in an effort to help the teens recognize the ways in which their thoughts affect their everyday lives and help to establish a safe environment that allows for difficult conversations to be managed.

The main curriculum seeks to develop the participants' knowledge, skills, and understanding needed to become effective leaders within culturally diverse communities. This program teaches the youth how to examine relevant issues facing their community along with awareness of themselves and how they relate to others. These lessons are brought into action when the youth are able to apply this knowledge through meaningful service experiences. Following each service experience is a debriefing session in which participants are asked to look back on their experience volunteering. For many, the service done with the youth group is their first time volunteering for a nonprofit organization. The debriefing session allows the youth to reflect on the lessons they've learned and any questions they have. Often, issues of socioeconomic status and cultural *identidad*¹⁵ are brought into the conversation. The numerous hours the group has spent together along with the many activities related to trust and open communication allow the participants to speak *honestamente*¹⁶ about the struggles they face.

One of the group's main focus is to decrease underage drinking in their community. This is accomplished through educational outreach projects for parents and youth. Additionally, the youth group works in conjunction with the local police

¹⁴ Communication

¹⁵ Identity

¹⁶ Honestly

department to enhance these outreach efforts. These include an operation which targets liquor establishments near the neighborhood which are known to sell liquor to underage youth. This undercover operation requires the youth to attempt to purchase alcohol from the establishment. If the establishment sells the youth alcohol, the police department will fine the establishment and the individual who did the selling. Aside from promoting prevention programs, working with the police department allows the youth to develop a relationship with the police officers who are meant to keep the neighborhood safe.

CHAPTER 3

LOS FINDINGS

One of a Kind: Occupying Predominantly White Spaces

Based on their place of residence, the majority of the youth at El Centro attend Wildflower High School. The district to which Wildflower High belongs is open enrollment, allowing students from around the Valley to enroll in its schools. In total, less than 20% of the student population at Wildflower High come from Spanish speaking families, making the youth's experiences as immigrants and/or children of immigrants unique. The fact that the school serves a predominantly white student body was something I was well aware of when I began my research. During my months as a volunteer at El Centro, I often overheard conversations regarding the experiences *los jóvenes* had in occupying predominantly white spaces. These experiences most often referred to their time at school and at the mall located just a few blocks away from El Centro. When I began my observations, I knew it was imperative to focus on this fact, both in conversation and during the interviews. I heard numerous stories from the youth depicting their struggle in being the only Latin@ in multiple spaces, including their classes, the mall, and in extracurricular activities. These stories were shared voluntarily each day at El Centro and during the youth group sessions.

Laura's story was one that I became most familiar with, as our relationship developed prior to my research and continued to strengthen in the following months. She has been involved at El Centro for more than 7 years and as a result has strong relationships with the staff. She lives in a small apartment with her parents, older brother, and 2 younger sisters. Laura often acts as the primary caretaker of her younger siblings, as her parents are forced to work multiple jobs in order to make ends meet. One of her favorite extracurricular activities is tennis. Her interest in tennis began five years

prior when she had the opportunity to play through youth programming at El Centro. Upon entering high school, she picked up the sport again and has been very successful since. One of the struggles Laura often expresses is her inability to relate with the members of her tennis team. She states:

“Um. It was kinda weird at first because *again* I was the only Mexican there. And everyone is white. They were all white, tall, skinny girls.”

Her identity as Mexican is highlighted in this space both through her skin color and what she has described as a Mexican body. Additionally, Laura spoke with me several times about the fact that the girls on her team are unable to relate to her life experience, including having to take care of her siblings, helping her mother with daily housekeeping chores, and contributing the earnings from her job in order to help pay bills. Cristina shared a similar sentiment during her interview:

It’s kind of hard to feel like a part of something, especially like the white community, because most of them feel like they are much better than us. At least some of them--most of them. They don’t understand Spanish, they don’t understand why we look that way, or why we even came here because they always grew up getting everything they wanted. But in our case, it’s different. For our families, we always have to work for stuff that we have and what we want.

Both Laura and Cristina were brought to this country at a young age by their parents in search of a better future. Their physical appearances, language practices, and legal status makes it difficult for them to relate to their white classmates, whose experiences are drastically different than their own.

Los Unicos en la Clase¹⁷A narrative often heard through El Centro involved the youth discussing what it was like to be the only Latin@ in class. Because this is a

¹⁷ The only ones in class

common experience shared between participants, it was a topic frequently covered both in conversation and during formal youth group sessions. When the participants discussed their experiences, they did so knowing that the other members of the group could relate. These conversations made evident the different experiences each student has in class as a result of being the only Mexican present. Although experiences differed between each member of the group, it caused each of them to question their belonging in this space. The questions of belonging were not only based on their race/ethnic background, but also in relation to their abilities. During my interview with Julia, she began discussing her biotechnology class in which she was the only Mexican. Initially she signed up for the course because the topic was interesting and caught her attention. Upon realizing she would be the only Mexican in class she expressed her discomfort:

And I go in the class and just look around and I see that I'm the only Hispanic student, which I didn't like, because I didn't have someone to go to or someone I guess that I knew that would take a class like that. I guess it was much more higher or so. It was scary. I felt lonely. I guess it could be called depressed in that class. Since I didn't know anyone I would be quiet. I felt scared—because everybody was white. I guess they feel like they're more superior or so, so I was just really scared that I probably wouldn't make friends. How would I get along? How would I pass the class? I was even scared to ask questions to the teacher. He was white also. 'Cause everyone there was smart in honors classes, AP, doing this or college level classes, and me just the regular Hispanic student.

Despite her interest in this course, the fact that no other students identified as Mexican made her experience significantly less pleasant. Although Julia is an outgoing girl, the discomfort in being the only Mexicana and lacking any allies inevitably caused her to become introverted in this class. Her reference to being “the regular Hispanic student”

speaks to the assumptions and expectations held by both herself and others regarding her abilities, a matter which will be discussed in a later section.

Many of the other youth expressed similar sentiments when asked about the demographics of their courses. Laura echoed Julia's comments when sharing details about her algebra course:

Last semester I was taking Algebra 2 honors and I was the only Mexican in there. They were all white people. And I was kind of scared at first because I was like 'What am I doing here? I don't belong here.' And then since that went through my mind all the time, that just got me down and like I almost failed the class because that's what I thought: 'What am I doing here? This is not for me. I feel like I don't belong here'

The constant feelings of isolation from both Julia and Laura acted as hindrances to their success in their courses, despite their interest in the topic at hand. Although both participants perform well in their other classes, the ones described above proved to be the most challenging. Both girls spent a great deal of extra time and effort on the assignments for these classes. Because of the unwelcoming environment present in their classrooms, both voiced hesitation in asking their teachers or classmates for any assistance. During her interview, Paola recounted her experience in biotechnology. Though both she and Julia were enrolled in this course at the same time, they attended class during different periods. She states,

I remember in my last year, junior year, I was in my—I think it was biotechnology or biochemistry or something like that— and I was in a class where it was all white people. I was the only Latina there. It was really awkward. I didn't really speak with any of them. And they didn't speak with me either so it was really awkward. I ended up dropping out of that class 'cause I really hated it (chuckle). I was there

and I didn't speak with anyone and I did try speaking with some of them and they were just like eh, you know.

Based on the data evident both in observation and during interviews, the effects of being the only Mexicans present in the classroom proved to be detrimental to the learning experience of those students. The combination of physical attributes along with the fear of being excluded served to reinforce feelings of isolation and not belonging. While the youth from El Centro were not always the only Latin@ in class, they affirmed the negative experiences they each had when this was the case. Conversations surrounding feelings of isolation and belonging were so typical at El Centro that such an experience became somewhat normalized. The youth were never surprised by the comments made by their peers. Wildflower High has had the reputation of being a white school among youth for years, and although the number of Latin@ students has been increasing in the past few years (S. Otero, personal communication, April 14, 2014), it was still far below that of white students.

Aside from feeling isolated and like they don't belong in classes with predominantly white students, some of the youth expressed a fear in reinforcing the negative stereotypes associated with Latin@s, specifically Mexicans in this state. Although Francisco attended East Mountain High School, the other high school near El Centro which serves a higher percentage of Mexican students, he shared the experiences of the students at Wildflower High in being the only Latin@ in his Advanced Placement English course:

I was weak at English. I was one of the only Hispanic students in there. And I felt intimidated the whole time because I felt—first of all English wasn't my strongest subject, and I felt like if I said something they would be like—well just even being a student there, looking stupid there, just like letting them—or getting that clue in

their heads like 'He's Mexican. He doesn't know what he's talking about.' At that time is when I was intimidated most.

Despite his presence in the Advanced Placement section of English, Francisco felt his language skills were inferior to those of his fellow classmates and often expressed his desire to improve them in order to better fit into this space. His discomfort in occupying this space is closely linked to a fear of reinforcing negative perceptions of Mexicans held by both students and teachers. Later in his interview, he too expresses his inability to ask questions during this course, as he feared that doing so would signal to others that he did not belong in this classroom.

The occupation of such environments proved to be difficult to the youth as it forced them to adjust their behaviors in order to blend in. While this may not seem like a significant reaction, it affected the cultural practices of the participants, including their language habits. Manuel was a great example of this. During each interview, I asked each of the youth whether they are more comfortable speaking English or Spanish. My fluency in both languages allowed me to give them the option to choose which language the interview would continue in, hoping this would make them feel more comfortable and free to express themselves. During Manuel's interview, he expressed his comfort and strong identification with speaking Spanish, but was uninterested in changing the language in which the interview was conducted. When I pressed him on the matter, he shared with me that the conference room where the interview was being held was not an appropriate place to speak Spanish. This was due to the fact that the room where the interview took place is almost exclusively occupied by white individuals, causing him to understand it as a space in which he doesn't belong. This was a boundary that I had not previously considered or recognized. Although we were the only two present during this interview, he felt an initial hesitation to express himself in his own language out of a fear

of being inappropriate. This sentiment was echoed by others, including Cristina and Laura, who were both scorned by their teachers for speaking Spanish during class. Jose was also admonished by classmates for speaking Spanish with his friends. He commented that they assumed he would be talking about them. Exclusionary norms, including the rejection of the Spanish language, serve to highlight the feelings of isolation and not belonging that the youth experience, and forces them to adjust their cultural practices in an effort to blend in and stay out of trouble.

Acting Different as a Means of Survival Through conversations of belonging and isolation, the youth eventually expressed the necessity to change their behavior in an effort to fit into spaces that have consistently excluded them. Because of El Centro's proximity to the mall, the youth often find themselves in this space despite feelings of discomfort. All of them, at one point or another, discussed the fact that this space is not welcoming to them and is not a space that they enjoy occupying. However, as a result of limited transportation and numerous job opportunities, they often found themselves applying for jobs or simply spending time at the mall. One afternoon, Paola and Paloma began sharing with me what it was like to visit this space. I would describe them both as strong, confident young women. However, when they began recounting their experiences their voices became docile and timid. Paola began sharing,

If I go into a store, and a white girl goes in too, the people that work there are gonna follow me and not her. They will ask her if she needs help and just ignore me.

Paloma affirmed this and compared it to her own experience as a light skinned Mexicana, stating that this difference makes her less likely to be followed in a store. Her ability to pass as white may afford her the privilege of not being followed, but it does not decrease her feelings of discomfort in occupying this space. Both she and Paola discuss

the need to adjust their behavior in these settings in an effort to challenge the notion that Latin@s do not have manners. Both mentioned the need to act more serious, speak less, and adjust their vocabulary as a way to fit in.

Similarly, when discussing her experience in the classroom, Julia expresses the need to adjust her behavior to fit in:

I don't know if this is the right word--- but I guess more proper or so. You can't like, be not like how you are, but just gotta do that higher standard or so. Like if I act who I am like all silly and be who I am they're just gonna look down on me. But if I act, I don't know, more manners, even though everyone has manners, they'll just be like 'she's not good enough, why is she here? That's so low of her to be doing that.' And then I guess if you act more white, they'll see you as I guess one of them? I don't like that but I guess sometimes you have to do it so you won't be looked at weird or they'll make weird assumptions of you.

Julia was clear in expressing that adapting to her surrounding was necessary in order for her not to stand out or feel excluded. She follows this quote by stating that she needs to not act crazy, blend in so that she isn't noticed, and instead act 'normal.' Quickly after, she acknowledges the fact that the idea of normal is not one that she and her Latin@ classmates get to define, but instead is defined by white individuals.

Orgullo While the youth found it necessary to adapt their behavior to the environments they were occupying, they also took a great sense of *orgullo*¹⁸ in standing out and representing their Mexican/Latin@ heritage. This was a contradiction they constantly had to manage, as the need to blend in often challenged this *orgullo*. Every single one of the youth I interviewed expressed their strong identification with their Mexican/Latin@ heritage. Whether this came from their own experiences in Mexico, or

¹⁸ Pride

the stories they heard from their parents about life in Mexico, this background contributed to their understanding of their identity. Carla spoke proudly of her memories in Mexico. This segment of her interview was filled with vivid details, including details of sights and smells, which depicted an average day at her family's *rancho*. She spoke of her background with a great sense of *orgullo* and although she was unable to visit because of the violence in Mexico and because of her legal status, this experience was still very much a part of her. This was the case for many of the other participants who often spoke of their favorite memories of being back home which included family gatherings, favorite foods, and favorite soccer teams. All of them feel a great connection with their heritage.

This was a topic that was discussed on a weekly basis at El Centro, and therefore crucial to discuss during the interviews. When I asked Paloma if her Mexican culture was important to her, she shared:

It kind of forms who you are. You grow up with it and you grow up with it with your family. So I would never switch anything to like, how they do it here in the United States. My kids, if I have kids, they will never know Santa Claus, they will always know El Niño Jesus. They will never open their gifts in the morning on Christmas, they'll open them on Christmas Eve. And they'll have a *quinceañera*¹⁹ not a Sweet Sixteen.

Although Paloma constantly fought to fit in at school and at the mall, her Mexican customs proved to be more important. The need to adjust her behavior in different spaces allows her to navigate them with more ease. However, her values still align closely with those present in her Mexican heritage. Laura shared an instances in which her dad had to drop her off at a party for her tennis team. She shared:

¹⁹ Traditional celebration of a girl's fifteenth birthday in Latin America.

...he told me– because he plays Spanish music in his car and when we were driving there he said “when I leave here I’m gonna blast my music loud so they can know I’m here, some Mexican is driving around.”

When I asked her whether she wanted him to play the music, she stated:

Kinda... So that they could know that– that a Mexican is there. Like, that he’s proud to be Mexican and that nothing is gonna change that. Even if we do live in America, even if we do have to adapt to it. He’s still proud to be Mexican.

Adapting to the practices and norms of White American culture proved to be a necessity in the lives of the youth. Engaging in such behavior allows them to blend in and avoid uncomfortable situations and punishment. However, defying cultural norms of the dominant group allowed them to find a “cultural space of uniqueness” (Camarota, 2008, p. 5) which permits them to hold on to aspects of their cultural identities.

Navigating Privilege

It was a warm May evening as I entered the parking lot of Wildflower High School. I pulled into a parking space to find a BMW parked to my right and a convertible Lexus to my left. This was my first time at Wildflower High, and from the comments I heard from the youth, I knew I would be entering an affluent space. This didn’t matter, however, because this was a night to celebrate. The time had come for nine of the youth to graduate from high school. As a mentor of the youth, it was important for me to be there to support them in this special moment. Miguel and I found some space on the bleachers and waited with anticipation for the ceremony to begin. The graduation speakers began their narratives which spoke of the lessons they learned through their years at Wildflower High. “Our faculty have taught us how to treat one another in a place where differences are embraced and diversity is welcome.” I couldn’t help but wonder how the youth reacted to this statement. They were clearly in conflict with the feelings

the youth expressed about Wildflower High. The following speeches talked about the lessons of personal responsibility learned from their parents, “I am grateful for my mother who taught me how to take care of my own things, like washing my car and applying for summer jobs.” Washing my car? All I could think about was the fact that *los jóvenes* don’t have their *own* things like their classmates do. This reminded me of the comments made the youth which reference to the many advantages their classmates have over them.

This graduation ceremony was the first time I was able to see firsthand how different the experiences of the youth are than that of their classmates. These racial and economic differences shape the way in which they understand privilege. In his work, Cammarota (2008) asserts, “What primarily sets them apart from white youth is race, especially the way in which race influences a hierarchy of privileges and advantages experienced within their politico-economic structure” (p. 10). Conversations of being the only Latin@ at school or at the mall led the youth to understand and recognize the differences that exist between their own experiences and the experiences of those around them. This privilege is understood comparatively and highlighted because they represent a minority in the school population. When talking about what it’s like to be the only Latin@ on the tennis team, Laura referenced her experience in going to a pool party at one of her teammate’s homes. The house was on the neighboring mountain and had a luxurious pool. Laura talked about what it was like having her father drop her off at this pool party.

What really hurt me was when he said, we drove up to the house and then he said, ‘Wow when are we ever gonna have a house like this?’ And that’s when I felt really bad. I was just like, I don’t know. He works so hard and like we never really

have time to spend together since he's always working for us just to give us what we want.

Having her father drive her to this pool party forced them both to face the socioeconomic difference between their experience and her classmates'. Although Laura's father works multiple jobs in order to provide for his family, they still face economic challenges. In another conversation, Laura acknowledged that these financial difficulties are not a result of insufficient work or effort, instead these are based on circumstances outside of her control and the privilege that white Americans have in the United States. During her interview, Daniela also shared the differences in her experience in contrast to those of her classmates:

Obviously I'm not at the mall all the time. I don't have money to be spending on clothes and how I be looking. I do what I can. I spend more time at home, especially with my mom. I help around the house. I clean and obviously we live in a packed apartment, I'm pretty sure the white folks don't. They have big houses and their own rooms and everything they ever wanted. To me---no. Every time I see like they're driving their nice cars, I really don't see myself like driving a Mercedes or something like that I'd rather have something I actually worked on and built myself, rather than something I bought off of someone else.

Daniela recognizes that the privileges enjoyed by white people are largely related to finances. Having the means to pamper themselves through clothes and appearances acts as a signifier of such privilege. In contrast, Daniela is unable to spend time and money on her appearance and instead focuses on helping her mother around the house.

Additionally, the living conditions of the youth were drastically different than those of their classmates. The neighborhood surrounding El Centro has numerous apartment complexes and multi-plex rental properties which allow multiple families to live under

one roof. At the time of her interview, Paloma was in the process of moving to a new home. She explained to me that because of financial difficulties her family is forced to move to a new home every year. This time, however, she and her family were moving to their second home in a 6 month period after being evicted. When describing the privileges enjoyed by her white classmates, Paloma stated,

And it's not even that they might have money, sometimes they'll be like oh— the school, or the people that they know, the people their parents know, the area they live in

Comments like this make evident that the youth's experiences have led them to understand the complexities of white privilege. This privilege is not limited to skin color or money, but instead extends to the area in which these individuals live and the access that grants them to numerous opportunities including relationships and educational endeavors.

The participants also recognize that having white privilege enables those who have it to manage problems with the law with much more ease. Paloma shares:

The white people can just get away with more because they have the money to get away with more. And they have the money to get lawyers and everything. And when they go to court they can pay everything fine. And then when you go to my old school district, no one has money for that. Even if you get—especially because most moms and dads don't have papers if they get a ticket it's a big thing. Even just a \$200 ticket is a lot. And for the white people it's just like "Oh, it's just \$100 we can pay it fast." They can get away with a lot more. I feel like the white parents aren't as strict. As long as they are gonna graduate or get good grades they are fine.

This sentiment was shared by other members of the group, who also mentioned that Latin@s in their neighborhood generally have a more difficult time dealing with law enforcement. The ability to pay a \$100 or \$200 fine may seem insignificant, especially when it's a result of a driving violation. However, the economic challenges faced by Latin@s in this neighborhood, especially those who don't possess documentation to live in and work in the country, make this much more difficult.

Saving up, Working Harder When discussing their experiences in comparison to that of their classmates, the youth generally mentioned the necessity to save up and work harder. Carla explains:

I guess Mexicans have more dreams than white people. That's how I see it. I guess I have more dreams than white people. *Cuando hablo con*²⁰ white people, it's more like 'I'm just gonna let life take me wherever,' but Mexicans have their little plans. But I guess they never stop fighting for what they want, they just keep going you know?

During her interview, Carla spoke in depth about what her life was in Mexico before moving to the United States. Although she was a young child, she provided vivid details about her life on the *ranchos*. Her family was forced to move to the United States as a result of limited opportunities and an increase in violence in her hometown. These circumstances forced her family to cross without proper documentation, leading them to have a questionable legal status in the country. While her classmates have the privilege of taking life as it comes, she and the other youth are put in a position that forces them to take every decision in their life very seriously. To "let life happen" can be perceived as an act of carelessness by their families, as the youth are expected to consider their families in every choice that they make.

²⁰ When I talk with

When Julia talked about the situation of Hispanics/Latin@s in this country she shared, Most of the Hispanics here at the school, their parents came from Mexico (in Spanish) in the 90s, so they don't have as much as the *gueritos*²¹ do. Their parents are lawyers and doctors and higher jobs, while most of the parents here work at restaurants or don't have a *job* job, so it's like harder for us. We have to actually work hard to get a decent living, even though the wages may be low. As long as we're keeping the family going it's all good. While the *gueritos* have everything that they want and don't really work hard for it. Let's say, a lot of them for their 16 birthday they get a car. For a Hispanic you don't get a car until—I mean maybe your parents can help you but you have to do it yourself. It takes years to pay for something like that... it doesn't come easy. Gotta keep going,going,going to get whatever you want.

Having to work harder than their classmates to be successful was a fact that the youth were familiar with. When discussing the differences in experience between white people and Latin@s, the conversation first spoke to the larger societal context. References to employment opportunities, educational achievements, and language barriers were used to prove the disadvantages experienced by Latin@s in this country. Daniela shared:

Mexicans are strong because where we come from, we struggle more than people struggle here. Everyone is like “oh it's a hell hole here blah blah blah.” But everywhere there's drugs, everywhere there's prostitution, everywhere there's evil. I feel like it was harder in Mexico that my mom tells me, because my dad doesn't even have his high school education or his middle school education. He dropped out like 5th grade, and after that he didn't go back to school. He took care

²¹ Literal translation: blondie. A term commonly used to describe individuals with light skin or Americans.

of my grandmother who is still alive, she's like 108. ...He just dropped out of school and stuff to take care of my grandmother.

Comments about life *en el otro lado*²² quickly emerged, as the youth used their parents' experiences in Mexico as a point of reference. Though nine of the participants were born in Mexico, most are too young to have any memories of their early years in Mexico. Their parent's narratives of life back home served to contextualize their move to the United States and the need to work hard.

Aside from understanding their lack of privileges by comparing their experiences to that of their classmates, *los jóvenes* from El Centro compare their social and economic circumstances to their families in Mexico. This dual frame of reference (Perez, 2012) serves to remind the youth that while they are disadvantaged in comparison to their classmates, they are in a position of privilege simply by being in the United States. This can help students "reframe their challenges and use them as a source of motivation" (Perez, 2012, p. 31). This excerpt from my interview with Francisco demonstrates this in action:

My dad's pueblo they call us *norteños*²³, they refer to us as that. And then, just being able to speak English well makes me different. I still speaks Spanish over there. So I would say, yeah I fit in there. Except for different traditions and habits. Like the way they greet each other, and different routines they carry on everyday are different from mine. Like my appearance yes, I fit in, but through personality I don't think so. I could, but naturally since I was raised here it would be different.

²² Translation: on the other side. Referring to the other side of the border.

²³ Literally translates to people from the north. Refers to individuals living north of the US-Mexico border.

Ana: What do they say to you when they talk to you and call you a *norteño*?

F: They assume that we are rich, or just wealthier than they are. And that we are more privileged. What else... (Pause). Yeah just those two. Yeah.

A: What do you mean by more privileged?

F: Like having.... One thing for sure is electronics. The electronics are more cheaper here than in Mexico so we have better access to them. And when we carry them over there, for example I bring my phone, it's like, oh, more high tech than it is there only because it's cheaper here. Also, when natives to Mexico look at life in the United States they see it as a better lifestyle, as far as education, water access and everything. It's much more... the environment is much more better. That's why they say more privileged.

A: Do you think you're more privileged?

F: (Pause). Um. I would say yes. Like being able to, not heat your water to take a shower, every other good is more cheaper over there and it makes the lifestyle much more easier. Also security. I feel much more secure here. It's not as dangerous as in Mexico. And I would say those are the top ones.

Despite the struggles Francisco and other youth face in Arizona, including dealing with discrimination and negative stereotypes, he recognizes that he possesses more privilege than his family in Mexico. His privilege is manifested through simple conveniences that may often be taken for granted, like taking a hot shower. Additionally this privilege is evident in the youth's access to material goods, education, and security.

Sin Papeles²⁴ All of the youth who participated in this study were in some way affected by matters of immigration. Perez (2012) suggests that students who aren't directly affected by the effects of detention or deportation are still aware of this reality through stories heard from family members. Whether they themselves were undocumented, as 9 of the participants were, or their parents were *indocumentados*²⁵, this legal status contributed to their daily experiences. The mention of such was common, as the youth often relied on Miguel, the program specialist, to answer questions or assist them in filing out documentation for themselves or for their family members. Because of my own connection to the Mexican government, I was often approached by the youth and by their families to answer questions and assist them through legal matters. One of the main concerns raised by the undocumented members of the group was their inability to pay for college. After the passing of Proposition 300 in 2006, youth without authorization to live in the country are forced to pay out-of-state tuition (Ochoa O'Leary et al., 2012). Daniela and Cristina were among the members of the group who most often spoke of this reality. Both students were bright and active in extracurricular activities. However, their legal status in the country hindered them from pursuing a college education. Cristina stated:

In other words, yeah, sometimes I really wish that because of the situation I'm in—I can't have a job, I can't go to college, I can't apply for a lot of things I wish I could—but by me having those obstacles I know I'm gonna be successful. If I keep pushing myself I feel like I can be, like other people have been. There's nothing that can stop me.

²⁴ Without papers. Refers to proper documentation to live in the United States

²⁵ Undocumented

While both she and Daniela acknowledged the limitations on their future resulting from a legal status outside of their hands, they were both determined to apply for private scholarships that would allow them to attend college.

The fear associated with being detained is not unprompted, but instead part of the reality many youth face. Laura's family, for example, was significantly impacted by her father's detention. Her older brother, Fernando, was also a member of the youth group. When their father was detained, he was forced to drop out of school and pick up extra shifts at work. At this point, he was the main provider in his home and was responsible for the finances of a 5-person family. When her father was detained, Laura's household responsibilities increased as her mother struggled without the help of her father. The youth recognize that all it takes is one single stop by a police officer and their entire life changes. Paloma had a similar experience when her mother was stopped by the police for what they claimed was a traffic violation, though she attributes this stop to her mother's identity as Mexican. For a few weeks, her mother was held in a detention center. During her interview Paloma shared:

She said it was a really bad place. The food was really gross. They had a little bathroom thing that was gross. She said that she would go to take a shower when that was there, she said that it was really bad.

Her details during the interview were limited, however, when she spoke of this incident at El Centro she talked about how much this experience affected her. When discussing her own identity as an undocumented migrant, she stated:

It sucks. I can't drive without being scared that the police is gonna pull me over and I'm gonna get arrested for driving without a license or for being here illegally...it kind of does feel limiting. And it's frustrating.

With consequences so great, it is inevitable that the fear of deportation significantly impacts the daily lives of the participants. Perez (2012) posits that as a consequence of their legal status, “many of these young adults are constantly on guard, worried about the possibility of getting caught. Often they avoid certain situations or people as fear becomes part of daily life” (Perez, 2012, p. 25). Forced to live with the uncertainty of her future, and aware of the experience her mother had in a detention center, Paloma’s life is significantly affected by factors outside of her control.

This topic was often covered in *conversaciones*²⁶ at El Centro between the youth. I overheard Eduard and Fernando discussing what happens when they get in trouble.

“We get an ass whoopin’

“White people just get their laptops taken away for a week”

“Yeah or their mini fridges, and we gotta worry about immigration.”

Though this was told in a joking tone, it perfectly captures the reality the youth face concerning their legal status in their everyday lives. When their white classmates find themselves in trouble, the repercussions associated with such are limited to having their privileges taken away, such as their electronics. At the same time, when the youth of El Centro get in trouble, they acknowledge the potential effects this could have on their status in this country. For those participants who do not possess legal status in the country, the fear of deportation or trouble with the law was shared by their parents as well. Without this legal status, the youth were limited in the type of activities they were able to engage in, not only because they lacked the proper documentation, but because their parents felt a great fear. Carla shared:

I feel like the Mexican parents have more challenges because some are kind of scared to do things that white people have the power of doing...*Unos no tienen*

²⁶ Conversations

*sus papeles*²⁷ so they feel like they are always scared of the police. They hardly go out and they're always like 'hey stay home blah blah blah, I don't want you getting into trouble' and the kid will be like 'I'm just gonna go here I'll be back.' It's just one of those things. It's so different how kids with papers don't really put so much effort, but then when other people who don't have the advantages they do of having papers they take it like 'oh let me do this' they set everything up. They do good in school, but they still can't do as much as they wanted to. Just having simple papers.

For an undocumented individual, to make a mistake carries much heavier consequences. Having this status in the country has acted as a hindrance to the youth in achieving their goals of getting a college education or a job.

In June of 2012, President Obama issued an executive order temporarily protecting undocumented youth who do not represent a threat to public security. The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) seeks to take away the attention from youth who are active contributors to society, and place it on undocumented migrants who have committed crimes. In order to qualify, the individual must have arrived to the US before the age of 16, reside in the United States for a continuous period of at least 5 years prior to June 15, 2012, must currently enrolled or graduated from a US high school, and not be convicted of a felony or significant misdemeanor (Schmid, 2013). The day this policy was announced was exciting for both the youth and the staff because we knew it would provide opportunities to those who were undocumented, even if it only meant temporarily. The months following the announcement of this policy were stressful, as the youth spent a great deal of time, energy, and money applying for this permit. This was no easy task. The application utilizes very technical language and

²⁷Literal translation: Some don't have their papers

requires applicants to provide detailed information. In order to submit an application, individuals must pay a fee of more than \$400. Many struggled as a result of their financial limitations and were unable to apply right away. Manuel, for example, has yet to complete his application because he is unable to pay the fee. Despite the financial burden, this policy opened up a great number of opportunities for the participants as it gave them protection from deportation, and a temporary work permit.

Managing Negative Stereotypes

One of the youth group sessions which stood out most to me during my observations dealt with matters of stereotyping. The conversation that took place wasn't planned and instead began organically from a discussion two of the youth were having. I overheard Carla say,

“Pero esas gringas²⁸ didn't know what they were talkin' about.”

“Ya sé²⁹, you know how gringos are talkin' shit about us.”

Intrigued by what I overheard, I asked the girls what was on their mind. “Don't you remember that video from last year? It was all over the news.” Once they mentioned this, I knew exactly what they were talking about. The year prior, a YouTube video surfaced featuring three high school girls offering their personal opinion regarding the state's SB1070 law. Aside from expressing their support for the law, they also spoke openly about their thoughts regarding the Mexican community in Arizona. This video was essentially a 6-minute rant full of discriminatory comments and racial slurs aimed at the Mexican community. It made national news and was a topic of conversation among many around the country. While I had seen the news coverage myself, I didn't realize that one of the girls appearing in the video was believed to have attended Wildflower High. Despite the fact that this incident happened a year prior to my research, it proved

²⁸ But those American girls

²⁹ I know

to be significant to the youth as I often overheard them talking about the video and the effects it had on their experiences at school. Because of this, I felt it was important to ask them about this video during each interview. Alejandra, one of the juniors of the group, shared her experience with me during the week that the video surfaced:

Like some people thought it was really stupid. And then like me and my friend Laura, we were walking together and some of these girls they gave us the most-- the funniest, strangest looks. They literally threw their leftover (food) at us. My friend Laura wanted to punch them.

Racial tensions escalated to such a degree, that Alejandra and her close friends were treated with disrespect and hostility. As she discussed the incident, her voice began to shake and she laughed with embarrassment. Her identity as Mexican made her a target for this kind of behavior in an environment that suddenly made the exclusion of Mexicans more obvious than ever. Many of the other youth discussed the effects this video had on them at school that week, including the death threats that arose after the video was leaked. According to the *jóvenes*, many students at Wildflower High panicked and decided not to attend school the days following the release of this video. Some of the youth expressed a concern that students from other schools perceived the student body at Wildflower High to be racist. All acknowledged the racial tensions that, although previously existed, were amplified by this video.

While some of the members of the youth group were surprised by the content of the video and by the tensions that followed, Manuel spoke of this in what seemed to be a careless tone. His attitude towards this matter during the interview led me to believe that he was unaffected by the whole ordeal.

Yo la verdad no me ofendí porque no es la primera vez que escucho eso. Toda mi vida he escuchado eso... que frijolero, que los burritos, y que los trabajos, ósea

todo lo escuchas así. La verdad se me hizo racista pero a la vez como que ‘a, otro video.’ Como no por que pasa frecuentemente, pero pues ya lo había escuchado antes y nada más que era... un video donde te decían todo en vez de escucharlo parte por parte. (I honestly did not get offended because it’s not the first time I’ve heard this. All of my life I’ve heard that... beaner, burritos, jobs, all of those things we hear. Honestly I thought it was racist, but at the same time I thought ‘Oh, another video.’ Like not because it happens frequently, but because I’ve heard it before and it was... it was a video in which they tell you everything at the same time rather than hearing it part by part.

This video wasn’t shocking to him because it served to affirm the comments he has heard regarding the Latin@ population. After sharing similar comments during the session, the other participants quickly recognized his comment to be true and confirmed with their own experiences. Many attributed the normalcy of these comments to the state’s anti-immigrant attitude, which seeps into institutional practices, cultural norms, and state legislation. Arizona has become infamous within the last few years for targeting minority populations, specifically individuals who do not possess proper documentation to be in the country. All of the participants in this study have grown up witnessing the hostile environment that has resulted from harsh pieces of legislation, and are therefore not surprised to hear such comments. The discussion during the youth group session turned to a conversation about the negative expectations consistently placed on the youth.

Each *joven* was eager to share their thoughts regarding the expectations people, specifically the Caucasian community, have of Mexicans. While the conversation began with general comments, these quickly moved to specific examples that spoke to each member’s personal experiences. These shed light on the narratives often heard on television regarding “illegal immigration.” Although only 9 of the 20 youth group

members were originally from Mexico and undocumented, the other members of the youth group come from families in which both parents are unauthorized immigrants. Despite the fact that the undocumented identity is not one that is shared by all members of the youth group, having family members who do identify as such makes these stereotypes relevant to their lives. “They just think we’re here to steal jobs, *pero no saben*³⁰,” stated Sofia. She is one of the younger members of the group who was born in the United States. Her mother’s identity as a migrant to this country has influenced her experience in facing such stereotypes. Manuel voiced a similar comment during his interview,

Como los americanos piensan que venimos nada más para quitarle los trabajos--- aunque puedo ir a downtown y conseguir trabajo así. Si tuviera papeles voy y para el final de este día consigo trabajo así (snaps fingers). Nada más que no quieren trabajos en donde les paguen 8 o 9 dólares la hora. Quieren trabajos donde le pagan 20 dólares la hora porque si no, no trabajan. Pero nosotros les quitamos los trabajos, verdad? (But Americans think we are just here to take their jobs—although I can go downtown and get a job like that. If I had papers and I go, by the end of today I would find a job like that (snaps fingers). They don’t want jobs that pay them 8 or 9 dollars an hour. They want jobs where they pay them 20 dollars an hour, or else they don’t work. But we are the ones that take their jobs, right?)

His tone during this segment of the interview was tense. It was clear that he and the other participants have dealt with these stereotypes for quite some time, as the passion in their voice grew with each word.

³⁰ But they don’t know

As discussed in the previous section, the participants have grown accustomed to occupying predominantly white spaces based on their place of residence and the school they attend. As a result, the burdens of dealing with such stereotypes are placed on few often causing them to feel alone. Having the opportunity to discuss their experiences while occupying predominantly white spaces is rare, making their time at El Centro much more valuable. It is then that they are able to openly communicate about their frustrations and struggles in dealing with such stereotypes. These factors make the conversations emotional in nature, often resulting in anger, frustration, or tears. Jose often shared his perspective on this matter and was frustrated by the fact that people (usually Caucasians) do not expect him, or other Mexicans, to be successful in the future. Through our conversations I was able to recognize that he sees this not as a testament to his personality or potential, but instead to the assumptions associated with the color of his skin. He shares,

Oh yeah, people don't expect you to be successful but if you are, then you get treated differently than if you weren't...They only expect the white Americans to be something in life...Something in life. They expect me to be the dishwasher at McDonalds---not a McDonalds literally, but a fry cook or just work out in the field and everything.

The notion that Mexicans do not amount to anything more than restaurant employees weighed heavily on the youth. Many shared that because white people expect them to be violent, drunk, and unruly, their opportunities for employment are limited. Additionally, Paloma stated during her interview:

We're not just gonna be begging for money. None of us wanna—none of us expect anything. That's what they think, that we expect to get welfare to get free things. No one expects that. We want to work for our money. If we want something, we

want to work for it. No one is expecting them to give us anything free. I think that's what they think here, that we just want free stuff. It's not like that. We just want to be able to build our future without having to worry about not having papers.

Some of the comments shared by the participants dealt specifically with instances in which they were forced to confront the negative stereotypes discussed. In her interview, Daniela spoke openly about the way in which these assumptions about Mexicans affect her experience at the mall. She states,

Sometimes you get a couple of stares, especially if you're going to a really high class store. They always judge you before knowing you...they always take a second look at you, and they always keep an eye on you, because you're a different color because they always think that you're gonna jack 'em from something or you're gonna steal something or whatever. They don't do that to white people. I've seen a couple of white people steal stuff and it's like, really? It's whatever. I don't really mind it. They can think what it is, but in my mind it really isn't what they think.

When occupying this predominantly white space, the youth experience the negative effects of the stereotypes head on. Many other participants discussed the discomfort in being at the mall because employees at each store assumed the worst of them. In her comment, Daniela attributes this treatment to stereotypes linked specifically with the color of her skin. Although she claims to not mind it, she was visibly disturbed by this matter. In other instances, I heard Daniela express a great deal of anger when having to deal with these stereotypes and the ways in which they affect her. When I brought this topic up during her interview, Paola also talked about the way in which her family was treated:

I did feel like we got treated differently like my family and I or my mother and I. I feel like we did get treated differently, but, I guess you could say not as much anymore. But the reason I think that is because I'm used to it. I always go to that mall and I'm like 'okay whatever.' I know how people are. Some people do, they stare at us, they'll just give us dirty looks. Like people from certain stores or if I go to Neiman Marcus, some people won't even greet me, they'll be like are you lost? The frequency with which these discriminatory practices and behaviors occur has caused the youth to become acclimated with such treatment.

Negative Expectations from Teachers As a mentor to this youth group, one of my roles is to assist the participants in their educational endeavors, which included research papers, math homework, writing emails to their teachers and attending school functions. The participants frequently would ask me questions about my college experience, including whether I was the only Mexican in my classes and what that experience is like. The one-on-one conversations I had with the participants led me to recognize their acknowledgment of the negative expectations the teachers have of them and the impacts these have on their confidence and school work. This was a conversation that I often had with Jose, who frequently struggled with this fact in his classes. I brought this up during our interview and asked him how he feels his teachers treat him. He responds,

I don't wanna be messed up, but they treat me like if I have a disability. That's how they are. That's how I feel I get treated. Like if I was discapacitated. That makes me think that they expect nothing from me. They just expect, yeah... just to figure out a way to finish school and stuff. Like to cheat *y todo eso*³¹.

³¹ And all of that

Jose's remark of being treated as though he has a disability was echoed by Manuel. Both assumed that their teachers expected little to nothing from them, and felt a great sense of pride when they were able to perform successfully and prove them wrong. While these negative expectations often prompted them to work harder to prove their teachers wrong, they also worked to make the students feel as though their teachers do not believe in them. This sometimes led to the students to care very little about their education. Cammarota (2008) asserts that beliefs about intellectual deficiency in Latin@ students encourage school faculty to expect failure from the students.

My interview with Paola also touched on the negative expectations her teachers have had of her. Paola is an intelligent young woman who is witty and confident. She doesn't hesitate to share her opinions with anyone. Throughout her interview she kept referencing the attitude that she has, making comments like, "I have an attitude already as it is." Remembering her comments during multiple sessions which referenced issues with teachers as a result of this attitude, I followed up and asked what this meant. At first, she spoke of it with a negative connotation referencing the fact that this attitude is seen as being a smartass or talking back. As I continued to press the issue, I realized this "attitude" is in fact something she and others love about her. Our conversation led us to conclude that this "fiery" attitude is associated only with Latin@ women. She shared with me that her math teacher especially picked on her and the types of jokes that she makes, while allowing her white classmates to make similar comments with no repercussions. She explains,

I think they just don't understand that that's the way most of us are. We kind of like snap back (chuckles). It's not that we're trying to be rude, that's just how we are. That's how I was raised. I mean my mom, it's not like she's told me 'OK, if

someone says something answer right away' she didn't say that. She just always told me if I had something on my mind to speak up.

At the beginning of her comment, she references "we" and "us," seeking to include all Latin@s who are raised with the value of speaking up and sharing what's on their mind. However, Paola acknowledges that her white counterparts are not forced to deal with these negative assumptions. When they speak their mind or make a joke, the teacher does not assume them to have a negative intention. When she, or other Latin@ students choose to speak up, the assumption is that they are seeking to defy authority and act out. The intersection of her gender and ethnic identity cause her teacher to have negative expectations of her. Through his own study, Morris (2005) poses that teachers who interpret Latin@ student identity as "street" assume that these students require more disciplinary actions. Paola's attitude may have been perceived as a threat by her teacher, causing her to discipline her more frequently than white students.

Rewriting Narratives The desire to rewrite the narrative associated with Mexicans was a common occurrence with the participants at El Centro. This was particularly noticeable with Laura. Laura is a high achieving student with a 3.4 GPA, one of the highest of the group. She is studious and dedicated to her school work, but found herself struggling to build a relationship with her English teacher. During my observations, we spent several days searching for a topic that intrigued her enough to choose for her junior year research paper. She eventually chose to write about the media's impact on standards of beauty, a topic that resonated with her personal experience. The day after choosing the topic, she came into El Centro disappointed after her teacher doubted her ability to successfully complete this assignment with such a difficult topic. Aside from this, Laura overheard her teacher suggesting the same topic to one of her classmates because she believed she could do a great job. From that point

forward, Laura *quería echarle más ganas*³² because she wanted to prove her teacher wrong. I spent numerous hours working on this paper with her until she felt like it was adequate. We both waited anxiously to find out her grade. Her score came back: 320/330, the highest score in the class. Laura was so excited and proud of the work that she produced, but most of all she felt a great sense of fulfillment knowing that she was able to prove her teacher wrong. Her hope was that her personal actions would somehow challenge her teacher's assumptions about Mexicans and make her rethink these stereotypes.

Laura wasn't the only participant who sought to change the ways in which teachers perceived her in an effort to challenge stereotypes about Latin@s. This theme was something I heard consistently from the youth, and something I believed myself when I was in high school.

When talking about being successful, Manuel states:

Pero a veces me siento como bien porque a veces le echo muchas ganas a lo que hago y pues cuando le hecho ganas me reconocen, y como soy mexicano no nomas me reconocen a mí, sino de dónde vengo. Y luego a veces eso hace que piensen que más mexicanos puedan hacer eso. (But sometimes I feel good because *le hecho muchas ganas* of what I do and when I do that and they recognize them, and because I am Mexican, they don't just recognize me but also where I come from. And then sometimes it makes them think that more Mexicans are capable of that.

The desire to rewrite this narrative emerged from the youth themselves in an effort to challenge existing ideas which defined their identities. Often, they expressed a sense of responsibility to represent Latin@s in a positive way with the hopes of changing negative

³² Expression meaning "putting forth an effort"

perceptions. Francisco shared his experience with me regarding his attendance at another school in the district for a special class. Although he attended East Mountain High School, a school composed of a higher population of Latin@s, Francisco was accustomed to being the only Mexican in his honors classes. Despite this fact, his attendance at this other high school proved to be uncomfortable due to the low percentage of Latin@s in the student population. One of the results of being the only Mexican in this space was an added pressure to represent Mexicans in a positive light. Francisco shares:

But just overall the environment of the school, I didn't really feel comfortable or that I fit in. I felt like I had to present an image. Like if I was being Hispanic, I had to present like—'oh he has etiquette, he fits in our crew.' Rather than if they saw me in saggy shorts or throwing stereotypical comments. I felt like I had to show intelligence in being Hispanic and showing like... 'hey he's different maybe the whole race is different.' And just break that stereotype. Even if it was without communication, just the image itself is powerful.

Francisco's perception was that Latin@s are typically viewed as less intelligent and gang like. In his eyes, his presence at this high school gave him a chance to challenge some of these assumptions, even if it happened through physical appearance.

His occupation of this predominantly white space often caused Francisco to have to deal with the negative stereotypes his teachers have of others Mexican students. Because of his high achievement and dedication to school, Francisco was chosen to peer mentor a class, providing assistance to his math teacher.

Okay so, I peer mentored for an algebra support class and my teacher even then would say 'these kids right here, most of them won't even make it till the end of

high school' and these students were the ones that dressed up kinda gangsterish and most of them were Hispanic, some of them didn't speak English that well. Although these stereotypes were not directly aimed at him, Francisco felt the need to challenge his teacher's negative perceptions. He recognized that these negative assumptions held by his algebra teacher affected the way in which he taught and motivated his students. While the teacher attributed his student's shortcomings to their personalities or lack of interest, Francisco recognized factors greater than this and sought to make these known. He tried to adjust his own teaching methods in order to better motivate the students he mentored. Francisco expressed a sense of disappointment upon recognizing his teacher's negative bias and willingness to quit on this specific population. His experience as a mentor, along with his own experiences as the only Mexican in class, led him to feel a sense of responsibility to rewrite the narrative that so often follows Mexican and Latin@ students. Through his personal actions, Francisco aimed to challenge his teacher in these ideologies in an effort to prove them wrong.

The data in this study made evident the lack of support the youth have in their educational environment. My findings support the existing literature on Latin@ youth experiences in the education system: the struggles Latin@ youth have in occupying predominantly white spaces, navigating privilege, and managing negative stereotypes. These experiences prove to contribute to the identity management the youth must engage in on a daily basis. Arguably, the school environment is one which is meant to provide a safe learning space for all students, yet instead, as Bejarano (2005) describes, it reproduces the social stratification of the United States.

Discussion

Within their schools, the youth of El Centro were often the only Latin@s present in their classes. Occupying such environments caused the participants to feel uncomfortable and excluded. Often they found themselves needing to adjust their behaviors in order to fit into the mainstream definition of what was deemed appropriate and normal. However, a sense of *orgullo* emerged from the participants as they wanted to stand out and represent their Mexican/Latin@ heritage. The fact that the *jóvenes* occupied such spaces allowed them to recognize the implications of privilege. Because they lacked this social standing, the youth were forced to save up and work harder in order to be successful. Despite their parents working multiple jobs, and the youth working hard to be successful in school, they recognize that their success is largely out of their hands and influenced by factors outside of their control. Lacking legal status in the country proved to be one of the greatest challenges the participants faced. Identifying as undocumented shaped many aspects of the youth's lives including their opportunities for employment, their ability to receive scholarships, and their future in higher education.

Facing the negative stereotypes associated with Latin@s was something the *jóvenes* had to do each and every day. The racial tensions at their school were heightened when a Youtube video featuring two girls ranting about Mexicans in the state leaked and gained national news. Though this video became public one year before my research, it proved to be relevant as the youth constantly referenced it and spoke of its effects. Many of the negative stereotypes that the youth had to face came from their teachers who often expected them to fail or to be disinterested in the class. Many of these stereotypes can be linked to the negative representations of Latin@s found in the rhetoric of state politics. Many of the participants expressed a sense of urgency to challenge the negative perceptions their teachers held of Latin@s through their personal actions. This was done

in order to rewrite the narratives that the youth have consistently heard throughout their lives concerning their efforts and ability to be successful.

Constantly having to manage through being the only Latin@s in class, privilege, and negative stereotypes was detrimental to their wellbeing. However, despite this lack of support from their educators, *los jóvenes* were able to turn to El Centro where staff members invested in the wellbeing and future of each participant.

CHAPTER 4

EL CENTRO AS A SAFE SPACE

One of the most memorable events in my time at El Centro was the end of the year dinner I was fortunate enough to attend. I assisted Miguel, the youth programmer, in planning a beautiful evening at a local restaurant to celebrate the graduation of several members of the youth group. We searched for a restaurant that was willing to accommodate a large group and a small budget. The restaurant where the dinner was held was more than willing to help after they learned about the type of work the youth engaged in all year. They provided several appetizers, main dishes and desserts; a dining experience that most of the youth have never had. Each youth group member wore their best outfit as they knew it was a special night. Some of the community leaders who acted as mentors attended this dinner to show their support for the youth. Funny awards were given to each participant setting a light, yet meaningful tone for the evening. The teens ate, laughed and took dozens of photos of one another. Each of their faces was beaming with joy. When we finished dinner, we took a walk outside to a nearby plaza surrounded by numerous fine dining restaurants and boutiques. We stood in a circle and concluded the evening with acknowledgments. Each of the youth spoke up and acknowledged one another and the mentors that were present. People walked by and stared, but no one was bothered. This was their time and their space, and it was clear to me that no one was going to take that away from them. It was at this very moment that I realized the significant role El Centro plays in the lives of its youth group members by facilitating the creation of a space that is both empowering and affirming. Every single teen cried as they expressed words of gratitude for one another.

“You are all mi familia.”

“I couldn’t have done this without you.”

“I will never forget all of the support you all gave me.”

The physical space we were occupying at that exact moment represented many of the themes I identified in my research. We were standing at the heart of the neighborhood which signifies wealth, whiteness and privilege. This is the same neighborhood that forces the youth to deal with the negative perceptions others hold because of their identities as Latin@s. The same space that constantly reminds the youth that they are unlike the others who reside there. The space that rejects their identities through discriminatory practices. And yet, the youth stood there unashamed, with their heads held high, speaking *their* language with *their familia*.

Una Familia Unida³³This familial environment present within the youth group is one of the most important things El Centro offers its participants. This was something I was able to witness myself and a fact which was reaffirmed time and time again by the members of the youth group. The obvious support seen at El Centro is offered by the staff members, who go far and beyond their job in order to assist the youth in any way that they can. I, too, became very involved in the lives of the youth and provided as much support as I could. This meant staying up late editing research papers and scholarship essays, writing letters of recommendation, giving rides, and attending special events. While the support provided by older mentors is important to the youth’s success, the support they receive from one another is equally important. Julia shared:

Cause we’re all Hispanic. Cause we’re teenagers so we know what a lot of us go through and all. We talk and we have those talks with the leader, like kinda like we don’t judge each other when we say things or hear things to the whole group. And we share and other people listen and help us out, give us a couple of tips and so they know we are not alone and this person or so-and-so is also going through

³³ A united family

it and don't forget we have people there to talk to us and whatever we want.

They'll be here and all.

What makes this support system effective is the fact that the support is both given and received. While the youth know they can come to the group to discuss their hardships, they also understand their responsibility as members of this collective to actively listen to the hardships of others. This is done free of judgment. Additionally, there is a mutual understanding that takes place between the youth because they share similar experiences. When the youth talk about their experiences as the only Latin@s in class, they know that the other members of the group will understand because they have all experienced this reality. When they talk about going to the mall and feeling like they are treated like criminals, they know the others have had similar experiences. Sharing their stories serves to validate their experiences and to recognize that they are not alone.

El Centro represents a third space in which elements of US and Mexican culture are incorporated and represented. At school, the youth recognize that they are occupying a space that does not belong to them. As a result, they are forced to adjust their behaviors and language practices. While the participants identify as Mexican, they also recognize that they do not belong in Mexico. When they spend time at El Centro, they have the freedom to perform their hybrid identities which blend aspects of both cultures. Having this safe space, where their identities are not judged, serves to affirm the way in which the youth choose to perform such identity.

As I mentioned earlier in this piece, the majority of *los jóvenes* have parents who work multiple jobs in order to make ends meet. This makes it difficult for the parents to fully engage in the lives of their children, often causing them to miss important school functions. It's not uncommon for the youth to only see their parents late at night when they arrive home from work, leaving them to spend the majority of time with other

teens. A common statement I heard during the interviews and in my observations is that the youth group is a second family to all its participants. The youth play with one another as if they were siblings. The older members of the group speak to those just starting high school as if they were older siblings, giving them advice on how to be successful in high school. When I asked Manuel why he continues to attend El Centro's youth group, he states:

Porque se siente como otra familia. Se siente como que tienes más familiares, y el ambiente siempre esta como feliz. Entonces todos con los que hables siempre te hablan de buena forma. Sientes como que más confianza de hablarles y pasarla bien y todo eso. Y siempre te ayudan si tienes problemas, siempre están dispuestos de ayudarte. (Because it feels like another family. It feels like you have more family members, and the environment is always like happy. So then everyone with whom you speak is always talking with you in a positive way. You feel like more trust to talk to them and to have fun and all of that. And they always help you if you have problems, they are always willing to help.)

Another reason the youth feel the familial connection with El Centro's youth group is because they rely on this relationship due to the struggles their own family face.

Alejandra was the only participant who did not live walking distance from El Centro, and was forced to take the bus home as her parents were rarely available to pick her up and take her home. As a result, I frequently offered her *un raite*³⁴ home. These rides allowed us to spend extra time together and develop a deeper level of trust. She spoke openly with me many times regarding the issues she experiences at home, including a history of abuse, drug use in the home, and careless parenting. For her, being at El Centro provides a safe space and a supportive family that assists her in working through any issues she

³⁴ A ride home

faces. Aside from this, Alejandra's experience differs a bit from that of others in the group in that she only has her immediate family in the country. She stated to me many times that prior to attending El Centro, she felt alone in this country. Through the relationships built at El Centro, Alejandra began to feel like she had a family she could go to when things were rough. Paola shared similar sentiments during her interview:

I think it offers me a lot of opportunities. A second family I could go to. And just guess you could say a second home because um, like... before when my dad still lived with us I hated going home because my parents always argued, um, and I would go to the program specialist and he was there (crying). And then I told my mom about that, and she hated that she was like 'you shouldn't be afraid to come home.' But I was. So, I stayed here a lot. I stayed here a lot because it took my mind off of things and I was concentrated in school and it just gave me a reason not to go home.

When things at home are hard to face, the members of the youth group know that they have another family to turn to. This family provides support for the youth as they are dealing with situations outside of their control, and gives them a space in which to redirect this negative energy towards a positive outcome.

Mentorship At the head of this family is Miguel, the youth programmer who leads the youth sessions each week. He has dedicated his time and effort to creating a safe space in which his kids, as he calls them, can recognize their potential and grow to be strong individuals. The relationships that he maintains with each participant are remarkable. He makes himself available to assist the youth in anything they need. This includes giving advice on school, relationships, family problems, legal issues, financial burdens, and fitness. Every single participant spoke of him with the highest regard, acknowledging the great impact he has had in their lives. Pizarro (2005) states that

mentors have the ability “facilitate the development of a strong identity grounded in the students’ own understanding of the racial-political climate...” (p.99). Through each youth group session, Miguel was sure to cover topics that he knew were related to the experiences of the youth. Many of these topics were chosen based on the personal conversations he had with each individual and often dealt with matters of the political climate present in Arizona and the ways in which this affected the youth. Although sessions were planned ahead of time, Miguel had no problem shifting to a different topic when he saw that something was on the youth’s minds. His goal was to create a safe space for the youth that challenged them to think critically about themselves and their experiences. Daniela shared her feelings about him:

I met my mentor and him—he changed like *everything*. My point of view on a lot of things. He showed me how to think out of the box, but then again in a smart way. Like chess. And I thank him so much because he helped me out a lot.

Especially letters of recommendation, community service, homework, projects, and programs.

The youth expressed their gratitude for Miguel weekly, both in session and in conversation amongst one another. In these conversations, *los jóvenes* acknowledged his unwavering commitment to the youth group and to each member of this group.

The admiration the youth have for Miguel comes in part from the credibility he has established with them based on his experiences growing up in a low income community with limited opportunities. During one of the youth group sessions I attended, *los jóvenes* were discussing the greatest challenges they’ve faced in high school. As the youth began to share their experiences and insecurities, many tears were shed. Manuel apprehensively shared his personal struggle, “My GPA is 2.1. I can’t go to college, I am ashamed.” At that moment, Miguel stood up and got in Manuel’s face

saying “My GPA was 1.8 and I got kicked out of five different high schools. *We* believe in you. *We* know you can do it.” This emotional exchange concluded with a warm embrace. By sharing his own personal story, Miguel informs the youth that he understands where they’re coming from and the struggles they are facing. His presence in their lives helps them see that they are capable of moving forward and being successful, despite the numerous challenges that stand in their way. Miguel’s words of encouragement serve to empower the participants each and every day.

Critical Thinking One of the qualities of the group that I was not expecting to see was the amount of critical thinking that took place during each youth group session. Through lessons that focused on self-awareness, the participants were given the opportunity to explore their *identidades*. These conversations encouraged the youth to question what it meant to be Mexican or Latin@, who defined these terms, and who was excluded from such definitions. Each member was encouraged to share their experience and their point of view which worked to broaden perspective between each other. During one of these sessions, Diego handed me a note that said, “What if you know you’re Mexican but people say ‘Oh you’re white’ or ‘you act white! You’re not even Mexican.’” Though he felt uncomfortable to bring this up himself, he asked me to share this question with the group. I knew this was a point that mattered to him because we had discussed the ways in which his inability to speak Spanish served to exclude him from groups of Latin@s or Mexicans. Through this conversation, the participants had the opportunity to critically discuss and challenge the negative perceptions often surrounding Latin@ populations, and even challenge their own perceptions of who was an authentic Latin@. The discussion of this topic led each member of the group to feel included and affirmed in their *identidad*, despite the differences that exist between the experiences of each member of the group.

The application component of the curriculum utilized in the youth group took the participants and myself to different parts of the city to engage in different community service projects. This dealt with issues such as hunger and homelessness, youth advocacy, and environmental efforts. Each service experience concluded with a debriefing session which prompted the youth to reflect on their experience as volunteers and to take the perspective of those they were directly assisting. The conversations that took place weren't always easy, in fact, they often made the youth feel uncomfortable and pushed them to challenge preconceived notions they held. However, they recognized the positive effects the various service experiences have in their lives. During my interview with Carla, she stated:

Yeah, being more supportive of my family. Being less---like I think about myself but I also need to think about other people. It helps me to understand the point of other people and the way they live and stuff like that. *No mas* to be there for them and to support them.

*Ellos saben que*³⁵ engaging in these projects allows them to see things from a different perspective. This isn't something that only happens temporarily, but lessons they learn to incorporate into their own personal lives and with their *familias*.

El Futuro For many Latin@ youth, a college education is not in their reach. One of the most important things I identified through my own observations and through my interviews was the fact that the lessons covered during El Centro's youth group better equipped the youth to deal with their futures. The participants were often given "homework" after each session. Though sometimes they complained, the homework they were given focused on doing research related to college. Finding scholarships for which they could apply, working on their personal statements, preparing for an interview and

³⁵ They know that

putting together a resume were some of the common homework assignments the youth were asked to complete. This was the type of homework that they did not receive elsewhere, but that prepared them in a way that will result in a successful future. Daniela compares the help she receives at school to that of El Centro:

Here, there's more help and there's people that it doesn't matter where you come from or anything, they'll help you. You don't really see that at school. The counselors are like, oh, you have to bump up that grade, and then they're like 'OK we're done, next person.' Here they give you more motivation more information than other places. They investigate no matter what. They will help you out to solve what you're having problems with or what you wanna do something. They'll help you out.

Aside from receiving specific information about college readiness, the youth appreciate the personalized help they are given by the staff. Because the ratio of student to mentor is significantly lower at El Centro, the participants are able to approach any of their mentors to ask questions.

One of the roles I played as a mentor was to assist the youth in completing these tasks. I spent hours talking with many of the seniors about the importance of telling their stories in college and scholarship applications. Though many lacked the confidence to share their stories, they were eventually empowered by their own experiences and excited to share them. Through activities focused on self-awareness, the participants recognized their desire and potential to attend an institution of higher education.

Daniela notes:

I've done community service, I've been involved with a couple of other groups, and I've learned that I actually do want to go to college. I learned how I can apply for scholarships, and how we're never alone, how people are always there to help

us and ask for help if we ever need it. Yeah. It's like a second home basically. You have your parents, but these are your mentors and they help you out a lot.

When she first attended the youth group, Daniela had no interest in attending college. This opportunity seemed unreachable, as she witnessed the struggles her brothers faced growing up which eventually led them to prison. For several months she refused to believe that she was capable of receiving a college education. Spending time with the other participants and engaging in the numerous projects at El Centro led her to recognize her potential, and one year later, she has successfully completed two semesters of her college education.

The data from the field notes and interviews demonstrates El Centro serves a significant purpose in the lives of *los jóvenes* who are involved in el youth group. Through their testimonies, the participants of this study painted a vivid picture of the negative experiences they encounter on a daily basis. The themes revealed in this study speak to the negative encounters Latin@ youth have in the U.S. education system. These are plagued by discriminatory practices that foster an environment which excludes Latin@ students and robs them of their power. In this space, Latin@ students are expected to conform to the norms set by their white counterparts and to accept their place as second class citizens in their schools. However, their involvement at El Centro allows them to push back and resist the oppressive environment which invalidates their experiences.

The model utilized at El Centro is one which can be reproduced across the country in order to make substantial change in the lives of young Latin@s. To create such change, it is imperative to acknowledge and validate the experiences the youth have in the education system. Allowing them to speak candidly about the injustices they face in their daily lives fosters an open and safe environment that enables the youth to make

connections between larger social issues and their own experiences. The support they receive from their peers and the youth programmer further affirms El Centro as a safe space that belongs to them and that is defined by them. By creating an environment that incorporates elements of mentorship, peer support, and critical thinking, Latin@ youth are better equipped to confront the hardships they encounter on a daily basis. Through the exploration of their identities, the participants reclaim the power that is taken from them at school and exercise it to ensure their success in the future.

CHAPTER 5

EPILOGUE

For me, this journey began 18 years ago when I first migrated to the United States from Mexico. As a young girl, I desperately wished I had a teacher or mentor who understood my experiences as a Mexicana living in Arizona. I began volunteering at El Centro with the hopes that I could be that person for someone else. The numerous hours I spent as a volunteer allowed me to build genuine relationships with the members of El Youth Group that were based on mutual respect and understanding. The many stories I heard from *los jóvenes* made me feel a sense of responsibility to utilize my privilege as a graduate student to shed light on the experiences of those who are often left at the margins.

Initially, my research proposal included an autoethnographic piece that would focus on my own identity formation and management in Arizona. This was meant to explore the privileges my skin color grants me and the complexities that arise when these meet the challenges resulting from my legal status. However, as I got deeper into this research project, I realized this wasn't the place for my own story to develop. I struggled for weeks trying to determine how important my personal narrative was and whether this was the place to explore my own struggles. Eventually, I made the decision to remove my own narrative after reviewing my field notes and finding the discomfort I began to feel in placing myself at the center of this research:

I am beginning to recognize that my story must take a backseat in this research project. *Los jóvenes* rarely have the opportunity to share their own stories, and as a result they are not heard or understood. Part of my responsibility, now that they have begun sharing their stories with me, is to make sure these are heard. I do

not need to be at the center of this research. No more attention needs to be brought to the already privileged voice.

Choosing to remove this piece from my research was perhaps one of the best decisions I could have made. This allowed me to focus on my original reason for going to El Centro which was to mentor Latin@ youth. The *herida abierta* that Anzaldua (2007) vividly describes is one that deeply resonates with me. Though constantly having to navigate through borders at home, at school, and in the community has become a norm, I am often left questioning where I fit in. Most of these questions remain unanswered. However, my experience as a mentor to *los jóvenes* gave me a place where I belonged and where I could grow in my own self-awareness.

Each week I spent at El Centro made me feel like it was my home. I found myself wanting to spend more time with *los jóvenes* to learn about their stories. As they spoke of the struggles they had in their person lives, I began to feel more responsible for their wellbeing and wanted to become more involved. The writing deadlines I set for myself quickly passed before my eyes and little to no writing had taken place. Instead, I chose to spend additional time at El Centro, mentoring the youth and accompanying El Youth Group to community service events. I engaged in numerous conversations that led me to better understand the experiences of the youth, and in turn, my own experiences in this country. Assisting the youth in academic and personal endeavors is what was most needed at El Centro, and what I wanted to do with my time. I struggled through the writing process and constantly wondered whether my time was best spent doing academic work, or applying the theories I spent hours reading. Finding a way to bridge my academic work with my interest in youth development was difficult, and at times seemed impossible.

The years I've spent at El Centro have given me the opportunity to build strong relationships with the youth who attend the programming offered. Many of these relationships have continued even though the majority of *los jóvenes* who participated in this study have graduated from high school, some going on to college and no longer attending the programs at El Centro. My role remains that of a mentor, now focusing on managing their Latin@ identity in higher education. I've continued my involvement at El Centro with the new members of El Youth Group and feel motivated by their desire to grow as individuals and the strong familial environment that continues to be created by the new group. As I prepare to graduate and enter the workforce, I look forward to the opportunity to spend my time and efforts in an environment similar to El Centro that will allow me to invest in the future of others, specifically Latin@ youth.

My purpose in studying this population was not to give *los jóvenes* a voice, but instead to make this powerful voice heard. Through my research, I was motivated by the amount of optimism and critical thinking I observed from each youth. I witnessed the power that having a safe space can have in the life of a young person. Though *los jóvenes* face a great deal of challenges in their everyday lives, I am confident that they have the potential to create social change by sharing their stories. Having a safe space like El Centro provides *los jóvenes* a supportive, risk free environment in which they can explore their identities and develop leadership skills to create change in their communities. The experiential learning model used at El Centro, which promotes critical thinking and self-awareness, is one that can be recreated in different regions of the country as a response to the negative experiences and the lack of support Latin@ youth face.

The staff at El Centro recognize the potential of each *joven*, but the real magic happens when the youth begin to recognize and see their own potential. It is then that

they are able to fully invest in themselves and in their futures. Being in this environment allows them to identify who they are and the fact that they can be agents of change in their community, as well as active participants in their own success. Through the constant validation of their experiences and affirmation of their identities, *los jóvenes* begin to believe in themselves. Once they recognize and see the light within themselves, they take ownership of their experiences and of their future. *Los jóvenes* acknowledge the hardships that their parents faced in coming to this country to provide a better future for them, and as a result they want to honor their parents' experiences by showing them that their hard work has paid off. Circumstances such as financial constraints and legal status are no longer a cause of shame, but instead are experiences that contribute to the person they have become.

I witnessed Alejandra recognize this light within herself. She was once a soft spoken, shy young woman who lacked confidence and was afraid to use her voice. The years I have spent at El Centro have allowed me to watch her grow into the woman that she is today: one who values the different voices that emerge from a group, one who is strong in her convictions, and one who lives and leads with integrity. At the end of her senior year she was preparing to apply for a scholarship to the local community college. Initially, Alejandra was ashamed to share her experiences growing up in a low income, at risk community. Instead she wanted to focus on her future goals without acknowledging where she came from. After several conversations, she made the decision to own her experiences and share the many hardships she has faced growing up in Arizona through her writing. Once she received a call back granting her an interview for this scholarship, we spent numerous hours working on her interviewing skills. Though Alejandra was confident in herself, she was nervous to the point of tears. I knew Alejandra could do it, but I wondered if she knew this herself. Weeks later, she called me to share the news that

she had been awarded this scholarship. We both screamed out of joy, and she invited me to join her for the scholarship awards ceremony. During the ceremony, she was asked to introduce the people she brought with her. After recognizing her mom and dad as the reason she made it this far, she turned to me and said, “This is Ana. She is the one that gave me my voice—actually the one who showed me how to use it.” This was perhaps one of the most meaningful moments I experienced during my time at El Centro, not because she recognized me as her mentor, but because she acknowledged that the potential was within her all along. All she needed was a person who could affirm it, and I was honored to have filled that role in her growth.

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APPENDIX A
YOUTH RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear Participant,

My name is Ana Terminel Iberri and I am a graduate student in the M.A. Communication Studies program at the West campus of Arizona State University West Campus. You may also know me through my volunteer work at El Centro. I am working with Dr Lindsey Meân, an Associate Professor at Arizona State University, on a study that examines Latina/o youth identity. In particular, we are interested in seeing the connections between race, gender and ethnicity for young Latinos and Latinas.

We are looking for young people willing to participate in this research study. For the research, we are interested in the ways that young Latinas and Latinos interact with each other and talk about themselves and their community. So if you agree to take part in the study, it means that you give me permission to discreetly observe your interactions with your group and I will possibly ask if you are willing to participate in a one-on-one interview with me. In this interview, I will ask you to talk about what it means to you to be a Latina or Latino.

If you agree to participate in the research now, you can still choose not to do the interview. You can also stop participating in the research or interview at any time. In the interview you will be able to skip any questions that you don't feel comfortable answering. I would like to audio record the interview but you can choose not to be recorded if you prefer, or stop the recording at any time. The interview will not be recorded without your permission. Please let us know if you do not want the interview to be taped. You also can change your mind after the interview starts, just let us know. Audiotapes will be kept in a secure location in Dr. Lindsey Meân's office on the West campus of Arizona State University. I will be transcribing the interviews and at this point I will remove any information and details that could make you identifiable.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can choose not to answer my questions at any point during the interview. If you choose not to participate or withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty and it will not affect your relationship with me or the staff at El Centro. There are no expected risks or discomforts to your participation.

Your response will be used to develop greater insight into the identities of Latina/o youth. Your participation in this research will be kept confidential. All participants will be given an alias or fake name that will be used for data recording and analysis and any details that could identify an

individual will be removed from the data or never recorded in the first place. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name will not be known.

If you have questions or concerns about this study please contact one of the researchers listed below. If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788.

Lindsey Meân
602 543 6682
Lindsey.mean@asu.edu

Ana Terminel Iberri
602 543 6295
atermine@asu.edu

APPENDIX B
YOUTH ASSENT FORM

My name is Ana Terminel Iberri, and I am a student at Arizona State University and a volunteer at El Centro. I am working with Dr Lindsey Meân, an Associate Professor at Arizona State University, on a study that examines Latina/o youth identity.

I am inviting you participate in a research study that will help me learn more about what it means to be a Latina/o teenager. I want to learn about the experiences that young people your age have in school, at work, and in the community. Your parent(s) have given you permission to participate in this study if you wish to do so.

If you agree, it means that you give me permission to observe your interactions with your group and that you might be invited to participate in a one-on-one interview with me. In this interview, I will ask you to talk about what it means to you to be a Latina/o. If you agree to participate in the study now, you can still decide not to take part in the interview later. You have the right to withdraw from the research or stop the interview at any time, or to skip any questions that you don't feel comfortable answering. With your permission the interview will be recorded, but we can stop recording at any point you want.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. That means that you may decide not to participate, or you may decide to participate only in one part of it. For example, you may say yes to me observing your interactions, and not to the interview or vice-a-versa. If you decide not to participate, or to participate only in one portion of the study, nothing will happen: nobody will be mad at you, and you will continue being part of your group as usual. Even if you start the study, you can stop and any point if you want. You may ask me any questions about the study at any time.

If you decide to be in the study, I will not tell anyone else how you respond or act as part of the study. Even if your parents, teachers, staff or siblings ask, I will not tell them about what you say or do in the study. At the beginning, you will be given a fake name that I will use instead of your own, that way your answers and comments will not be linked to you.

You need to know that as a professional it is my duty to report any instance in which anyone discusses wanting to harm her/himself or others. I will report this type of situation to people that will be able to help.

Signature

Printed Name
Signature of investigator
Date

APPENDIX C

PARENTAL PERMISSION FORM-ENGLISH

Dear Parent,

I am a graduate student under the direction of Dr. Lindsey Meân in the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Arizona State University, and a volunteer at El Centro . We are working on a study that examines Latina/o youth identity. In particular, we are interested in seeing the connections between race, gender and ethnicity for young Latinos and Latinas.

I am inviting your child's participation which will involve discrete observations of your child's interactions with the youth group and I will possibly ask if your child is willing to participate in a one-on-one interview with me which will be audio recorded. Your child's participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to have your child participate or to withdraw your child from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. Likewise, if your child chooses not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty and it will not affect your child's relationship with me or any of the staff at El Centro. The results of the research study may be published, but your child's name will not be used nor will they be identified in any way.

Although there may be no direct benefit to your child, your child may benefit from talking freely about their own experiences with a person who will actively listen to them and believe what they have to say is important. Youth, in particular, may benefit from this type of interaction. It may also contribute to a deeper understanding of their own experiences, identities, and development. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your child's participation.

If you choose to give permission to your child, and they agree to participate, they will be assigned an alias at the beginning of the study that will be utilized in all research material that will ensure confidentiality is maintained. No identifying information will be used at any stage of the study. The master list linking participants with their aliases will be kept in a secure network on Dr. Mean's computer. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations or publications, but your child's name will never be used.

If you have any questions concerning the study, please contact me at (602) 543-6295, or Dr. Meân at (602) 543 6628.

Sincerely,

Ana Terminel Iberri

By signing below, you are giving consent for your child

_____ to participate in the above study.

Signature

Printed Name

Date

If you have any questions about you or your child's rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you or your child have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788.

APPENDIX D

PARENTAL PERMISSION FORM-SPANISH

Estimado Padre,

Soy estudiante de maestría bajo la instrucción de la Dra. Lindsey Meân en la Escuela de Ciencias de Conducta y Sociales en la Universidad Estatal de Arizona (ASU) y voluntaria en el Centro. Estamos trabajando en un estudio que analiza las identidades de jóvenes latinos. Estamos específicamente interesadas en ver las conexiones que existen entre la raza, el género, y el origen étnico en jóvenes latinos.

Me gustaría contar con la participación de su hijo, la cual implicará discretas observaciones de las interacciones de su hija/o con el grupo de jóvenes y posiblemente le preguntaré a su hija/o si está dispuesto a participar en una entrevista conmigo que será audio grabado. La participación de su hija/o en este estudio es voluntaria. Si decide no permitir que su hija/o participe en este estudio, o si decide retirarlo del estudio en cualquier momento, no habrá ninguna consecuencia. Asimismo, si su hija/o decide no participar o retirarse del estudio en cualquier momento, no habrá ninguna consecuencia y no afectará la relación que su hijo/a tiene conmigo o con cualquier funcionario del Centro. **Los resultados de este estudio pueden ser publicados, pero no se utilizará el nombre de su hija/o ni se le identificaré en absoluto.**

Aunque es posible que no haya ningún beneficio directo para su hija/o, su hija/o se puede ver beneficiado al hablar libremente sobre sus experiencias con una persona que los escuche y que considere sus comentarios importantes. Los jóvenes, en particular, pueden verse beneficiados de este tipo de interacción. Al igual, puede contribuir a una comprensión más profunda de sus experiencias, identidades y desarrollo. No existen riesgos previsible o molestias en la participación de su hija/o.

Si usted decide darle permiso a su hija/o y se comprometen a participar, se le asignará un alias al principio del estudio que se utilizará en todo el material de investigación, **así se podrá garantizar que la confidencialidad se mantiene.** Ninguna información que pueda identificar a su hija/o se utilizará en ninguna etapa del estudio. La lista maestra con los datos de los participantes con sus alias se mantendrá en una red segura en el equipo de la Dra. Mean. Los resultados de este estudio pueden utilizarse en informes, presentaciones o publicaciones, **pero nunca se utilizará el nombre de su hija/o.**

Si usted tiene alguna pregunta sobre el estudio, póngase en contacto conmigo en el numero (602) 543-6295 o con la Dra. Meân en el (602) 543 6628.

Sinceramente,

Ana Terminel Iberri

Al firmar abajo, usted da consentimiento a su hija/o _____ para participar en el estudio anterior.

Firma

Nombre

Fecha

Si usted tiene alguna pregunta sobre los derechos de su hija/o como participante de este estudio, o si siente que su hijo se ha puesto en riesgo, puede contactar al presidente de la Junta Insitucional de Revisión de Sujetos Humanos, a través de la Oficina de Integridad de la Investigación y Aseguramiento, al (480) 965-6788.