

Wealth, Stereotypes, and Issues of Prestige: The College Choice Experience of  
Mexican American Students within their Community Context

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### Abstract

Utilizing the notion of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), this study focuses on the various forms of capital that Mexican American students from the South Texas Border draw upon within their community to navigate the college choice process. Findings indicate that neighbors, church members, and in one case a physician served as sources of social capital, while students drew upon resistant and aspirational capital to deal with racial/ethnic stereotypes and negative perceptions of local/regional universities.

Key Words: Mexican American, College Choice, Capital, Community Cultural Wealth

**Wealth, Stereotypes, and Issues of Prestige: The College Choice  
Experience of Mexican American students within their Community Context**

The influential role that family and significant others play in the college choice process of Latino<sup>1</sup> students is well documented (Ceja, 2001, 2004, 2006; Flores & Obasi, 2005; González, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003; Hurtado-Ortiz & Guavain, 2007; Perez, 2007; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Person & Rosenbaum, 2006; Rosas & Hamrick, 2002; Talavera-Bustillos, 1998). Specifically, parents, siblings, extended family members, and school personnel (i.e., teachers, counselors) are most often identified as the individuals in Mexican American students' social networks that assist and/or hinder students' ability to navigate the college choice process (Ceja, 2000; González et al., 2003). Fewer studies, however, focus on the role that community members who are not school affiliated or kin can play in this process (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003).

As such, the purpose of this study was to examine the influential role that non-familial or school related individuals had on the college choice process of 20 Mexican American high school seniors from South Texas. The challenges that arose and/or strengths that students drew upon within their communities in the

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<sup>1</sup> The terms "Latino" and "Hispanic" are used interchangeably and in accordance with their use in the literature cited.

midst of navigating the college choice process and accessing a postsecondary education were also examined.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Mexican American College Choice**

While navigating the college choice process can be a challenge for any student, Mexican American students can face additional barriers if they also happen to be the first in their family to seek a postsecondary education (Choy, 2001; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998) and/or come from low-income households (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Kurlaeander, 2006). In the U.S., these circumstances are a reality for many Mexican American students. In similar fashion, there are various individuals and/or entities in the lives of Latina/os, and Mexican Americans in particular, that have been deemed significant in this process, in both positive and negative ways.

González, Stoner and Jovel (2003), for instance, devised a “college opportunity framework” rooted in social capital theory that was based on the educational life histories of a group of Latina college students. In this framework, parents, siblings and extended family members, as well as specialized honors programs, teachers, counselors, and college outreach and preparation programs were identified as potential agents of social capital in the college choice process. Alternatively, potential agents of institutional neglect and abuse included: teachers, counselors, school administrators, the school curriculum and ESL and

Special Education tracking. González et al.'s (2003) study however, was limited to the school and familial context.

Efforts to gauge the influence of non-familial or school related individuals on Mexican American students' college choice process seemed inherent in the work of Flores and Obasi (2005) who set out to find the effects of mentors on the educational and career development of Mexican American high school students. Their findings, however, remained consistent with previous research in which a majority (75.3%) of the 714 participants identified mentors who were relatives. Non-relatives noted as mentors included teachers (11.0%) and friends (3.9%), which could be considered a part of students' school community, and famous people (1.3%), which students did not actually have contact with.

While not focused on the college choice process in particular, Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2003) investigated the social networks of Mexican-origin youth and in doing so found that some students had "informal mentors" from their community or the local university that provided students with influential and needed support during trying times. These mentor relationships differed from students' relationships with school personnel in that they were "free from the organizational constraints found in schools" (p. 234). Students also indicated that informal mentors more often exhibited "parenting-like behaviors" and offered advice than they did institutional knowledge or resources. Some students also identified role models in their lives, who served as "sources of inspiration and

pride” (p. 244). In a few cases, non-familial or school related individuals were considered role models. Overall however, the number of non-familial or school related informal mentors and role models was limited, suggesting that such individuals were not abundant in students’ communities. Yet Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2003) argue that:

This is not to say that such individuals are not plentiful in these communities. The real problem is that the mechanisms and institutional resources necessary for systematically generating these connections for large numbers of youth do not exist in these communities.

Given these findings, it is pertinent to describe the South Texas Border community, to conceptualize potential sources of capital in the region.

### **The South Texas Border Context**

In this study, the South Texas Border is confined to the four southernmost counties in Texas, an area also known as the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) where “a complex blend of U.S. and Mexican cultures, languages and customs” flourish (Yucel, 2001, p. 1). Approximately 1.3 million individuals (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2010d) reside in the four counties that comprise the RGV: Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, and Willacy. It is a region that is predominantly Latina/o (88.1% to 95.7%, depending on the county) and is experiencing substantial population growth such that by 2015 over 1.5 million individuals are projected to live in the area (Texas State Data Center, 2010). Yet while this area has a rich cultural history and a booming population, its location on the border

contributes to the various social, educational, political and economic struggles of the region (Miller, 1982). In 1998, for instance, Texas' then Comptroller of Public Accounts John Sharp issued a report called *Bordering the Future* that outlined the various challenges of the entire Texas Border region, particularly in being ranked number one in its "poverty rate, percentage of impoverished school children, unemployment rate, and share of adults lacking a high school degree" (p. 8).

Due in part to this reality, the region also faces dismal secondary and postsecondary educational attainment rates. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2010d), the percent of South Texas Border residents twenty-five years or older with a high school diploma or GED is between 46.5% and 62.4%, depending on the county. This rate is substantially lower than that of the state (79.3%) and of the nation (84.6%). College completion (Bachelor's degree or higher) rates for RGV residents within the same age range are equally low: 14.9% in Cameron County, 15.2% in Hidalgo County, 8.2% in Starr County, and 9.5% in Willacy County. In Texas this rate is 25.4% and in the U.S. it is 27.5% (Ibid).

These low educational attainment rates, however, do not rightly depict the value the community places on education, and instead reflect current socio-economic hardships in the region and historical inequities in funding and systemic barriers that residents in the RGV continue to confront (Santiago, 2008a). The higher education institutions along the entire Texas Border have historically

received insufficient support and unequal funding from the state, resulting in an underdeveloped infrastructure (Santiago, 2008a; Yamamura, Martinez, & Sáenz, 2010). In 1987, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund filed suite against the state of Texas in *LULAC v. Richards* because of these inequities in funding that resulted in limited undergraduate and graduate program offerings and second rate physical facilities at Texas Border universities (Sharp, 1998). The suit did not result in a win, but Border universities gained the attention of Texas legislators in the process. Consequently, in 1989 the Texas legislature approved *The South Texas/Border Initiative*, an initiative providing additional funds to Texas Border institutions for approximately ten years (Sharp, 1998).

Significant improvements in higher education were made in the RGV as a result of this initiative, but higher education infrastructure needs remain. Currently, five postsecondary institutions serve the residents of the RGV, but only two are full-fledged four-year universities offering undergraduate and graduate degrees, the latter of which are limited. Similarly, professional schools are lacking, although efforts have been made over the years by local legislators to establish both a law school and medical school in the region (Texas Legislature, 2009). Thus, there remains a need to further explore the sources of strength, college knowledge, and support Mexican American students in South Texas can draw upon from within their community to navigate the college choice process.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework utilized for this study is Yosso's (2005) notion of community cultural wealth. Rooted in Critical Race Theory, Yosso's framework claims to be a direct critique of Bourdieu's cultural capital theory (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1980), which Yosso believes is based on a "traditional view of cultural capital [that] is narrowly defined by White, middle class values, and is more limited than wealth—one's accumulated assets and resources" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). In this sense, Yosso (2005) expands on Bourdieu's work providing a framework that depicts the means by which Communities of Color possess and utilize "an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts...to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (p. 77).

Community cultural wealth posits at least six forms of capital that includes: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital (Auerbach, 2001; Delgado Bernal, 2001; Stanton-Salarzar, 2001; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Faulstich Orellana, 2003 as cited in Yosso 2005). Individuals possess aspirational capital when they maintain future hopes and dreams, despite real or perceived barriers. Linguistic capital refers to the "intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style" (p. 78). Familial capital consists of "those cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia* (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition" (p. 79). Alternatively, networks of individuals and resources available within one's community can be

considered sources of social capital. Having the skills to maneuver through social institutions is attributed to navigational capital. Finally, resistant capital is a culmination of the “knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality (Freire, 1970, 1973; Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 1994; Delgado Bernal, 1997; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001 as cited in Yosso, 2005, p. 80). All forms of capital within the community cultural wealth framework were considered in this study, except for familial capital as non-familial or school related forms of capital were purposefully examined here.

In addition, three research questions were posed: 1) what role do Mexican American students' social networks within their community play in their college choice process?, 2) what challenges arise for students within their community that inhibit their ability to successfully navigate the college choice process?, and 3) what strengths do students draw upon from within their community to assist them in successfully navigating the college choice process?

### **Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative methodology (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998), specifically utilizing individual, semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 2006) with 20 Mexican American high school seniors from two traditional high schools in one large school district in South Texas. Students at the two high schools, referred to as Fuente High School (Fuente) and Paloma High School (Paloma), are predominantly Latina/o, 94.9% and 96.1%

respectively, and a majority are considered economically disadvantaged in that they qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, 89.4% and 97.8% respectively (Texas Education Agency, 2010). The total enrollment at both schools ranges from approximately 2,500 to 3,175 students (Texas Education Agency, 2010).

### **Participants**

Sampling was purposeful in nature (Patton, 1990), with each participant meeting the following criteria: identifying as Mexican American, being a senior at either Fuente or Paloma, and aspiring to attend college after graduating from high school. Students were recruited with the assistance of school personnel, with an equal number of students (10), with an equal gender balance, recruited from each school. Twelve students (60%) were first-generation immigrants, in that both of their parents were born outside the U.S. specifically in Mexico. More than half of all students (11) were of first-generation college status<sup>2</sup>, or 55%, when considering first-generation college students are those whose parents have a high school diploma or less (Choy, 2001; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

### **Data Collection Procedures**

All students were interviewed twice, with the first interview focusing on students' college aspirations, as well as their sources of college information and

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<sup>2</sup> As per Federal TRIO Programs a student whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree can also be considered a first-generation college student.

support. In the second interview, students shared their understandings of how their sociocultural characteristics influenced their college choice process. Interviews took place in the Fall of 2009, were conducted on school grounds and in English, although students were offered the opportunity to conduct the interview in Spanish or in both languages. Interviews lasted an average of 39 minutes, with the shortest lasting 15 minutes and the longest lasting 45 minutes. The length between students' first and second interviews ranged from one to two months, except for the last student interviewed whose first and second interviews were conducted from one day to the next because of time constraints.

### **Data Analysis**

All interviews were digitally audio-recorded, transcribed, provided a code for confidentiality purposes, and checked for accuracy to ensure reliability (Creswell, 2009). Once all transcripts were deemed accurate, an inductive analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990) was used which began with an open coding procedure (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In open coding, portions of text that emerged from the data, based on the text's relevance to previous literature, and/or relation to the research questions and conceptual framework of the study, were given a label or category name (Creswell, 2009). Once a code was created, I tried not to deviate from its initial definition or meaning, so as to ensure reliability (Creswell, 2009). Comparisons were then made between codes in order to derive initial themes that reflected multiple students' perspectives and were supported by

evidence in the data (Creswell, 2009). Initial themes were then further analyzed through axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), where connections between themes and sub-themes were created to reach a deeper understanding of the data.

### **Findings**

Three themes emerged from the analysis that focused on: 1) the sources of social capital available within students' communities, 2) the challenge students faced in dealing with the low level of prestige afforded local regional universities, and 3) the resistant and aspirational capital that students drew upon within their community to combat negative stereotypes about Latina/os and/or Mexican Americans and college attainment.

#### **Sources of Social Capital in the Community**

Six students (30%) specifically referred to non-familial or school related individuals within their community as sources of college knowledge and/or support in the midst of their college choice process. These sources included members of students' religious congregations, neighbors, and for one student, a physician. Cristina, for instance, was a student at Paloma high school who talked about her involvement at her church and how the members of her congregation supported her college aspirations and at times provided her with college related information. She revealed this saying,

I help out a lot at my church... And that's where I've met a lot of the people, a lot of people that go to college and they're like, 'You should go

to this college or go to this [one], or go to that [one]'...They have helped me in a lot of ways. Um...It's information and support.

As a first-generation college student, the interactions Cristina had with church members who had first-hand knowledge of what college was like were critical.

Tony and Beto were two other students who also turned to members of their congregation for advice about college. Trying to make sense of all of the college pamphlets and information he was receiving, Tony felt "a lot of pressure" and consequently would "talk to the pastor a lot." Alternatively, Beto described how he discussed postsecondary plans with his church youth group and his priest:

Sometimes he'll [priest] talk to us, 'So what's going on in your life?' and, 'What are you planning to do after high school, those of you that are gonna graduate?' And then we'll get into the whole college or rather than going to college you know working. Like a lot of students, even if they say, well yeah I want to go to college, and then graduation comes around and they end up just working. And that's the one thing I don't want to do.

It is clear that the conversations Beto had in his youth group reinforced his aspirations to attend college after high school instead of joining the workforce.

Two other students spoke about how neighbors were sources of college knowledge for them. Charlie, a Fuente student interested in pursuing a career in film, had originally thought he would obtain his bachelor's degree at the local regional university and then move to New York City for film school. Between Charlie's first and second interview with me, however, Charlie attended his girlfriend's niece's birthday party where he met a high school computer teacher who was a neighbor to the niece. This neighbor mentioned, "UT at Austin

[University of Texas at Austin] is actually a pretty good place [to study film] because it's...like right now like a mecca for fine arts." After being provided this newfound information, Charlie admitted that he would "pay more attention to UT... look it up more," even though he had "never thought about UT until like a couple of days ago" after speaking with the neighbor. This happenchance meeting supports Granovetter's (1973) notion that weak or more informal, less established ties are significant in providing "channels through which ideas, influences, or information socially distant" from an individual can be reached (p. 1370).

Eddie also garnered necessary college information from a neighbor his mother introduced him to who worked at the local regional university. Eddie explained, "he started talking to me about financial aid...and he gave me like a little run down of the stuff he does and stuff that I need to do." The neighbor advised Eddie to take courses that "actually help you later on, [instead of] courses that are not gonna help you at all." The conversations Eddie had with his neighbor proved useful, solidifying his decision to attend the local regional university.

Selena was the one student who identified her physician as someone influential in her college choice process. A shy senior and first generation college student, Selena said, "The doctor that I go to he talks to me a lot, like, and he'll be like, asking me like questions, 'Oh, well what college do you plan to go into?'" He would mention the "names of some other colleges," she added. As a result, she considered him to be "really cool." This response suggests the doctor did not

provide Selena with tangible college knowledge, however it is obvious that Selena considered the doctor's interest in her future as a form of support that she valued.

### **Dealing with Issues of Prestige**

Another theme that emerged from the data illuminated a challenge that students faced within their community in attempting to navigate their college choice process. This challenge had to do with the manner in which the local regional universities were viewed as less prestigious than universities outside the RGV. This circumstance was particularly daunting for students who could not financially afford to attend a university outside the region and/or wanted to attend a regional university close to home because of their close familial ties.

Geneva, for example, was a Fuente high school student who revealed this less prestigious view of the local regional universities held by individuals in the community. In describing her college aspirations she said:

There's benefits like, if I leave and stay over there [outside of South Texas]. I learn more, I'll learn more and of course if I come back, I'm not like, I'm not exactly limited from learning, but I mean, I'll just learn a little less. But that's kind of the downside to it.

When asked what she meant by this she explained:

Well, I don't know how to say it without saying, without being mean. But to my, to my step-dad's side point of view, because he's Californian, he's from California so he thinks that we're low, not low class, but he thinks that like we're limited...People in [the city], well not people in [the city], but in general, not Mexicans, but yeah, pretty much people in [the city] or in the [Rio Grande] Valley, people in the [Rio Grande] Valley. He says that, how can I say it, higher expectations I guess...Like, people up north, out of the [Rio Grande] Valley [have higher expectations].

Geneva's comments suggest that the local regional postsecondary institutions are not only considered as less prestigious but also as of a lesser quality. So much so, that Geneva felt she would "learn a little less" if she attended a local regional university. She also referred to how this perception extended beyond the universities but also was considered a reflection of the individuals in the community. Geneva painstakingly contemplated agreeing with her stepfather who considered individuals in South Texas as "limited." How does such a view then influence students' self-esteems and college aspirations if they believe they come from a community that is "limited"?

Another student at Paloma high school, Fernando, hoped to attend the University of Texas at Austin, and echoed Geneva's sentiments by specifically pointing out the difference in funding that contributed to variations in prestige among institutions. "I've heard that Austin has good facilities for preparations, like to prepare you more for what you want to focus. Let's say engineering, they have better technology and knowledge up there I guess than over here at [local regional university] which is not as, let's say, rich as UT [University of Texas at Austin]," he said. Consequently, Fernando admitted, "That's how I think it's a better education."

Henry was another student who specifically referred to issues of prestige:

The more prestigious school you go to, the more you expect that of it. I mean when you think of good schools in Texas, you think of like A&M

College Station, Austin, maybe Baylor of course, you know, things of that nature... You don't think of like Corpus Christi or Kingsville A&M, you think of College Station. You don't think of [local regional university].

These narratives exposed a palpable challenge that the South Texas community faces. While some students did appreciate the local regional university particularly because it provided dual enrollment opportunities for them, these comments were few. Yet approximately half of all students shared their intentions to begin their college careers at a local regional university, despite having apprehensions about the quality of education provided by these institutions. These doubts indicate students' knowledge and consideration of the academic reputation of postsecondary institutions in their college choice process.

There are a number of factors that likely contribute to the less prestigious label that local regional universities in South Texas have garnered. For instance, they are open enrollment institutions, are commuter campuses, and primarily serve South Texas residents. Ironically, it is these same factors that make the institutions more accessible and affordable than others in Texas and provide a region plagued by low postsecondary attainment rates an opportunity to change this circumstance.

### **Resisting Stereotypes and Maintaining Aspirations**

Overwhelmingly, when discussing their reasons for wanting to pursue a postsecondary education after high school, students admitted to being urged to do so in order to resist and combat negative stereotypes about Latinos or Mexican

Americans both regionally and pan-ethnically. Additionally, this resistance was coupled with aspirations for college that for many students were held in the face of financial hardships and a lack of familiarity with accessing and attending a postsecondary institution because they were first generation college students. These examples of resistant and aspirational capital were rooted and cultivated in the South Texas community, and thus a reflection of the community cultural wealth within this region.

Speaking from a local regional perspective, for example, Jasmin said, “Coming from this area too, nobody, not a lot of people graduate [from high school], a lot of people drop out and even less people go to college and I just want to be, want to be one of those few people who get a college career.” Sergio also used the low college attainment rates in the region as fuel for his college aspirations. He explained:

I think since I’m Hispanic it’s more, and especially in [this city] it’s more of a ‘You should go to college because there’s a lot of people who don’t go to college and don’t make a lot of money’...I want to improve the image of my city because people generally think of South Texas, mainly the [Rio Grande] Valley as a very poor and uneducated area when there is [sic] actually some people who are educated and do succeed.

The real and perceived negative stereotypes of Latinos and Mexican Americans in the region as being “uneducated” and not wanting or willing to pursue a postsecondary education were harnessed by these students and others to further their own college aspirations.

From a pan-ethnic point of view, Zulema and Charlie revealed how teachers empowered students by raising their awareness about the historical educational inequities afforded Latinos/Mexican Americans in the U.S. This in turn, helped cultivate resistant and aspirational capital among students. Zulema explained:

I heard Ms. [X], my government teacher [say] like how there's really [a] low rate for Hispanic females to gain their masters. And I was like, 'I want to be able to help that go up.' You know, there's like something wrong, I have to keep going and to help that go up and that would be something, one of the characteristics [of why I want to go to college].

Charlie also revealed how teachers had shown the movie 'The Walk Out' in class to illustrate "how back then it would be unfair for Latinos and how hard it would be [to go to college]." This made Charlie "more goal driven," and adamant in not wanting to contribute to "the statistic of not going [to college]." Even beyond the classroom, however, students' drew upon resistant and aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005) within their community to combat deficit thinking about Latinos/Mexican Americans in terms of educational attainment.

### **Discussion and Implications**

This study reveals the significant role that non-familial or school related community members can play in Mexican American students' college choice process. As many Mexican American students are the first in their families to attend college, relying on parents or other family members for guidance in this process may not be an option (Choy, 2001; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998;

Tornatsky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002). Furthermore, many Mexican American students attend overcrowded, low-income schools where college-focused resources are often limited (Orfield & Lee, 2004, 2005), school counselors are burdened with large caseloads that keep them from assisting all students (McDonough, 2005; Vela-Gude, Cavazos Jr., Johnson, Fielding, Cavazos, Campos, & Rodriguez, 2009), and particularly in Texas, teachers are bound by curriculum that prepares students for state exams instead of a postsecondary education (Hampton, 2005; Sloan, 2005; Valenzuela, 2005). Thus, community members can help fill in the gaps in providing integral college knowledge and support to Mexican American students. Schools in South Texas need to capitalize on this by collaborating with churches, university alumni associations, and Chambers of Commerce to initiate opportunities where community members can be college resources for students.

Findings also highlighted the resistant and aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005) available in South Texas that students like Rocio and Steven drew upon to combat negative stereotypes of Latinos/Mexican Americans. As Rocio noted, “I think people in general think Hispanics don’t really get their education and that’s like a big part why I want to go.” Similarly, Steven said, “I’m Hispanic so I guess a typical stereotype would be that we don’t usually go to college, which is their belief which is fine...it lets me know they don’t expect me to excel but my grades have proven them wrong.” While students withstood negative pan-ethnic stereotypes, they also faced concerns over the prestige of universities in the RGV.

Within the region, students dealt with the view of local regional universities as less prestigious than universities outside the area. For some students this issue caused real tension because they intended to start their college education at these institutions. As such, Texas policy makers must give greater consideration to this matter and allocate additional funding to South Texas Border universities in an effort to improve infrastructure and the quality of education at these institutions. After all, these universities are among the top 25 institutions in the nation with the highest enrollment of and degrees awarded to Hispanics (Santiago, 2008b, 2008c). Therefore, investing in these institutions would support Texas' agenda to "close the gaps" (Closing the Gaps, 2000) in Latina/o participation and success. Additionally, community leaders and educators in South Texas need to harness the social, aspirational, and resistant capital available in the region in order to dispel the negative perceptions and sentiments held and perpetuated by residents regarding the local regional universities. Community-wide dialogues can be utilized to address this issue.

Finally, future studies could expand upon these findings by solely focusing on the role of community members or entities in students' college choice process, as this study asked students about their sources of college knowledge and support in general. Future research could also include community members' perceptions of their role in Mexican American students' college choice process.

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