Examining the Influence of Peers on the Identity Development of Latinx Men in Male-Centered Programs

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Introduction

Student identities are critical in order to understand the experiences of students in higher education. Scholars have linked identity development to have a positive influence on the success of undergraduate students (Chickering, 1969; Guardia & Evans, 2008; Patrón & Garcia, 2016). Recently, there has been a greater focus directed towards the collegiate experiences and success of male students of color on college campuses. Previous studies have shown they do not experience success at the same rates of their female counterparts and other White identified peers (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009; Wood & Harris III, 2013). In response, many campuses have begun implementing interventions or programs for the purpose of retaining Latinx men and men of color. These programs are referred to as Minority Male Initiatives and focus on promoting the persistence of men of color through interventions including mentoring, service learning, professional development, and holding critical conversations regarding racial and gender identity (Estrada et al., 2017; Keflezighi, Sebahari & Wood, 2016). Male-centered student programs provide Latinx men with a community and a space to share their experiences and backgrounds and explore their identities with their peers and mentors. However, few studies have analyzed whether these types of interventions are influencing the identity development of the student participants. Specifically, for Latinx male students, the intersectionality of their identities (ethnicity, race, gender, class, etc.) have an influence in how they navigate spaces in higher education and interact with their peers (Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004). This study will examine Latinx men and male-centered programs at four-year universities by answering the following research question: What influence, if any, do connections cultivated in male-centered student initiatives have on the identity development of Latinx men enrolled at four-year universities?

Literature Review

Scholars have pointed to different factors that contribute to the experiences of men of color such as learned gender norms and expectations (Harris III & Harper, 2008) and their socialization prior to entering higher education (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). Though research on male college students of color continues to expand, there is limited literature on the unique experiences of Latinx men. More specifically, there is limited research that explores the identity development of Latinx men on college campuses and how they come to understand their intersecting identities. The next section will provide an overview of trends among Latinx men as students in higher education as well as external and internal barriers that may influence their persistence and retention in higher education.

Identity Development for Latinx Men

Dependent on their social environments and upbringing, students enter higher education at different stages of their identity development (Baxter Magolda, 2003; Chickering, 1969; Dancy, 2011; Guardia & Evans, 2008; Patrón & Garcia, 2016; Torres, Jones & Renn, 2009). For Latinx male college students, the intersectionality of their identities influence how they navigate spaces in higher education and interact with their peers (Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004). Two influential cultural values that tend to inform and shape Latinx men's identity development are machismo and caballerismo.

Machismo

In order to contextualize the educational experiences of Latinx men, we must understand gendered expectations for men set by the Latinx community. Previous scholars have referred to those expectations and behaviors as machismo, a form of masculinity within the Latinx community (Arciniega et al., 2008; Estrada & Jimenez, 2018). Many researchers have pointed to gender roles and gender role socialization as an influence on the experiences of Latinx male students in higher education. James O'Neil (1981) defined gender roles as "behaviors, expectations, and role set defined by society as masculine or feminine which are embodied in the behavior of the individual man or woman and culturally regarded as appropriate to males and females" (p. 2013). Machismo refers to a standard of values taught to Latinx men and is often associated with hyper masculine behaviors such as violence, patriarchy, and intimidation (Arciniega et al., 2008). Throughout their lives, Latinx men and boys receive cues from their families, communities, and society that inform them how to perform the role of a man (Bukoski & Hatch, 2016; Estrada & Jimenez, 2018; Figueroa, Perez & Vega, 2016; Saenz, Bukoski, Lu & Rodriguez, 2013). From a young age, Latinx men are expected to act in a certain way and aspire to certain roles that have been prescribed to them. In a study by Figueroa, Perez and Vega (2016), many of those expectations are carried into adulthood and continue to evolve as Latinx men grow older. In their study, participants indicated that their families placed heavy responsibilities on them as they grew older, such as becoming a provider for the home (Figueroa et al., 2016). In much of the literature published on Latinx men attending college, the performance of machismo has been an important theme in understanding their educational experiences (Bukoski & Hatch, 2016; Sáenz et al., 2013; Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009, Sáenz, Mayo, Miller & Rodriguez, 2015).

Researchers have also found that men of color in general develop a fear of appearing subordinate and being prideful (Saenz et al., 2013). In a study conducted by Saenz et al. (2013), participants discussed refusing help in an effort to avoid being perceived as subordinate. This presents a challenge in the educational experiences of Latinx male students as it leads them to restrict themselves from seeking help from faculty, administrators, and peers. Similarly, Bukoski and Hatch (2016) found through their collected narratives that both Black and Latinx men felt the need to navigate college on their own in order to prove their worth in order to demonstrate their power and status to other peers. For many Latinx men, higher education and educational achievement is seen as a conflict to the gender norms and what they have been taught growing up (Bukoski & Hatch, 2016; McGowan, Tillapaugh & Harris III, 2019; Saenz et al., 2013). The majority of the literature focusing on the influence of machismo on the educational experiences of Latinx men tends to highlight how machismo has hindered the ability

of Latinx men to succeed in higher education. This understanding of Latinx men has clouded the way they are viewed in higher education and has led professionals to look at men of color, particularly Latinx men, through a deficit-focused perspective (McGowan et al., 2019). Though machismo is associated with negative traits such as hypermasculinity, dominance, and sexism, scholars have argued it is only one side to understanding masculinity within Latinx communities and Latinx men possess the cultural wealth to persist and succeed in higher education (Arciniega et al., 2008; Estrada & Jimenez, 2018).

Caballerismo

Positive traits associated with Latinx masculinity, or *caballerismo*, can be described as a code of masculinity that includes "nurturing, family centered, and chivalrous" (Arciniega et al., 2008, p. 21). Though some authors have identified traits of caballerismo among self-identified Latinx men, research on caballerismo is scant and has not been studied among Latinx male students in higher education (Arciniega et al., 2008; Sáenz et al., 2013; Sáenz et al., 2015; Estrada & Jimenez, 2018). Arciniega et al. (2008) were the first group of scholars to attempt to create an understanding of caballerismo and how it differs from traditional machismo. Behaviors associated with caballerismo include affiliation, emotional connectedness, and psychological well-being (Arciniega et al., 2008).

Though research on caballerismo is limited, previous studies focused on Latinx men have found that those who are high achieving in college demonstrate behaviors associated with caballerismo (Estrada & Jimenez, 2018; McGowan et al., 2019; Perez & Taylor, 2016; Perez & Saenz, 2017). Thriving Latinx men in higher education exhibit caballerismo through their abilities to develop relationships with peers and create community on campus, specifically with other Latinos (Arciniega et al., 2008; Perez & Taylor, 2016; Perez & Saenz, 2017). Estrada et al. (2017) also identified that through *hermandad,* or brotherhood, Latino student organizations promoted the engagement of Latinx men in higher education. Through these connections, Latinx men created a sense of support and promoted behaviors associated with caballerismo with other members (Estrada et al., 2017). In understanding how caballerismo manifests among Latinx men, it guides the understanding of how some Latinx men navigate institutions of higher education.

Male-Centered Programs

As college faculty, staff, and administrators create programming to support men of color, each initiative will vary from one college to the next based on the goals and needs of the institution. Programs may differ in their developmental focus such as mentorship (Sáenz, Ponjuan, Segovia & Del Real Viramontes, 2105; Smith, Klobassa, & Salinas, 2019; Torrens, Salinas, & Floyd, 2017), leadership, professionalism, socio-emotional support, identity development, and academic coaching. Some programs may be comprehensive and integrate all aspects of their program curriculum (Beatty, McElderry, & Dorsette, 2019). For the most part, programs established at four-year universities focus on the holistic development of men of color. Beatty et al. (2019) noted that comprehensive programs may draw from student engagement, ethnic/racial, and gender development theories to guide their program models. A notable program, the Male Success Initiative (MSI) at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF), operates under four-pillars which target multiple aspects of the undergraduate experiences of

men of color: Academic Coaching/Tailored Mentoring, L.E.E.D. (Leadership, Engagement, Enrichment & Development), Career Trajectory, and Gender & Masculinity (CSUF, n.d.). Paquette and Wall (2019) asserted that retreats serve college students well in that they are isolated with their peers and focused and committed to a single issue. Through retreats, men of color challenge their learned behaviors and grow to be vulnerable with one another (Paquette & Wall, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

This research study is guided by Yosso's (2005) model of community cultural wealth. Studies using Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth shift the paradigm in how scholars examine the experiences of Latinx male students in higher education. Rather than noting what Latinx men are missing in terms of social and cultural capital, the narrative switches to what they are bringing to their campuses and how are they using their cultural wealth to achieve success (Perez & Taylor, 2015; Perez & Sáenz, 2017; Sáenz et al., 2018; Yosso, 2005). Through Yosso's work (2005), campuses must get creative in the ways they receive students of color and promote the sharing of capital and cultural wealth.

Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative research study used a narrative design to better understand the lived experiences of four-year university Latinx male students and how relationships within a male-centered program have an influence on the participants' identity development, particularly how they come to understand their identity as men of color (Mertler, 2019).

The study took place at South Coast University (SCU) (a pseudonym), a four-year, residential university located in Southern California. The institution is a private religiously affiliated campus in a small, affluent community. SCU recently received a large Hispanic-serving institution (HSI) grant to establish initiatives to support racially-minoritized students and their success. One part of this grant established the AVANZAR program (a pseudonym), which was focused on retaining male students of color attending college. Currently in its second year of implementation, AVANZAR participants at SCU are required to attend weekly class sessions facilitated by faculty, administrators, and graduate student mentors. The program also offers a peer mentorship program in which male students who attend SCU, serve as mentors for other male students who attend a local community college. Other activities include a men's summer leadership retreat which consists of three days where participants get to know each other and participate in activities that guide them in building resilience, leadership, social and cultural capital, and community engagement.

Participants

Participants for this study met the following criteria: (a) identified as Latinx; (b) identified as men; and (c) were involved in a male-specific program at a specific religiously-affiliated university in Southern California. Below is a brief background on each of the two participants. I have assigned pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. Both participants were involved in the

same programs and campus and knew each other prior to the interview.

Vicente is currently a senior majoring in Mathematics and Computer Science at South Coast University. Throughout his college experience, Vicente has been a commuter and is a resident in Southern California. After graduating, he aspires to pursue a career as a mathematics professor who is actively involved in research. Vicente identifies as Mexican-American.

Marco is currently a senior at South Coast University majoring in Biochemistry with a minor in Mathematics and aspires to be a physician scientist. Marco is a resident of Southern California and has been a commuter student throughout his college experience. Marco identifies as Mexican-American.

Data Collection

Data was collected during an hour-long focus group that took place in a private, reserved location at SCU and was only disclosed to the student participants. Responses were recorded using the researcher's iPhone, as well as Zoom. Three students had agreed to participate in the study; however, only two students showed up at the set time. Given the circumstances at the time with a global pandemic, options to participate in-person or via Zoom were offered to participants. One participant was in-person, while the other utilized Zoom. The focus group consisted of 14 questions asking about their experiences in the male-specific program and the relationships they cultivated within said program.

Researcher Positionality

I identify as a Latinx, specifically Mexican-American, man, and a first-generation graduate from a four-year university. As a student, I never participated in programs such as the one being studied. Also, I have studied the experiences of Latinx male students in higher education throughout my graduate school experience. I removed my personal experiences and knowledge regarding Latinx men from influencing the way the data was analyzed by critically thinking about how the focus group questions were worded and how the data was presented.

Limitations

A limitation of the study was that it occurred at the beginning of a global pandemic and the campus where it took place had begun transitioning to remote learning. Therefore, students were no longer required to come to campus. The pandemic forced me to provide alternative options for participants to attend the focus group, while allowing them to practice physical distancing. Although the focus group still took place on campus, only two of the three students participated, which limited the amount of data collected. Also, one student was limited to joining the focus group via Zoom from his home. This hindered my ability to observe non-verbal behaviors and their reactions to questions and responses. Another limitation was the sample size of the study. Given that only two students participated, the data presented in this study cannot be used to generalize and should continue to be examined.

Results & Discussion

From the findings within the analysis, three themes were identified: (a) interpersonal relationships; (b) mentorship; and (c) identity development. Using three sources of capital, aspirational, social, and resistant, from Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth, I examined the identified themes and their influence on the identity development of the participants.

Interpersonal Relationships as Sources of Aspirational Capital

There was a clear connection between the participants and their peers within the AVANZAR program. Though both participants did not describe their connections in depth, there was an apparent influence in how the participants viewed their educational experience alongside their peers within the program. Within the AVANZAR program and other identity-based programs on campus, participants were able to connect with peers who shared similar ethnic, racial, gender, and first-generation college student identities. More specifically, through the AVANZAR program, which is designed specifically to support male students of color, they felt a sense of validation in being Latinx men pursuing a postsecondary education. They both mentioned that prior to enrolling for their first-year at SCU, a primarily White campus, they did not have many peers from high school who also pursued a higher education, which led to a feeling of isolation on campus and in their communities. As college students of color enter new spaces where their identities are salient, or where students realize they are a minority on campus, they develop stronger ties to their identities (Torres, 2003). For participants, transitioning from primarily Latinx communities to SCU, though labeled a HSI is a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), raised their awareness of their own identities and propelled them to find community among those who share them. After joining AVANZAR, they felt motivated sharing space with other men of color who share similar goals and the program encouraged them to build a community within a new environment. For example, both participants were aware of the careers they wanted to pursue while at SCU. Their peers within the program maintained their aspirations to pursue graduate school and doctoral degrees regardless of knowing there is already a small percentage of Latinx men that go on to pursue and obtain graduate degrees (Yosso, 2005). Vicente noted that connecting with other men of color pursuing a higher education has increased his motivation to continue past his undergraduate education:

> It allows me to be exposed to, I guess, even a more targeted group that I can relate to, that being underrepresented [men] where a majority of Latinx descent, which is good, because now you're seeing familiar faces with people who share similar stories, and the fact that you're able to share stories or just share the space and what you're here for. Just sharing these things, it allows you to continue the motivation you have for what you want to do.

It is important for higher education administrators and faculty to understand the power of creating and providing spaces for minoritized student populations in fostering the aspirational capital of students. Within these spaces, students can share stories of their own experiences with peers of similar identities and motivate each other to persist in their education.

Interpersonal Relationships as Sources of Social Capital

Within the networks cultivated through the AVANZAR program, participants indicated that the program provided a space where they felt they could escape from their lives as students. Within the space, participants engaged in conversations that were different from what they talked about in their academic courses. Being that both participants were majoring in STEM programs, opportunities to talk about life with their peers was a stress reliever. One participant described their seminars with peers as a therapy session where they not only heard how their peers dealt with certain personal situations, but learned to share more about themselves. For Marco, the weekly seminars and additional programs with the staff and other participants in the program provide a space where he feels comfortable sharing his experiences and developing deeper connections with other men of color:

> I think all its events where they have us together, like we'd have dinner together, the basketball game, that was really cool. I didn't get to go to the summer retreat, but I'm sure that's also part of it. Every class is just talking. Most of the class is actually us talking to each other than lecturing at us. I feel that's also where you can build those deeper connections as well.

Peers in this case served as sources of emotional support in that they cultivated a space to talk through their problems, personal or academic (Estrada et al., 2017; Yosso, 2005). Through this, peers also helped participants of the study to deconstruct behaviors of internalizing their personal problems and not seeking help, which is often associated with the concept of machismo (Arciniega et al., 2008; Estrada & Jimenez, 2018). For Marco, being in AVANZAR helped him realize that seeking help and taking care of his mental health is okay:

> I feel like for me, it has helped me as a student because understanding what machismo is, there's a lot of stuff I didn't know, I'll be honest, before the program. It helped me take care of my mental health, which ultimately helps me be a better student. I'm learning how to talk about whatever issues I may be having. That it's okay to talk about them. As simple as it may sound, it's really not something I did. I think it also helps for understanding my community like that also helps with the idea of what it could be like to be a leader and why we need to be leaders for our community.

However, that was not the case for Vicente. While both participants welcomed discussions about their personal lives in the seminars and other events, Vicente noted hesitation in talking about his personal problems with others because it is solely up to him to solve them. Based on his response, this behavior is associated with machismo. Vicente wants to maintain a sense of independence when it comes to their own personal life by avoiding sharing as a means to be cautious of being perceived incapable of handling his own problems (Saenz et al. 2013). Saenz et al. (2013) found within their study that Latino men often restrict being expressive or sharing about themselves as a means to maintain a sense of pride and status among their peers.

Identity Development as Resistant Capital

Scholars in previous studies have focused on how behaviors associated with machismo have hindered the educational experiences of Latinx male students in higher education (Saenz et al., 2013; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). Latinx men may be taught in their homes or communities to exhibit these behaviors and often continue them once they step onto a college campus (Bukoski & Hatch, 2016; Saenz et al., 2013). It has also been noted that within communities of *hermandad,* or brotherhood, Latinx men worked towards counteracting traditional hypermasculine machismo (Estrada et al., 2017).

In the responses from the study, participants engaged in conversations with their peers about what it means to be a man. Yosso (2005) posited that within communities of color, lessons of challenging societal messages are taught amongst families. Through the focus groups, participants noted that while they learned from both program faculty and staff about behaviors associated with machismo, they learned how to deconstruct those behaviors through interactions with their peers. For Marco, conversations with peers helped him identify some of those "problematic behaviors" and used the help of his peers to learn how to combat them and practice healthier help-seeking behaviors. Vicente noted that he had an understanding that these aspects of Latinx masculinity were "bad" and used the discussions with his peers as affirmation to what he already believed:

> My experience with the seminar, it was nice in the sense that a lot of the information that I just knew was tucked into my head, reinforced through the seminar…If you think a certain way, and then you have people supporting what you're saying, you feel good.

Nevertheless, both of them were able to learn more about how behaviors associated with machismo have affected their personal lives and participants began challenging behaviors that were passed down from their families and communities and reflecting on how they have hindered their own experiences growing up (Yosso, 2005).

Implications for Professional Practice

The data analysis of the focus groups yielded different implications for professional practice. Among them was a desire for Latinx men to connect further with other men of color on campus. A critical implication would be for student affairs practitioners to assess their campus's ability to foster a program designed for supporting men of color. The program utilized in the study was done at a PWI; however, the campus recently obtained the status of being a HSI. The campus has had grants and programs established for serving minoritized students and program participants are able to access support in different areas. However, it would be important to consider the amount of opportunities of involvement available for men of color to become engaged throughout campus.

As campuses consider the implementation of programs designed to support men of color, within the program design it is critical to keep peer to peer learning at the forefront of the program objectives. Through the analysis, the participants noted that some of the high points of the program included that they were able to just talk to their peers. More specifically, in their program seminars, it allows them to learn more about each other and discuss relevant topics

among their community. As seen through the study, participants began learning more about how machismo appears in their own experience through interactions with their peers, as well as learning about healthier behaviors to support their mental health. Through peer-to-peer learning, practitioners should focus on facilitating dialogue among participants and have a group counseling component to allow space for participants to share about their experiences. A group counseling component for Latinx men, or men of color more broadly, would provide space for participants to further explore aspects of their identities within a supportive, group setting. As with all program components, the group counseling sessions should focus on facilitating dialogue among participants, as well as empowering them to unlearn hypermasculine behaviors and learn more about their behaviors associated with *caballerismo*.

Another implication for practice found within the study was the importance of having a peer mentorship component to the program. As participants talked about mentorship, there was a desire to share the knowledge they had gained about their college experiences and what they had learned about their identity as Latinx men. Even though participants were involved in a co-curricular program that does not pay them or give them academic unit credit, they still demonstrated a strong desire to be involved and be a mentor to other students. Through these types of mentorship programs, student leaders who identify as men of color can provide the opportunity to support incoming first-time and transfer students outside of the classroom and enable participants to connect with other men of color in meaningful ways outside of the classroom. Additionally, it is recommended that these programs incorporate partnerships for men of the program to engage in mentorship with students in local K-12 schools as means to promote a college-going culture among boys of color. This would serve as another opportunity for men of color in college to share their lived experiences and knowledge as well as guide younger boys in their journey to understanding their own identities and assist them in unlearning hypermasculine behaviors from a young age.

Implications for Future Research

The limitations and delimitations of the current study show a need for further research examining the influence of peer relationships within male-centered programs on the identity development of Latinx men. Given the size of the study and the timeframe, additional research should focus on increasing the amount of data collected from a larger sample size. For future research on the topic, a larger sample consisting of participants from diverse Latinx ethnicities and different higher education institutions should be considered. Both study participants identified as Mexican-American and from a relatively local region in California, warranting attention to male students who may identify with other ethnicities and may differ in generational status in the United States would help to better generalize to the broader Latinx population. Different Latinx ethnic sub-groups may share differing cultural values and practices; therefore, it would be beneficial to gain as much perspective as possible to further understand how Latinx men experience the development of their identity.

Furthermore, the male-centered program studied was recently established, and the participants had only been involved for a limited amount of time. It would be beneficial for scholars to examine the effectiveness of these programs on the persistence and engagement of participants. Longitudinal studies may also be effective in understanding the long-term impact that these programs can have on participants' overall sense of self and identity development.

As more campuses consider implementing programming specific to men of color programs, it would be insightful to have information on how these programs affect the educational experience of program participants. Though the program may be focused on social and community engagement, further understanding how their involvement mediates students' academic and post-graduation life would provide great support in establishing such programs on a campus. For example, future research utilizing a mixed methods approach to determine the level of effectiveness of programs by analyzing data collected through academic transcripts, semester to semester persistence rates and six-year graduation rates, while also collecting qualitative responses through interviews and focus groups to identify key factors in students' success would be helpful to extend the collective understanding around the impact of these programs.

Lastly, other opportunities for future research include the impact of being in peer mentorship roles on Latinx men, or men of color, and their understanding of their own gender, racial, and ethnic identities. Throughout the study, participants indicated a strong interest in becoming more involved in their peer leader roles. They found a sense of fulfillment in their roles and felt that they had a duty to pass down the information they gained from the discussions within the program. Previous authors (see Garcia et al., 2017) have noted that serving in leadership roles has had an impact in the development of leadership identities among college Latinx men. Within peer mentor roles, not only do students develop their own leadership skills and identities as a leader, but they also understand how their position has an impact on the experiences of their mentees. For both participants in the study, exploring and learning more about their identities went beyond their own personal development but they knew that it was information that they could pass down to the community they serve and may serve in their professional roles. Examining how these roles impact the experiences and development of Latinx men in peer mentor positions would highlight the importance of these opportunities in the development of identities of not only Latinx men, but men of color in higher education more broadly.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study was designed to examine the influence of peer relationships within male-centered programs on the identity development of Latinx male students at four-year universities. Study participants revealed that through their involvement with the male-centered program and interactions with their peers, they felt a sense of validation in being a Latinx man pursuing a college degree. They also shared a desire to become mentors within the program, but also within their community and in their future careers as professors in the STEM field. Lastly, participants were able to not only learn more about their own identities, but also reflect upon them and deconstruct learned behaviors that they identified as hindering their interpersonal relationships and their academic experiences. The program in the study was not just a co-curricular experience for students to add to their resume, but also a space for them to dig deeper into their personal identities as well as to be validated by simply sharing space with other men of color who shared similar goals.

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