

“I Didn’t Want My Life To Be Like That”: Gangs, College, or the Military for Latino Male High School Students

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Nationally, only half of Latino males graduate from high school (Contreras, 2011). Scholars are beginning to critically examine the various internal and external influences which contribute to low academic achievement for Latino males. This qualitative study uses a human ecological theory to examine how Latino male high school students with high academic achievement understand and develop goals to attend postsecondary education versus engaging in gangs or the military. The findings highlight the students’ different levels of college preparation, interactions with military recruitment, and their gang connections.

Keywords: Gangs, College access, Latino males, Mexican American males, Military recruitment, High school students

The value of college access and completion cannot be overstated for marginalized racial and ethnic student populations. Various media outlets stress the importance and need for a college degree to gain the necessary tools for social mobility and training to enter white-collar professions (Lagemann & Lewis, 2011). Although there have been various initiatives to increase college enrollment for low-income student populations through college outreach programs, community-based organizations, and access to federal aid, there still remains a myriad of barriers for Latino male high school students to gain and utilize the needed resources to advance (Huerta & Fishman, 2014; Sanchez, Huerta, & Venegas, 2012). One major challenge for Latino males involves graduating from high school; nationally only half of Latino males complete high school (Contreras, 2011; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). Access to higher education for youth in urban spaces may be hindered by social and environmental distractions related to gang

violence; association with, access to, and sale of drugs; and under-resourced schools, which provide the ideal combination to narrow the opportunities for Latino male youth to believe and develop college-going identities (Conchas & Vigil, 2012; Huerta, McDonough, & Allen, 2015; Noguera, Hurtado, & Fergus, 2011; Rios, 2010; Vigil, 1999). Even when urban high school students are offered honors and advanced placement courses, the students’ confidence and sense of college level preparation waver (Hallett & Venegas, 2011). In 2007, only 34% of Latino male high school completers enrolled in college versus 44% of Latinas (Pew Research Center, 2013).

Vigil (1999) asserts that gangs and the streets have encroached into urban schools. Gang involvement may be a strong preventer of college and career readiness; this area is under-researched and needs further investigation for Latino male youth (Conchas & Vigil, 2012; Vigil, 1999). The significance of gang participation is a major concern for Latino youth because they represent 46% of the estimated 746,000 gang members in the U.S. (US Gang Research Center, 2011).

Latino male youth who do not prepare for college or join gangs may be aware of the U.S.

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military as an opportunity to finance postsecondary education or gain the necessary training to prepare for future blue-collar careers (Huerta, McDonough, & Allen, 2015). Schools have become the ideal space to recruit urban youth for gangs and the military (Ayers, 2006; Naber, May, Decker, Minor, & Wells, 2006). Latinos represent between 10-15% of the over one million service men and women in the different branches of the U.S. military (RAND, 2009). Examining gang, college, and military pathways for Latino male youth may help explain the current conditions for this population in the United States. Hence, the purpose of this qualitative study is to understand how Latino males attending one high school in Southern California shared and used information about gangs, college, and the military to influence their post-high school opportunities.

Although only half of Latino males graduate from high school, this work is timely in that it explores the postsecondary opportunities and experiences of Latino male high school students who have college choice—an area that seems especially important considering the current context in which low high school graduation rates negatively impact the ability of Latino males to enroll in the military and become prepared for two and four-year colleges (RAND, 2009). The U.S. military has responded by exploring flexible eligibility standards for Latinos in order to increase their participation rates in the various branches (RAND, 2009). Some community colleges require general education development (GED) for enrollment and federal student aid requires a high school diploma or GED equivalent to reach eligibility to receive any form of federal student aid. Again, the aim of this study is not to focus on the Latino male high school students who struggle with school. Rather, I focus on those who have a choice to attend college, exploring how they collect and use information about gangs, college, and the military. I begin with a review of literature on Latino males and the ecology model followed by a discussion of the study design and findings.

The Pathways Used by Latino Males

The study is grounded in literature in three distinct areas involving Latino males: K-16 education experiences, gang influence and involvement, and the military recruitment. While often considered in isolation, the presence (or lack thereof) of opportunities to participate in postsecondary education, gangs, and the military influence the range of possibilities youth perceive for their future. Further, each of these systems tends to be in competition for Latino males' time, attention, and commitment.

Latino males in K-16. The social and academic challenges for Latino males in schools are multifaceted. One cannot point to a specific educational moment and attribute Latino males' failure to simply their home life, attending under-resourced schools, or overrepresentation in special education and school suspension (Noguera, Hurtado, & Fergus, 2011; Rios, 2011; Vigil, 1988, 1999). But the culmination of life experiences and life context influence how Latino males engage schools and feel supported by educators, and how schools help shape opportunities for low-income students.

Latino males enrolled in high school who want to attend postsecondary education must frequently depend on timely and accurate information provided by school counselors (Bonous-Hammarth & Allen, 2005; Plank & Jordan, 2001). Unfortunately, high school and college counselors often are unable to provide the timely and needed information to students because of their multiple administrative demands related to scheduling, testing, and discipline (McDonough, 1997). For some Latino males, the support from college access programs is the only way to gain the necessary skills to achieve college admissions (Sanchez, Huerta, & Venegas, 2012). College information does not reach the students, including Latino males, who are in the most need (Plank & Jordan, 2001; Zarate & Gallimore, 2005). However, college access programs are limited in their scalability and resources to provide the needed cultural affirmation racial and ethnic minority students need (Villalpando & Solórzano, 2005).

Simultaneously, some educators may believe Latino males are disinvested from schools because of their attitudes and posturing toward street culture by “keeping it real,” which is a performance of race, gender, and affiliation to urban culture (Carter, 2005). This is not to say all Latino youth share this posturing, but the behavior may be an effort to avoid bullying by gang affiliated peers who target academically-oriented students (Conchas & Vigil, 2010; Rios, 2011; Vigil, 1988). Most of the literature on Latino male youth focuses on their disenfranchisement (Halx & Ortiz, 2009; Noguera, Hurtado, & Fergus, 2011; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009), so there is a challenge to pull together literature that highlights average or high-achieving Latino male high school students (Garrett, Antrop-Gonzalez, & Velez, 2010). The stresses and pressures to maintain a commitment to school and urban street culture is a delicate balance for young adolescent men of color because a misstep may cause others to either physically or verbally torment the individual (Conchas & Vigil, 2012; Rios, 2011).

Latino males and gangs. The purpose of schools is to educate and train the next generation of working adults. However, Latino male youth are constantly mistreated by educators and criminalized (Conchas & Vigil, 2012; Halx & Ortiz, 2009; Rios, 2011; Tellez & Estep, 1997). The criminalization by teachers and security officers is often influenced by community context, style of dress, and students’ peer affiliation (Rios, 2011). Whether the criminalization of Latino youth may be conscious or subconscious by educators, the students are aware of the mistreatment and sometimes purposefully “fight back” to demonstrate they will not be controlled and further pushed out by schools (Calabrese & Barton, 1995; Flores-Gonzales, 2005; Luna & Revilla, 2013; Rios, 2011).

As mentioned, Latino youth represent 46% of the over 746,000 gang members in the U.S. Once youth become gang affiliated, educators may disinvest from supporting or caring for youth (Halx & Ortiz, 2009; Huerta, et al., 2015; Rios, 2011; Valenzuela, 1999; Vigil, 1999). Once labeled a gang member, schools use their

discretion to transfer the student to alternative schools, which typically have fewer resources and concentrate on students with the worst behavioral issues (Ruiz de Velasco & McLaughlin, 2010; Tellez & Estep, 1997; Vigil, 1988, 1999). Gang involvement typically leads to incarceration, decreased educational credentials, a life of poverty, and the need for increased social services (Pyrooz, 2014; Vigil, 1988, 1999). For those Latino youth who already live in poverty and whose families are dependent on social services, gangs provide the needed support and structure to emulate a family system if they do not have the necessary supports at home (Tellez & Estep, 1997; Moule, Decker, & Pyrooz, 2013; Vigil, 1988, 1999, 2009).

Others suggest that gangs provide the necessary support to cultivate one’s identity and space for a feeling of involvement (Conchas & Vigil, 2012; Rios, 2009, 2011; Vigil, 1988, 2009). And the need to belong to a group or community influences gang involvement, especially when the student feels disenfranchised from his home or school (Calabrese & Noboa, 1995; Conchas & Vigil, 2010, 2012; Vigil, 1988, 1999). Although Valenzuela’s (1999) work did not focus on gang involvement for Mexican youth, the lack of caring by teachers and other educators permeated the spirits of the students and the same could be said for Latino male youth who are gang active. However destructive gangs are for Latino male youth and other boys, students see the opportunity to gain quick access to financial resources and the reward of “being somebody.” Cash and power rule the street (Arfaniarromo, 2001; Calabrese & Noboa, 1995; Krohn, Schmidt, Lizotte, & Baldwin, 2011; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006; Vigil, 2012). The compounding or marginalization of Latino male youth further pushes them away from schools and into gang membership.

Latino males and the military. The presence of Latinos in the military has a long history. Notably, Latino males actively joined the various U.S. military branches during WWII and were some of the most awarded soldiers during that time. Now, military recruiters have a strong presence in urban and low-income high

schools promoting the multiple benefits of signing bonuses, career and technical training, and access to funds to finance postsecondary education (Ayers, 2006; Huerta, et al., 2015; McDonough & Calderone, 2006). The social and financial benefits of enlisting in the military are very enticing for low-income Latino males who are persuaded by dental and health insurance, a regular paycheck, and competitive housing loans (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). Latinos hold a strong desire to serve their country, with career preparation a close second as a reason to join the U.S. military (Dempsey & Shapiro, 2009). Unlike high school counselors, military recruiters are able to guarantee specific benefits and amounts provided for life after the military, whereas college counselors can only make predictions based on often limited information (McDonough & Calderone, 2006).

Young Latino males regularly travel one of these pathways: gangs, college, and/or military. Some would argue that one pathway is better than the others, but context and environment shape which is best for the individual. The following section illuminates the theoretical grounding of this paper, which is based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecology of human development theory.

Ecology of Human Development Theory

Previous studies that focus on Latino males have examined their college experiences through a feminist lens (Saenz & Bukoski, 2014), marginality and matter (Huerta & Fishman, 2014), and developmental model to examine ethnic identity development (Guardia & Evans, 2008). I use Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecology of human development theory to understand how Latino male high school students interact with the multiple environments to gain knowledge about gangs, college, and the military. This model places individuals at the center of their environment and the developmental process; outcomes occur simultaneously and cannot be removed from the person's lived experience (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Renn 2003). Bronfenbrenner's theory recognizes that individuals are nested in multiple environments through a larger ecology consisting of the

person, place, context, and time (PPCT). The individual of interest (person) interacts with his school (place), which is influenced by his parents' occupation and behaviors (context) and ultimately by dominant ideologies and political environment (time). The PPCT perspective reflects the four paradigms created by Bronfenbrenner, which are the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem.

The microsystem focuses on the individuals' daily interactions with their homes and schools, which may include gang members, college counselors, high school teachers, or military recruiters. The interactions with these various actors contribute to the cognitive development of the person. These regular interactions between the individual and other actors help shape the individual's view and behaviors of his world, and what is possible (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The mesosystem highlights the influence of interactions between the individual and two or more systems from the microsystem on individual development. For example, the interconnection of a Latino male's family, his friendship group, and the high school environment affect his knowledge and motivation to prepare for college through rigorous high school academic preparation (Huerta, et al., 2015). Bronfenbrenner (1979) stresses that when schools are isolated from a person's home environment, parents have limited interactions with teachers, counselors, and other educators, resulting in a diminished relationship. When parents, students, and schools are disconnected, the chances for college enrollment decrease for Latino male students (Goldrick-Rab & Han, 2011).

The external forces that influence an individual's opportunities encompass the exosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The parents' or guardians' occupation can shape the types of economic resources available to their sons, the geographical location of their home and access to the high quality of schools, and individuals in their social networks who can provide access to higher education (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1986). Another example of external forces includes a

school board's decision to reduce funding for the number of college counselors in high schools, which impacts low-income Latino males' ability to gain accurate and timely information about college.

The macrosystem encompasses the three other paradigms. The macrosystem represents the larger dominant beliefs and ideologies of a society, which shape resources, challenges, and opportunities for access (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). An example would be a Latino male living in a low-income and non-college educated community, where the shared belief that college is not worth the time or financial investment, and who thus enters the workforce rather than go to college.

The significance of Bronfenbrenner's ecology of human development theory pushes the discourse about how the environment shapes Latino males' view of opportunities, but also amplifies how the subtle interactions between the various systems structure pathways to gangs, college, or the military for this community. The use of the ecological model helps to position each system to help explain how college preparation, military recruitment, and gang membership are integrated into the lives of the students, whether intentionally or indirectly. The model also provides clarity to the complexity of social networks and connections among the systems in each of the different social contexts of people's lives. Previous theories used to examine Latino males have focused on the individual's ability to accumulate various forms of wealth to understand how to navigate the education systems; this theory shows how the students and the education system interact in a given space and time, which is then molded by the dominant ideologies of the community. The following section discusses how data were collected, coded, and analyzed.

Method

I used qualitative methods to explore how students collect and use information about gangs, college, and the military. Qualitative methods allow the individual's voice to capture moments of joy, concern, and struggles in

exploring life experiences. The data presented in this paper are part of a larger qualitative study on Latino male students' post high school opportunities. In total, 25 Latino male students were interviewed and observed at three schools in Nevada, and the Inland Empire in southern California.

The seven students who are the focus of this paper attended the same high school, which served over 3,000 students and was located in the Inland Empire region of southern California in a predominantly Latino and working-class community. I gained access to the school through an administrative assistant who brokered contact with the school principal. No incentives were offered to the students besides an opportunity to reflect on how they collected and used information about their post-high school options. I began by connecting with two students who shared and recruited their peers (Creswell, 2009).

The seven participants were between 15 and 19 years old and all identified as Mexican or Mexican-American. They were considered average with grade point averages above 3.0 and ambitions to attend two- and four-year colleges. They participated in various forms of rigorous academic preparation, which is strongly suggested in order to be successful in postsecondary education (Perna, 2000).

The seven students were vastly different from the extremely marginalized Latino male students attending alternative high schools in Nevada. In addition to their academic performance and ambitions, they did not have academic or behavioral challenges, had not been arrested, and had not switched schools multiple times due to behavioral issues. Most of the literature on Latino males in K-16 focuses on the marginalized, the "invisible or vanishing," and emphasize the crisis. I highlight counter narratives of low-income and average achieving students, who are closely connected to gangs and the military, but prefer the college path.

Each semi-structured interview ranged from 25 to 90 minutes. Interview questions related to gangs, college, and the military, and how their parents, friends, and high school counselors

either promoted the pathways or suggested that they stay away from the three options. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. I used open coding for each of the seven participants, which allows themes to naturally emerge (Saldaña, 2013). Later, I used an inductive and deductive process for data analysis to avoid restrictions of theme development (Bazeley, 2013).

Results

I rely on three paradigms of Bronfenbrenner's ecology of human development theory to frame the key findings: microsystem, mesosystem, and macrosystem. Each of the seven participant's primary post-high school option was higher education. The students felt the military was a secondary option because of the access to resources to finance their postsecondary education and the additional financial benefits, such as health insurance, although they feared death. Each of the seven students was aware of the presence of gang members in their communities, school, and for some – at their place of employment – but gang participation was not their goal.

College Preparation

The microsystem focuses on the students' daily interaction with their home, school, teachers, or other educators. This interaction contributes to students' cognitive development and molds their worldviews. Students' higher education options ranged from local community colleges, state colleges, private religiously affiliated schools, and a few highly selective research universities. Their goals ranged from earning vocational certificates in culinary arts to pursuing advanced graduate degrees. The college-going goals were shaped by their daily interactions and messages received from their parents, college counselors, and high school teachers. Some students had positive and supportive experiences because of their commitment to high academic preparation and strong connections to Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) programs. These students were able to enroll in advanced placements courses and had meaningful

interactions with their counselors who pushed and motivated them to select and apply to top 25 schools.

Some counselors acted more as barriers to the Latino males than as facilitators to college-going behaviors. For example, Ernie, a senior and high-achieving student, shared his views about his college counselor:

Right now, there's no relationship [with my counselor]. 'Cause like last year they cut counselors because of like budget cuts so...then...my senior year and I got this completely new counselor that knows nothing about me and doesn't know anything about college, and like, I'm sorry but...this one time where she, she tried telling me that um, she's like, "Oh UC Sonoma," and I was like, "No, University of Sonoma is a Cal State," and she's like, "No, it's a UC," and I'm like, "No, it's a Cal State." She didn't know! You know what I'm saying? It was kind of like, "Why am I here? I know more than you do." And so for the relationship with my counselor that I currently have, there's none. After she tried telling me that Sonoma was a UC, I just never went back.

When Xavier, a student whose goal is to attend a community college for a certificate in culinary arts, was asked about his relationship with his high school counselor, he stated, "I rarely see my counselor. The only time I see my counselor is for scheduling." Xavier's academic needs were different from the students whose goals involved attending four-year universities. Counselors and educators are supposed to support and forge meaningful relationships, but as various studies have indicated, college counselors are often overwhelmed with various non-counseling activities (Corwin, Venegas, Oliverez, & Colyar, 2004; Espinoza, 2011; Huerta, 2015; McDonough, 1997; Perna, Rowan-Kenyon, Thomas, Bell, & Li, 2008).

Chuck, a senior who was attending a highly-selective four-year research university, had a different relationship with his high school counselor. He comments about how connected

and motivated he was to achieve his college-goals.

I really have a really, really good relationship with him [my high school counselor]. He already knows me by name, I don't have to ask...he knows about what colleges I applied where, he knows my sister, he knows what college I'm going to, how much money I'm getting, he knows everything about me. He knows like what clubs I'm in, what sports I'm in. It's because every little question, I don't hesitate to go in there and ask. Every little thing. Like his secretaries know me, like, "ah he's coming in there again," and I don't care. I wanna ask questions.

The microsystem captures how students' daily interactions shaped their cognitive development. The students highlighted their experiences with their college counselors and the various types of support provided. The problems with college counseling have been explored for various student populations and the students in the most need often do not receive the necessary support to meet their potential.

All of the students were the first in their families to attend higher education and were not receiving academic support from their families. The students recognized the need to find support services in order to be college-ready, but also to learn the nuances of applying to college. Four of the seven students participated in AVID, which exposed and fostered a college-going culture for students to develop their social and academic goals to enroll in four-year colleges. Ernie, a senior and oldest of five siblings, shared:

The first time college entered my mind, it was awhile back; it was in middle school. That's when I started thinking about college because that's when I knew what it was...And they were the ones that introduced me and encouraged me to get a further education, a post high school degree...not just to focus on graduating but like getting good grades that way I would qualify for a good school, also I could get more money as far as scholarships and

grants goes, and, yeah but. College was never an initial thought for me.

Ernie mentioned that his introduction to college was in middle school through the AVID program. Between working part-time at a regional hamburger chain and earning good grades, he attributed his increased motivation to attend college to the AVID program.

Ernie's family, specifically his mother, supported his goal of attending college, but was unable to provide the scaffolding necessary to know which classes, exams, or other admission criteria would make him more competitive. Like most low-income and non-college educated parents, she thought promoting high school completion would be sufficient for future job placement. Ernie, who would be the first in his family to attend college, reluctantly grimaced as he said his mother was "ignorant" about the college-going process. He shared, "She didn't know about college...her focus was getting me to graduate from [high school]...if it wasn't for AVID, I wouldn't be where I am now." He was similar to other first-generation college students and parents who are unfamiliar with the college-going process (McDonough, 1997; Mullen, 2010). The AVID program served him at a critical moment in his schooling process and provided the needed tools and support systems to be successful in navigating the college-process (Espinoza, 2011). He was now debating between attending a Baptist or Jesuit university in California. The cost of tuition was covered, but he would have to pay for housing at both schools. Ernie only applied to a handful of colleges and universities in California; he did not qualify for the application fee waivers because of his family income, although he did qualify for free and reduced lunch. He stated that his stepfather's employment had been inconsistent during and after the recession – his family depended on the sole income from his mother. An additional motivation for him to work hard in high school was to prepare to leave for college and move away from his mother and stepfather. His stepfather was unsupportive and they had a strained relationship. Ernie also wanted to leave home to reduce his mother's

financial burden of supporting seven people in one household.

The microsystem describes the interactions of individuals with other systems, which impacts their development. I highlighted the role of interactions in one student's goal to become college-bound through his participation in the AVID program, but also shared the student's limited support from his family to promote a college-going culture. This observation is not an attack on the mother's inability to support the student, but an acknowledgement of what other studies have stated – students need support in navigating the complicated college-going process (Espinoza, 2011; Huerta & Fishman, 2014; Sanchez, Huerta, & Venegas, 2012).

Military Recruitment

The students in this study discovered and prepared for college at different points in their K-12 experiences. All the students mentioned their parents' openness and support for them to attend college and provided different forms of encouragement and agency to the students to choose which college would be best for them. The parents were split on their support for their sons' thoughts of joining the military because of their fear of leaving home to possibly enter a foreign war. The students saw the various financial benefits and job training as added bonuses for committing three to four years of their lives in the military. Students mentioned lessening the burden on their families as an underlying reason to join because of the free and guaranteed housing, financial aid for college, and health insurance. Those needs were not always met from their families' economic positions.

The students talked about the constant presence of military recruiters at their school. The recruiters would interact with students during lunch periods, provide presentations during class periods about the various benefits, and dismissed myths about dying and the battlefield. They frequently distributed business cards to students during class transitions. Mario, a senior who wants to attend a community college, shared:

It [the presentation] was a big group. Like they [the recruiter] would come to a class and they would like speak to us as a presentation kind of thing. And after they were like, oh ok, if you guys have any questions, you can come up to me individually, like my name is so and so and I'll be around campus all day so if you guys have any questions, just come up to me. I'll be happy to answer them or assist or whatever.

The recruiters were not restricted from connecting with students and would do their best to build bridges with the students to encourage them to join the different military branches. As mentioned, the recruiters would make concerted efforts to dispel myths about the types of jobs available in the military and share that not all soldiers were in the battlefield or simply killing people for a living. Mario shared his recruitment experience:

Well they [the recruiter] say that obviously the fear that...the military is just fighting. Like people think that 'oh the military is just like, oh we're going to go out there in combat and just kill people.' Like, it's not even like that. It's like if you choose to do so. Like they have like hundreds, maybe not hundreds, but like numerous amounts of groups that you can go to like you could go into combat, you could, I think one of them was like a private chef, you could do a storage management, you know, like there are many things you could do. Um, and it's like, they're not forcing you to do any of it. It's like you choose where you want to go and what you want to do.

Mario further elaborated his fears about being a financial burden to his family because of the costs of higher education by seriously considering the military during his final year of high school. He shared, "I started considering [joining the military] this year because...I was always interested in the financial [benefits]...How am I even going to get there [to college]...Like I don't have a way to pay for

anything.” He faced the pressures of trying to find the best way to pay for college without asking for additional support from his family. Although community college may seem financially reasonable to some families when compared to the costs of a four-year college, the context and perceptions of families about college costs matter (Huerta, et al., 2015; McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Sanchez, Huerta, & Venegas, 2012).

Juan, a rising senior with goals to attend community college before transferring to a four-year college, was frustrated with military recruiters targeting Chicano high school students. He eagerly shared how recruiters typically target Chicano students and his peers:

He [the recruiter] only recruited and went up to Chicanos and that’s what bugs me, you know? At our school, we have the Chicanos, the Americans, all different people, you know? We’re diverse, but basically the recruiter he only goes up to us Chicanos and stuff and is like, “Just come to the army and join the military,” and it kind of annoyed me and so I asked, “We’re diverse. Why don’t you ask other individuals at the school?”

The recruiter was selling the option of choice of a focused profession and the various benefits afforded to students should they join the military. Juan believed military recruiters solely focused on Chicano students to join the military and ignored White students. The external forces on an individual’s opportunities and the family’s current socioeconomic stability made the military appealing considering the challenges in financing higher education and the thought of being an additional burden to parents and families. As the students shared, their parents were not able to support financially the burden of their sons’ tuition or other university related fees.

Gang Connections

The students’ contact, interactions, and relationships with gangs differed. Some of the participants worked with gang members, others

knew of gang members that lived in their communities, and some had former gang members as relatives, so the access to gang information was fluid in their environments. All the students were aware of the potential outcomes of gang involvement, including death, incarceration, and conducting criminal missions for the gang, but also the opportunity for friendship and community. Ernie was the student closest to joining a gang. While the other students intentionally stayed away from gangs, he considered the recruitment offer from a young gang member. Ernie shared during middle school that a student suggested he join his new gang. Ernie stated:

They wanted me to be [in a new gang]...and honestly, the only reason I ever thought about it was because I felt like I didn’t have anybody. And but, it was just one night and I just like stayed up and it was like two or three in the morning and I was just like thinking about everything...it was a little crew and then [could be] a big gang...shoot somebody or stab somebody or like pocket check (steal something from others)...I didn’t want my life to be like that...I know [who] they are, but I don’t correlate myself with them, I don’t hang around with them outside of school, just like in strictly school ‘cause you know, I don’t want to get into any drama outside of it [school].

In some urban and low-income communities, gangs are a natural part of the landscape. Families and neighbors know of the local gang members and some are the victims of the gangs’ behaviors, whether it is robberies, assault, or vandalism to their property. Latino male youth may look up to gang members as role models and see opportunities to be supported and mentored by gang members, if the individuals do not have the necessary support systems at home. Ernie debated and struggled with the decision not to join the gang, but he could have easily become a member and his life trajectory could have been vastly different as a senior in high school.

Discussion

This paper explores the students' perceptions of and interactions with gangs, college, and the military for Latino males in one high school through the use of a human ecological theory. None of the students had the same pathway to information as they moved from middle school to high school and then college. Three overarching themes emerged. First, middle school was a period of exploration between gangs and college, as shown by Ernie who struggled with the decision of not becoming an active gang member. Next, the pressure of how to finance their higher education was worrisome for them and the military was a secondary option to help alleviate their economic stress, although one student felt the recruiters often targeted Chicano students. Finally, inconsistency of college counseling existed for all of the students.

Middle school is an emotionally and physically turbulent time for adolescent students (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006) and the students in this study were no different from their peers experiencing the similar stressors. The cultures and the environments of the middle schools were not explored, but may have shaped how the students perceived educational opportunities. The example of Ernie was highlighted because of his closeness to joining a new gang and, although he was a good student and person as a child, the transition of moving and feeling alone prompted him to search for support from his peers. Luckily, Ernie made the conscious decision not to join the gang, but his story illustrates the importance of parents and educators providing support during major transitions for students and being present to advocate and provide necessary emotional support. This theme is affirmed by a recent study by Estrada, Gilreath, Astor, and Benbenishty (2014) who report most California youth join gangs during middle school, which is an area that required additional attention.

Individual interactions with gangs shaped students' identity and developmental awareness of opportunities and in some ways motivated them to pursue higher education. The students

shared that their families encouraged them to stay away from gangs because of the various negative outcomes. It was not clear what role schools and educators played in sharing information about gangs, but it is less difficult to determine how the different systems interacted to facilitate opportunities. As reported by Vigil (1999), the streets are encroaching on schools; gang recruitment and violence are common in urban schools. Students undergoing major transitions, such as middle school, are at a critical period and need advocates to mentor and support their goals; however, adults and other educators must be aware that students are still in the exploration stage of their lives and unfamiliar with the various options available. The influence of adults on Latino male students cannot be overstated and specifically educators must use their roles to positively impact students' college-going identities at earlier stages.

Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1989) suggests that educators, researchers, and others view individuals as swirling in various cycles and paradigms of information about what is possible based on context and what they believe is possible. But educators must see that student goals of attending college or joining the military may seem foreign to students who may be the first in their families to explore their options; the students may self-limit because of various internal and external factors. For some youth, the college and military systems may conflict because Latino males may believe that one path should dominate their trajectory. Espinoza's (2011) work shows that educators and other caring adults can either intervene and provide the supports to focus on college or ignore students who need the most help and then relegate the marginalized students even further.

The second finding about the students' internal pressures to finance their postsecondary education is a concern for low-income students who do not want to contribute to the economic pressures faced by their parents. Parents' occupations (exosystem) directly shape the parents' networks and their ability to expose their children to different opportunities and individuals who could propel their college-going

goals. The students in this study talked about affordability of college and the added stressors to their family similar to previous research with Mexican-American college students (see Schwartz, Donovan, & Guido-DiBrito, 2009).

The college students made concerted efforts to not share their internal feelings of stress with their families or educators as to not air the families' troubles. The students shared with me their fears, but did not discuss the pressures with their families, friends, or educators at their school. This is important for financial aid counselors and college outreach professionals to improve their counseling skills to engage and explain to students the intricacies of the financial aid appeal process (Tierney & Venegas, 2009). Low-income male high school students may believe they must "man-up" to be solely responsible for paying for their higher education or be forced to enter the military as a last resort to secure guaranteed financial safety to not accept the burden of student loans. As discussed by the students in this study, military recruiters had a strong presence at their school and promoted messages about the various guaranteed benefits of the military. The students stated that only college admissions recruiters and no financial aid counselors visited their schools, which added to the anxiety about understanding the financial aid maze.

The inability of college counselors to support the most vulnerable populations has been stressed for over 20 years (Espinoza, 2011; McDonough, 1997, 2008). Frequently, low-income high school students "find out" about college and financial aid at late periods of their secondary schooling experiences (Bonous-Hammarth & Allen, 2005; Plank & Jordan, 2001). The students in this study were no different; the lower achieving students with 2.0 to 3.0 grade point averages received information about going to local community colleges to prepare for transfer to a four-year college and the highest achieving students were coached and provided the necessary scaffolding to reach a highly-selective four-year college. We could debate about who "deserves" to attend a particular college, but we know that type of college attended and the resources provided by

said college can determine whether students reaches their third or fourth year of college and are eligible to graduate. The microsystem interactions with AVID and college counselors positively shaped the students engagement, but also the individual students' college readiness. This finding is important to document how inconsistent college counselors are for Latino male students, but also an opportunity for counselor education programs to stress the importance of college and financial aid curriculum for future professionals who serve low-income populations.

Lastly, the need to support Latino male students to prepare for two and four-year colleges is important, not only for their individual economic positioning, but for the larger implications to society. How and why each student selects a particular college or decides whether to join the military or a gang is complicated and complex. Family values, economic position, individual confidence in academic abilities, and other factors influence students' beliefs about what is possible after high school. The relationship between earning a college degree and social mobility cannot be overstated for the next generation of college educated professionals in order to provide stronger economical footing. However, the effort to promote college opportunity for Latino males requires additional investments from educators at various stages of the educational pipeline to promote either college or military participation.

Conclusion

The students in this study represent the "average" high school student. The students were in an environment where opportunities and challenges fluctuated based on various internal and external factors, such as parents' occupations, interactions with peers, the quality of college counselors, and military recruiters. These students' opportunities propelled them to various types of college opportunities, including community colleges, technical colleges, or four-year universities, which were influenced by their parents, teachers, and counselors.

Future research should consider examining the parenting styles of college educated Latino men through a longitudinal study comparing multiple generations. Also, future studies should examine how Latino and Latina students understand and experience information about gangs versus college knowledge. Lastly, other studies should examine other racial and ethnic student populations' experiences and sentiments concerning marginalization by educators and military recruiters.

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