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Chapter Ten

"No Margin for Error:"

Racialization along the

Transition to Higher Education

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Despite a large body of sociological research on Mexican-origin students' educational outcomes, there is a dearth of scholarship regarding students who reach higher education, how they get there, and the impact of racial dynamics in this process. Much sociological research on Mexicans in the United States has examined their educational attainment in relation to assimilation patterns (Alba & Nee, 2003; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Haller et al., 2011; Portes & Fernández-Kelly, 2008; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Telles & Ortiz, 2008). Research points to sociopolitical dynamics and structural obstacles influencing this group's relatively high rate of high school noncompletion and low rate of college enrollment. In addition, studies have examined the experiences of these students in college (Ayala & Contreras, 2018; Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012; Rojas-García 2013).

To get a clearer understanding of any difficulties that Mexican-origin students (this includes both those born in the United States and those who come from Mexico) face as they pursue college, we must listen to the voices of those students, who by moving from high school into college have managed to "overcome the odds." By examining the constraints that Mexican-origin high school graduates face, and the influence of racial dynamics on these constraints, we

can better understand how others might enter college and the costs they might bear in this process. More broadly, in this chapter I argue that to identify the factors most conducive to addressing the educational disparities facing these students and be better equipped to address those disparities, we must recognize both the constraints and resources these students encounter in their transition to college. Using in-depth interviews with 35 Mexican-origin students in Pennsylvania, this research investigates the strategies helping respondents transition into college.

A Racial Analysis of Educational Constraints and Resources

Today sociological research tends to rely on two frameworks to explain educational achievement among the children of immigrants: new assimilation and segmented assimilation. The former, is distinctive in prioritizing the role of institutions, through civil rights enforcement by the state, in facilitating assimilation (Alba & Nee, 2003). Segmented assimilation uniquely differentiates the possibility of "downward" mobility given U.S. structural barriers (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Portes & Zhou, 1993) and focuses on the more recent second-generation youth. This framework's starting premise is of an unequal U.S. society where the children of immigrants experience either upward or downward mobility depending on a group's characteristics, their context of reception, and community structure (Portes & Fernández-Kelly, 2008; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Although each assimilation framework elucidates important factors, e.g. institutions and group contexts, affecting immigrants' educational achievement, each model has shortcomings. For this study, the most crucial shortcoming is the inadequate analysis of race-based constraints within schools in explanations regarding Mexican-origin students' relatively high rate of high school noncompletion (see Ballinas (2017) for a broader critique of these frameworks).

Since educational institutions racialize immigrant children (Feliciano, 2009) and disadvantage Mexican-origin students (Conchas, 2006; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999), it is crucial to move beyond assimilation frameworks and incorporate a racial analysis focusing on the constraints and resources that Mexican-origin students encounter in their educational trajectories. One framework to consider as a starting point is the *College Opportunity Framework* (CFP), which posits that Latina students' "opportunities for college" result from "accumulation of high or low volumes of social capital" and institutional neglect. For this study, social capital consists of resources embedded within social relationships, which are themselves embedded within the hierarchical structures of institutions; such resources are accessible through ties with institutional agents who occupy one or more positions of relative high-status or authority within an institution (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Social capital may reproduce inequalities or empower those with lower status. Institutional neglect is "the inability or unwillingness of schools or its personnel to prepare students for postsecondary education" (Gonzalez et al., 2003, p.153). However, the CFP does not explicitly consider the role that racial dynamics play in students' transitions to college. Therefore, it is imperative to integrate aspects of *Racial Formation Theory* (Omi & Winant, 2014), mainly racialization and racial projects, along with the white racial frame and racial microaggressions to better understand the resources and constraints Mexican-origin students encounter in their educational trajectories.

Racialization is a process by which social meaning is attached to physical characteristics attributed to specific individuals, groups, and their practices (Omi & Winant, 2014). Interlinked with this process are racial projects which simultaneously provide interpretations of racial identities and allocation of resources along racial lines within specific contexts (Omi & Winant, 2014). Much research finds that Mexicans in the U.S., regardless of citizenship status, experience

racialization as "a threat," "illegals," "criminals," and non-Americans (Chavez, 2013; Feagin & Cobas, 2014; Romero, 2011; Sáenz & Douglas, 2015). This racialization results in discrimination in the workplace and schools, racial profiling by law enforcement, anti-Spanish hostility, and violence (Ballinas, 2017; Feagin, 2014; Feagin & Cobas, 2014; Romero, 2011; Telles & Ortiz, 2008). Despite continuous anti-immigrant policies and sentiments, immigration sociologists and others continue to rely on integration and assimilation to analyze Mexicans' experiences in the U.S. (Feagin & Cobas, 2014; Romero, 2008; Sáenz & Douglas, 2015). Other scholars find that school officials stereotype and discriminate against Mexican-origin students by assuming they do not care about their education and by holding low academic expectations of them (Ballinas, 2017; Conchas, 2006; Ochoa, 2013; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999).

Thus, it is crucial to investigate to what extent racialization influences the educational inequities and opportunities facing Mexican-origin students. Two additional concepts to consider in this inquiry are the white racial frame and racial microaggressions. The white racial frame is defined as "a socially imbedded set of racial stereotypes, images, and emotions that is widely accepted and critical to maintaining white subordination of people of color" (Feagin, 2014, p. 26). Whites developed the white racial frame to interpret and defend their advantages as meritorious, define themselves as superior and people of color as inferior and deserving of lower social status (Feagin, 2014). This frame has been used to doubt Latinx students' academic abilities (Ballinas, 2017), as well as to justify the segregation of Latinx students, the denigration of Spanish-accented English by teachers, and the doubting of Latinx students' English proficiency (Feagin & Cobas, 2014)[1].

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Racial microaggressions are useful for examining racial dynamics within schools since they encompass "brief and commonplace verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities," whether intentional or unintentional, and communicate "hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults" to a person or group (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273). Psychologist Derald Sue and his colleagues' analysis of racial microaggressions identifies three main types: (1) microassaults, or explicit and derogatory verbal or nonverbal attacks, (2) microinsults, or subtle but insensitive and rude snubs degrading a person's racial identity or heritage, (3) microinvalidations, or comments that exclude or nullify a person of color's experiences and thoughts. Taken together, Latinx individuals tend to face perceptions of foreignness and are assumed to be less intelligent than whites (Sue et al., 2007). Additionally, Yosso et al. (2009) identify institutional microaggressions as "marginalizing actions and inertia of the university evidenced in structures, practices, and discourses that endorse a campus racial climate hostile to People of Color" (p.164). More specifically, Ballinas (2017) found that Mexican students encountered white racial framing and microaggressions, in both high school and college, which questioned their academic abilities and citizenship status.

To strengthen the analytical power of institutional neglect (Gonzalez et al., 2003), it must be combined with the concept of institutional microaggression, and its focus on educational institutions' "actions and inertia" that permit settings detrimental to students of color (Yosso et al., 2009). In this way, high school teachers who are not invested in Mexican-origin students may signal to these students that they do not matter. Consequently, students' academic engagement, and their ability to complete high school and enter college, may be constrained. Several participants referenced such teachers and provided examples, analyzed below, of encountering the white racial frame and racial microaggressions in these ways.

This chapter argues that to identify the factors most conducive to addressing Mexican-origin students' educational disparities and be better equipped to address those disparities, we must analyze the constraints and resources these students encounter in their transition to college, the influence of racial dynamics on this process, as well as the strategies respondents used to resist those constraints. Further, this chapter utilizes racial microaggressions and the white racial frame to analyze the institutional neglect respondents encountered in high school, how this institutional neglect racializes respondents, the broader racial project implicated, and how respondents resisted this racialization and racial project.

Interviewing Mexican-origin Students

This research addresses two main research questions: To what extent do racialization and other racial dynamics influence Mexican-origin students' educational trajectories? and What are some of the strategies that these students use to counteract such dynamics? The first question seeks to identify the race-based constraints that Mexican-origin students encounter in their educational trajectory to analyze how previously unexplored factors may be contributing to their relative low levels of academic achievement. The second question focuses on how these students resist such constraints in order to better understand how others may benefit from such strategies. Likewise, since most research on Mexican-origin students focuses on those in the U.S. Southwest, it is crucial to investigate students in other locations to better identify the factors conducive to these students' high school completion.

Given this project's concern with better understanding the meanings attached to being Mexican and the allocation of educational resources in Pennsylvania, aspects of racial formation theory are used to analyze Mexican students' experiences. In addition, qualitative inquiry is employed because it provides an opportunity to intricately observe social life in allowing

researchers to "attempt to make sense of…phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). Hence, this study employs in-depth face-to-face interviews with open-ended questions that asked about both the obstacles respondents encountered and the help they sought during their time in high school. It was purposeful to not explicitly ask respondents about any race-based denigration they may have encountered during their time in high school to ensure that respondents did not downplay experiences with race-based denigration. Respondents' relationships with parents, school officials, friends, and overall experiences were also discussed.

As with all researchers, my own perspectives and experiences influenced this research. Having Mexican immigrant parents, being a first-generation college student, and attending college in Pennsylvania are some crucial similarities I share with the respondents. However, unlike the respondents, I was born and raised in a predominantly Black, Dominican, and Puerto Rican neighborhood, attended a "low-performing" high school in New York City, and have been trained as a sociologist whose focus is on (systemic) racism and immigration.

Interviews averaged 75 minutes in length, were tape-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were analyzed inductively according to patterns in responses identified during interviews (Patton, 1990). A grounded theory approach helped identify and classify new and distinct categories as open codes, while a constant comparative method aided identifying common patterns across transcripts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). All respondents were enrolled at Victory University (fictitious name) when interviewed. Of the thirty-five interviewees, eighteen were born in Mexico and their age of arrival ranged from four to fourteen years of age; these are 1.5 generation respondents. At the time of interview, all respondents had attained some form of legal status. Sixteen respondents identified as female, while nineteen identified as male. All

respondents attended and completed high school in Pennsylvania. This state was selected for investigation because its Mexican population has grown tremendously since the 1980s, it is considered a new destination, and it is an understudied location regarding issues of immigration and racial dynamics. Furthermore, it is crucial to investigate how resources are being distributed in a location where the largest immigrant group has recently settled.

All respondents attended what I call Victory University. Victory, selected given the relatively high numbers of Mexican students enrolled there, is a Pennsylvania, public state institution where white students make up over 60 percent of the over 20,000 students enrolled, while Latinx students make up fewer than ten percent of the population. Respondents were recruited through a Latinx student group's meetings, this group's closed Facebook page, and referrals from university officials who worked with Latinx students. All interviews were conducted between 2014 and 2016.

Geographic Context

Respondents and their families settled in various southeastern Pennsylvania semi-rural and suburban communities largely consisting of white middle-class individuals. Most respondents' parents worked in the local agricultural fields and in housecleaning, restaurants, and less so in factories. Consequently, respondents' class status was noticeably lower than their white peers' class status. Likewise, respondents and their families were distinguishable from the white majority since they are Mexican in an area previously without a sizeable Mexican population. Such racial and class demographics were influential for the ways in which respondents experienced being Mexican, racialization, and educational opportunity and inequality in Pennsylvania.

Respondents' High Schools

Using the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) as well as *U.S. News & World Report*, I found that only two of the participants' high schools had Latinx students comprise 20% or more of the school population. The other six schools had Latinx students represent 3-10% of their respective populations. Participants also described most of the teachers and administrators in their respective schools as white. These schools also had at least a 90 percent graduation rate (this figure comes from *U.S. News & World Report* high school profiles). In order to protect respondents' privacy, I do not list the specific schools profiled. However, according to respondents, most Mexican-origin students did not complete high school at their schools. Respondents were usually among the few Mexican-origin students enrolled in their mostly white advanced placement (AP) courses. Twenty-five respondents were enrolled in AP courses. Beyond providing an average of thirteen AP courses, most high schools offered several extracurricular activities including sports teams, language clubs, science and political clubs, and in two schools, even a Latinx student organization. Despite most participants' noticeably lower-class status, respondents theoretically had access to the same resources that strengthen a college application as their white and middle-class counterparts.

Although respondents' social settings were predominantly white, twenty-five respondents described their friends, especially their closest friends, as mainly Mexican; all others had Mexican people in their friend circle. Respondents felt otherwise unwelcomed within their high schools given the racial segregation in AP courses and among students at most schools. These dynamics exist in combination with the low status attached to parents' occupations, low family socioeconomic status, racializing interactions with white students and white school officials, and the absence of any other racial or ethnic group in significant numbers within respondents' schools and communities. It is in this context where Mexican-origin students are racialized as

academically incompetent as part of the broader societal racial project meant to render them underserving of academic resources and broader success.

Constraints: "The high school was not invested in making sure all of their students go to college"

People of color must navigate spaces, including educational institutions, that are often white controlled (Evans & Moore, 2015; Feagin, 2014; Feagin & Cobas, 2014). The whiteness of these spaces results from histories, structures, practices, and discourses that reproduce racial inequalities, the assumed superiority of whites and the inferiority of people of color (Evans & Moore, 2015; Feagin & Cobas, 2014). Pennsylvania high schools were structured to reflect the white and middle-class demographics of respondents' communities. Such experiences partially stem from the socialization and cultural reproduction, or a white racial framing, that reinforces a hierarchy of cultural meanings privileging white middle-class culture within schools (Carter, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999). The above quote from Maleno, a 1.5 generation respondent, echoes a sentiment shared by half of the respondents, regarding how schools and most school officials acted as an additional constraint in the transition to college. For example, respondents' interactions with their white peers and school officials resulted in microaggressions that questioned their academic competency and pursuit of college (Ballinas, 2017). Inside these schools, respondents were made to feel unwelcome in various ways that explicitly positioned Mexican-origin students as inferior and deficient in relation to white middle-class students and (re)produced the whiteness of these settings (Ballinas, 2017).

Within this context, the identity category of Mexican is made to signify students who are academically incompetent. This racialization occurred through respondents' interactions with school officials and their peers. Research finds that school officials can perpetuate the

inequalities facing low-income, minority, and immigrant students (Conchas, 2006; Espinoza, 2012; Stanton-Salazar, 2011, 2001). Most respondents described school officials and peers questioning their academic capabilities, accomplishments, or pursuits. Ernesto (all names used in this chapter are pseudonyms), a U.S.-born respondent, remembered teachers being "prejudiced toward Mexicans:"

> My eleventh-grade history teacher would stand behind me every exam…He would walk around and always end up behind my desk…And every exam it was the same thing, he thought I was cheating because I would score 97, 98...So, he would always expect something, he would always be monitoring me. And in my work…he would take off all these little points and I would talk to my [white] friends in class and ask if he took off for them…he wouldn't take off half the stuff he took off me.

At a different high school, teachers questioned whether Moyses, a 1.5-generation respondent, belonged in their respective high-level math and AP science classes. Moyses recalled:

> I remember the first day of class…I was the only Mexican student in that class, I showed the teacher my schedule… I was in the right room, I was supposed to be there, and the teacher flat out told me that they made a mistake and that I was not supposed to be there and I said what do you mean, you're Mr. [X], this is your class. Even though it said it on my schedule and everything, he still sent me to the guidance office to make sure that there was no mistake, that always stuck with me the fact that it was like, I guess he couldn't believe that a Mexican could be in this high level math class.

These kind of interactions, and various others described by respondents, exemplify microinsults (Sue et al., 2007) since teachers explicitly doubted students' academic abilities given that they were Mexican in a mostly white and middle-class school. Interactions like these racialized respondents as academically incompetent and inferior to their white middle-class peers.

For other students, school officials and peers doubted their academic competency and pursuit of college. Reina, a U.S.-born respondent, recalled rejection from her white peers as well as her white counselor explicitly steering her away from "good" four-year universities. She explained:

> I started performing really well in high school, I mean I had all these advanced classes and for some reason I wasn't really accepted among the smart [white] kids…My teachers too, they never really paid attention to me. They weren't very encouraging either. [My counselor] was the one that told me not to apply [to Victory] because I wasn't going to get in, even though I had everything.

Reina's counselor suggested she apply to a community college where the entrance standards were lower than at Victory. In Reina's case, we see how a white racial framing of Mexican students has the potential to reproduce educational and other inequalities given how difficult it is for community college students to transfer to and graduate from four-year institutions. Various respondents at other schools, regardless of national origin, also had white counselors discourage them from applying to Victory University. It appears that counselors racialized respondents, including Reina, as incapable of meeting the entrance standards because they were Mexican. Such actions are microassaults (Sue et al., 2007) since they targeted Mexican students in mainly white schools and represent institutional neglect.

Eleven other students confronted similar racializing assumptions from their counselors. Among these students, gender influenced their racialization as academically incompetent in that female students were more likely to be steered toward community college, while male students were more likely to be steered toward trade schools. Milo, who arrived in Pennsylvania at a young age, shared the following microinvalidation when asked about his high school experiences:

> I think something that was really important to me…showed me a new perspective of how the world really is was when I went to talk to my counselor [about college]…She was like "so, I was looking at different possibilities for you after high school," and I remember she told me "well there are like a lot of trade schools that will be perfect for you." One, I had never spoken to her about anything related to my goals, she just automatically went down that road and then she tried to tell me that college wasn't an option, but trade schools are totally possible…That always stuck with me, even today…

More broadly, six other respondents from different schools believed that teachers did not care about whether Mexican-origin students graduated (Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). It appears that a white racial framing informs these school officials' assumptions that Mexican-origin students do not value a college education and that they are academically incompetent. Such framing also results in broader institutional neglect and racializes respondents as undeserving of institutional resources and broader success.

Besides school officials, respondents' white peers reinforced the belief that Mexican-origin students are deficient in relation to white middle-class students. Various respondents perceived that their white peers "looked down upon" Latinx students because of their language and accents (Ballinas, 2017). For Alma, a 1.5-generation respondent, this involved students and teachers making fun of her name because it is Spanish. These microassaults are part of a larger pattern where whites disparage Spanish, its speakers, and their accents since they are assumed deficient and inferior in juxtaposition to white unaccented English speakers (Feagin & Cobas, 2014). Other respondents specifically described the comments directed at Mexicans in their high schools as racist, while some were subjected to slurs (Ballinas, 2017). Further, one third of respondents reported hearing "go back to your country" from white students. The underlying assumption behind these interactions is that being American means being white (Feagin & Cobas, 2014; Romero, 2011) since this country's persistent white racial framing of Latinx people racializes them as un-American foreigners.

Some respondents also felt unwelcomed given their school administrations' actions and inactions (Ballinas, 2017). At one high school, Latinx students were called "wetback" and "spic," but according to respondents, the administration overlooked the incidents without addressing them. Such inaction normalizes the use of slurs against Latinx students and marks

them as inferior. At another school, the administration changed the Latinx student organization's name from "Latinx Working Together" to "We All Work Together" given white parents' objections that the former name was racist. The administration's siding with the white parents communicated that Latinx students do not belong and are less valued than white students. Although these actions do not fall under the definition of institutional neglect, but should, such actions nonetheless constitute institutional microaggressions since they represent an unwelcoming environment that marginalizes Latinx students (Yosso et al., 2009).

Most of the incidents detailed above are examples of "ascription of intelligence" microaggressions meant to convey that respondents, because of being Mexican, are supposed to be less intelligent than white students are (Sue et al., 2007). Beyond mere attempts to question participants' academic abilities, withhold academic support, and potentially exclude them from "good" white universities, such interactions reinforce the myth that Mexicans are poorly educated and racialize them as inferior to whites within Pennsylvania high schools and communities (Ballinas, 2017). More broadly, institutional neglect and microaggressions are the mechanisms through which Mexican students are racialized. Such processes work to reinforce the racial project of Mexicans as academically incompetent which renders them underserving and can ultimately exclude them from academic resources and broader success. This project is justified through the white racial frame. Together, all these racist dynamics leave respondents with no margin for error in their transition to higher education.

Resources: "Both of my parents were always supportive of me going to college. But they didn't know the specifics"

In addition to the constraints already elaborated, respondents also had to contend with other systemic disadvantages: being the first in their families to attend college, lower

socioeconomic status, and being unfamiliar with the college application process, among others.

How then did respondents resist the microaggressions and institutional neglect that racialized

them as inferior and excluded them from academic resources? Respondents were able to fashion

a set of resources from their relationships with family members, mentors, and others to

counteract the racial project of Mexicans as academically incompetent meant to exclude them

from academic resources and success. For each respondent, it was critical to have enough

support to resist this racial project and consider college a possibility for them. Perhaps most

crucial for this endeavor was the encouragement and love all respondents received from their

parents. However, as demonstrated in the quote above from Daniela, a U.S.-born respondent,

respondents still required specific information to transition to college. Relationships and the

social capital cultivated by respondents, together with enrollment in programs assisting

disenfranchised students to attend college, combined to make college a reality. Below, three

sources of support—role models and mentors, school officials, and college-readiness programs—

integral in facilitating respondents' transition to college and resistance to racialization are

elaborated.

Role Models and Mentors

Transitioning to college was made possible in part due to the information and examples

provided by role models and caring relationships with mentors. Twenty-four participants had a

close relationship with someone who greatly influenced their pursuit of college. Among some

respondents, this was an older sibling that helped them considerably and whom they viewed as a

role model. Research demonstrates that low-income Latinx students who enroll in college benefit

greatly from the presence of a college-educated adult to provide guidance in this process

(Gándara & Contreras, 2009). However, not all mentors and role models were college-educated.

At her high school, Rebeca, a 1.5-generation respondent, heard racist slurs directed at Mexican-origin students and had her ability to gain entrance into Victory questioned by her counselor. Her brother, who previously completed high school and enrolled at Victory, was her role model. Rebeca described:

> My brother was definitely a really good guide since he had already been through [a lot of what I have]…He was the one that really helped me through the college application process and one of the biggest influences in me coming here and motivating me to keep pushing forward and working hard.

Rebeca and a few others had older siblings who completed college or were attending college when respondents applied to college. These older siblings were one source providing respondents with resources that they were excluded from through institutional neglect.

Recall that Ernesto, a U.S.-born respondent, encountered doubts about his academic competency. Below, he shares why his father is his role model:

> [My parents] wanted me to be a real man and make sure that I could care for my family in the future, so I don't have to work like them who are barely making minimum wage to support us. [My dad] works in the fields from six am to five pm. So, in ninth grade he asked if I wanted to work with him, but it wasn't as a punishment, but to teach me a lesson of what life is like without a career. He would have me working there and he was like "Do you want to do this for the rest of your life?" I'm like, obviously not. But that's how my dad instilled it in us, out of the whole entire family, we are the only ones who got to college…So my dad, he had all five of us there…So we all understood the value of life without an education. That question he asked us "Do you really want to be waking up at six am, making minimum wage, barely enough?" just stuck with me.

Ernesto and his siblings were able to experience some of the struggles of working in agricultural fields. Specifically, their father's lesson demonstrates, in a concrete way, the connection between having the equivalent of a sixth-grade education and how this can lead to limited economic opportunities such as working for minimum wage for eleven hours a day at a physically demanding job. Ernesto mentioned his father as being instrumental in him seeking the resources to help him resist the racialization he encountered in order to pursue higher education.

Relationships with mentors provide students with access to support and resources necessary to complete high school (Espinoza, 2012; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Valenzuela, 1999). Mentors changed the lives of working-class respondents by believing in their capacity to get to college and showing them how to get there (Louie, 2012). Minerva's relationship with her mentor, the coordinator of RISE (pseudonym for college-readiness program detailed below), was crucial. Minerva, a 1.5-generation respondent, and a first-generation college student, recalled that her mentor "always pushed me to go for what I really wanted to do, because she thought she saw potential in me for pursuing a career." Minerva's mentor countered the racializing microinsults (Sue et al., 2007) from her white guidance counselor who doubted Minerva's ability to gain entrance into Victory.

For some respondents, mentors played an added role. Sara, another 1.5-generation respondent, described having "a close relationship with my college advisor because I could relate to her since she's also African American." According to Sara, this college advisor was not an employee of the school, but worked independently. For Sara and others who did not know anyone with college experience, having a relationship with a college-educated Mexican or minority adult was important because it lessened their doubts about whether they could achieve something that was uncommon among minorities in their communities. Moreover, being able to "relate" to her Black advisor was also crucial since this relieved Sara from feeling out of place in her white school. Sara's college advisor was able to provide her the support she needed and counteract the institutional neglect from her white high school.

Mentors and role models counteracted the institutional neglect and microaggressions that racialized respondents during high school. These adults provided inspiration for respondents in environments with few, if any, college-educated Mexicans, Latinx, and minorities. Crucially,

these caring individuals invested time in respondents and provided access to valuable resources. These caring relationships helped respondents disentangle the academic incompetence attached to the identity category of Mexican inside their schools. These individuals were one source that provided access to academic resources and aided respondents' resistance of racialization.

School Officials

Teachers and guidance counselors must often be advocates, mentors, parents, and even psychologists to students while simultaneously being obligated "to act as purveyors of unequally distributed rewards and punishments" and "as gatekeepers and controllers of scarce resources" (Stanton-Salazar, 2001, p. 162). Research finds that school officials can perpetuate the inequalities facing low-income, minority, and immigrant students (Conchas, 2006; Espinoza, 2012; Stanton-Salazar, 2001, 2011). Still, school officials can also interfere in the reproduction of inequality since they can offer support that students lack access to (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Twenty-seven respondents mentioned receiving support from a school official toward high school completion and reaching college. In almost all cases, it was one school official that supported respondents' pursuit of college and counteracted broader institutional neglect.

Sofia, a 1.5-generation respondent, described one of her teachers and their support:

There was a time when I wanted to drop out because I had too much going on and I remember my business teacher...[sat down with me and] took out a calculator, and he did all the math of how much rent, a car, you know all the stuff when you are independent you have to pay for, and how much I could make on minimum wage…and he was like you can't do this (laughs). And I was like okay, I won't. It changed my mind.

Sofia's relationship with this teacher was significant for two reasons. First, Sofia did not have anyone "who went to college" or "who went to school in the U.S." Thus, for Sofia, trying to get to college "was a struggle because I never had" guidance. Second, Sofia's white counselor suggested she apply to community college, and this made her even more uncertain about going to

college. This teacher counteracted Sofia's counselor's microinsults racializing her as academically incompetent.

Claudia, a U.S.-born respondent, cited a close relationship with her sociology teacher as influential in applying to college. Claudia explained:

> I still keep in contact with him, I still meet up with him sometimes for lunch. He was very encouraging. I knew I wanted to do something with science in college, I originally thought about forensic science and he was telling about checking out specific schools and about financial aid and other things. I really appreciate him for that because that wasn't part of his quote-unquote job.

Because of her teacher's advice, Claudia decided on and pursued a science degree at Victory given her interests in science and Victory's highly ranked science programs. This sociology teacher helped Claudia counteract her guidance counselor's racializing microassault (Sue et al., 2007) suggesting that Claudia, because of being Mexican, should not "waste" her time applying to Victory because she would not gain entrance.

School officials played crucial roles as nonfamilial adults who provided support that made students' transitions to college much less complicated, uncertain, and difficult. In some cases, these individuals made students' transitions to college possible (Espinoza, 2012; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Louie, 2012; Portes & Fernández-Kelly, 2008; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). These officials were also instrumental in counteracting the microaggressions and broader institutional neglect that racialized respondents as academically incompetent and underserving of academic resources and broader success.

College-readiness Programs

Despite the assistance detailed in previous sections, most respondents, usually the first to attend college in their families, still needed additional guidance in transitioning to college. College-readiness programs filled in the gaps in resources that respondents required to make the

transition. Twenty-five respondents were enrolled in federal initiatives such as Upward Bound,

Migrant Education Program, and other local programs. According to Alfonso, who arrived in the

U.S. as a teenager, Upward Bound helped him get to college. He described:

> You go there [to a college campus] for the summer for six weeks and take the courses
> you will be taking next year in high school, so when you go back to high school
> you…have covered about sixty percent of the material…When senior year comes, they
> take you on college tours, I saw like twenty colleges before coming [to Victory]. They
> have guest speakers, help you with financial aid, have a FAFSA workshop, and all kinds
> of workshops. They really facilitated the whole thing.

Participation in this program was crucial for Alfonso and others who did not have role models,

mentors, or school officials to guide them through the college application process. Furthermore,

Alfonso's participation in Upward Bound helped to counteract his white peers' doubts that he

could gain entrance into Victory's renowned STEM programs.

The Migrant Education Program (MEP) is a federal program assisting the children of

migrant workers to complete high school and prepare them for college. When asked about the

college resources her school provided, Katherine, a 1.5-generation respondent, recalled an

example of institutional neglect and how the MEP countered this. She explained:

> I was involved in the migrant program and they are the ones that really helped me a lot
> and I know a lot of people in there and actually a lot of them come to this school today.
> So that's what really helped me, but my school specifically didn't really help at all.

Similarly, Pennsylvania-born brothers Roberto and Nelson received no assistance from their high

school guidance counselor who suggested they were incapable of gaining admission to Victory

because they were Mexican. Instead, the MEP counselors buffered their high school guidance

counselor's racializing microassaults (Sue et al., 2007) and provided them with guidance that

facilitated their transition to Victory.

Local programs also allowed participants to visit colleges, gain internships, attend career-

oriented workshops, and they demystified college, provided tutoring, and helped students with

college applications. Since 2010, Resources, Inspiration, and Support in Education (RISE; a

pseudonym), has assisted over eighty Latinx students, including nine from this study, to enroll in

various universities (these figures are from personal communication with the program director).

David, who arrived in Pennsylvania as a young child, detailed how RISE helps students:

> Yea, a lot of it was just telling the students, telling me, how it was actually possible to get to college, because I guess that there is this thought that some students have that you can't pay for it or afford it. It just opened our eyes to this possibility and showed us how to do the application.

Many respondents and their parents initially believed that it would be difficult for them to afford

college tuition. Additionally, since all respondents' families had lower socioeconomic status than

their white middle-class peers, most respondents disclosed encountering perceptions around

them that all Mexicans were poor. Thus, RISE served to disrupt a strongly held microinsult that

racialized Mexicans as inherently poor in respondents' communities.

Several other respondents participated in a separate program, Amigas, which specifically

provided young Latinx women with educational opportunities, leadership training, and

mentorship. Concha, a U.S.-born respondent who encountered institutional neglect from her high

school, received much support from this program since "it was run by Latinas" that had

"graduated high school" and went on to college. As with another program, Latinos in STEM,

Amigas allowed respondents to meet Mexican and Latinx college students and professionals.

These relationships were especially crucial since they provided respondents with tangible

examples to emulate as they were usually among the first from their respective families to attend

college and had few minority adults around them who were college-educated. Such relationships

also helped respondents disentangle academic incompetence attached to the identity category of

Mexican inside their schools.

The examples discussed in this section demonstrate the importance of having multiple sources of social capital toward transitioning to college. Participation in college-readiness programs was vital for helping students complete high school, apply to college, and enroll in college. Programs provided students with a roadmap that helped transform their "college aspirations into realistic expectations" (Louie, 2012, p. 101) in providing key resources not available elsewhere; most respondents came to learn about the programs mentioned through their relationships with those who supported them. Additionally, these programs and the caring adults supporting respondents buffered the institutional neglect and microaggressions that racialized respondents as academically incompetent and excluded them from valuable resources during high school. Without respondents seeking out this support and broader resistance to racialization and white racial framing, their transition to college would have been derailed.

Turning Negative Experiences with Racialization into Positive Educational Outcomes

Despite much scholarship demonstrating that Mexican-origin students have among the lowest educational levels of any racial or ethnic group in the United States (Alba & Nee, 2003; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Haller et al., 2011; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Telles & Ortiz, 2008), there is a dearth of investigations considering the role of racial dynamics on the educational inequalities and opportunities this group encounters. Unlike existing sociological research on Mexican educational achievement, this study employed a racial analysis of Mexican-origin students' educational trajectories. Results indicate that the microaggressions and institutional neglect respondents experienced racialized Mexican-origin students as academically incompetent. This is part of an ongoing societal racial project meant to exclude Mexican-origin students from the benefits of a college education. The white racial frame (Feagin, 2014) was used to justify this interpretation of the racial identifier Mexican, allocation of resources based

on this interpretation, and the reproduction of racist structures upholding this interpretation (Omi & Winant, 2014) within respondents' high schools.

Beyond resisting the above-mentioned racialization, racial project, and white racial framing, respondents also had to overcome broader structural disadvantages such as having low socioeconomic status, parents with an average of a sixth-grade education, a lack of familiarity with the college application process, and racialized tracking, among others. What then facilitated respondents' disruption of these constraints and broader disadvantages? The racializing perceptions of academic deficiency that respondents experienced motivated them to seek assistance in order to prove their detractors wrong. It is important to note that respondents were able to turn these negative experiences of racialization into positive educational outcomes because of the availability of broader resources to help them transition to higher education. Thus, the answer to the above question lies in the combination of social capital and support that respondents cultivated through their relationships with family members, some school officials, and other important adults with participation in programs that assisted marginalized students with completing high school and enrolling in college. Respondents were able to access vital information about applying to and attending college through their enrollment in these programs. More specifically, certain mechanisms needed to be in place for respondents to benefit from such resources.

A network of resources existed in respondents' Pennsylvania communities given the various relationships between students, adults who provided them with support, college-readiness programs, and Victory University. The density of relationships can be attributed to a significant number of Mexican migrants arriving in Pennsylvania beginning in the 1970s (Shutika, 2011); slightly more than half of respondents' parents arrived in Pennsylvania by the

1980s. As the number of these students in high school increased, concerned community members created various initiatives to meet the needs not being fulfilled by schools. Over time, relationships were built between individuals working in local programs, those working for national initiatives like Upward Bound and the Migrant Education Program, and students. As respondents progressed into high school, a significant number of Mexican-origin students were present there and a subsequent minority was on their way to or already in college.

For instance, a diversity program at Victory directly recruited migrant students from respondents' high schools. The director of this Victory program had relationships with different Migrant Education Program (MEP) specialists at some of the respondents' schools. The coordinator and creator of RISE used to be an MEP specialist and has a working relationship with the Victory program coordinator. Since the coordinator of RISE is a Latinx woman, she also helped mentor some of this study's female participants in Amigas. This program is specifically for female Latinx high school students and provides similar resources to those of RISE. Both Amigas and Latinos in STEM (LiS) are national programs that have local chapters in the U.S. Northeast. Furthermore, LiS has an affiliate program at Victory that sends current Victory Latinx students to Pennsylvania high schools to have discussions with Latinx high school students who might be interested in attending college. Alfonso learned about LiS and Victory in this way while in high school. Although Alfonso did not qualify for the Migrant Education Program in high school, a specialist guided him toward Upward Bound. Alfonso then assisted Gerardo, who was not enrolled in any college-readiness program, with his college application process. Gerardo, as his older brother, also served as a role model for Milo.

It is important to recognize that just as the racial project that racializes Mexican students as academically incompetent and excludes them from higher education is reproduced across this

country, so too can the resistance to it be reproduced. The previous paragraph provides some of the ways this resistance can work. In terms of policy, this would involve increasing funding for local programs and larger national college-readiness programs that assist marginalized students' transitions to college. These programs solidified respondents' preparation for college in tying together the social capital that mentors, role models, and school officials provided. Such programs are increasingly important given the cuts to public education and specifically to schools where majorities of students are more likely to be nonwhite and poorer. Moreover, as with my respondents, resistance to this racial project and broader educational inequalities requires that these programs are connected to each other, to individuals who believe that all students should be able to go to college, and to students who are racialized as academically incompetent and excluded from higher education. Colleges and universities truly committed to diversity and recruiting, retaining, and graduating Latinx students can create or increase outreach initiatives with local high schools and with existing programs targeting these students. Such outreach is crucial for high school students who might not have any other source of support in trying to resist racialization and transition to college.

This study purposefully focused on students who were able to overcome significant odds in transitioning to college. I realize that much of what respondents experienced in this transition was influenced by their previous schooling, as well as their lives outside of school. Unfortunately, this study was not able to focus on those experiences. Still, relying on qualitative methods to carry out this study was also quite purposeful. Therefore, this study can only help us speculate about those students who were not able to complete high school nor enter higher education. As some may posit, that this study's findings may not be applicable outside of Pennsylvania, is another significant limitation. However, as in most qualitative research, the

"loss" of generalizability was purposeful. My intention was to focus on the nuance and depth of Mexican young people's experience with and resistance to racialization in their transition to college not emphasized in most existing research, as well as to expand upon existing theoretical propositions. Hopefully, this approach can be replicated by others in order to further learn how to increase the educational opportunities and decrease the inequalities facing Mexican-origin and similar students.

Conclusion

Through its emphasis on the racialized constraints that Mexican-origin high school graduates experienced *and* the resources they fashioned to counteract those constraints, this study contributes to scholarship on the children of immigrants, social capital, educational achievement, and the influence of racialization on educational inequality and opportunity. We must remember that this study's respondents, like many minority, immigrant, and working-class students, do not have access to the same academic resources as their white and middle-class peers. Despite the common societal belief that marginalized students can overcome inequalities simply through hard work, determination, grit, and/or resilience, this chapter has shown that various systems of support are necessary to help marginalized students overcome the systemic barriers that may thwart their academic achievement. Respondents experienced institutional neglect and microaggressions that racialized them as academically incompetent as part of a racial project meant to exclude Mexican-origin students from the benefits of a college education justified through the white racial frame. Additional constraints on respondents include low socioeconomic status, parents with an average of a sixth-grade education, a lack of familiarity with the college application process, and racialized tracking. Respondents overcame these constraints with the support of family members, college-educated adults, mentors, role models,

and various local and national educational initiatives. It appears then that respondents and others like them have no margin for error when it comes to gaining entrance into higher education. Thus, if we are truly committed to addressing the educational inequalities affecting low-income, immigrant, minoritized, and other students, funding for local and national college-readiness programs should be increased.

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