# Exploring the Role of Community Cultural Wealth in Graduate School Access and Persistence for Mexican American PhDs

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This article focuses on the extent to which devalued forms of capital along with limited access to valued cultural capital facilitated the access and persistence of 33 Mexican American PhDs who earned their doctorates in a variety of disciplines at 15 universities across the United States. Using the framework of community cultural wealth, this study uncovered and contextualized the ways that Mexican American PhDs activated navigational capital, resistant capital, social capital, aspirational capital, and legitimated forms of cultural capital in order to access graduate school. In order to persevere in their doctoral studies, however, participants were often reminded that cultural capital was necessary for gaining access to socialization processes and support mechanisms that would lead to funding opportunities and faculty careers. This study illustrates the extent to which participants' forms of capital (including cultural capital) were valued within hegemonic and oppressive institutions.

The process starts as an undergraduate when you're . . . looking at the dynamics of who interacts with whom and what you hear about professors. If you want to . . . do graduate studies, be aware of the environment that you're going to be in. [When] there's no record of them ever producing a minority student, that is already telling you a lot. (Aztlan, Chicano, working class, life sciences)

Most of the literature on educational pathways leading to the doctorate for students of color focuses on limited access to cultural capital (Cooper et al. 2002; Monkman et al. 2005; Perna and Titus 2005) rather than the value assigned to privileged forms of cultural capital that (un)knowingly perpetuates social class standings and centers dominant-class knowledge (Winkle-Wagner 2010; Yosso and Solórzano 2005). In essence, "one's culture can act as [currency] in social

settings where one can exchange cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, norms, preferences, or mannerisms for social rewards such as acceptance, recognition, inclusion, or even social mobility" (Winkle-Wagner 2010, 5). Individuals who have so-called legitimate forms of cultural capital within a particular field, such as education, are rewarded with privileged knowledge and skill sets that decipher institutional symbols and language, internalize positive reflections of their communities found in educational curricula, and are generally sorted along lines of knowledge (rather than labor) production, all of which contribute to successful navigation through educational systems. If, as Bourdieu (1973) asserted, the means of obtaining cultural capital are either through symbolic inheritance or proper schooling, educational systems along the P–20 pipeline have an obligation not only to teach underresourced communities and families the "hidden curriculum" but also to value modes of cultural capital cultivated within, in this instance, Latina/o communities.

Unfortunately, narrow conceptualizations of cultural capital within educational research fail to account for the "knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro- and micro-forms of oppression" (Yosso 2005, 77). Implicit within these narrow conceptualizations is an assumption that without possession of valued forms of cultural capital, Latina/o students will experience difficulty in matriculating and succeeding in college and moving on to graduate school, with little consideration being given to how additional forms of capital contribute positively to Latina/o educational attainment or enhance whatever limited dominant forms of cultural capital Latina/o students may possess. New approaches to understanding cultural capital and community-based forms of capital need to focus on the assets found in families and communities (i.e., community cultural wealth), as well as challenge educational systems along the P–20 pipeline, to nurture and validate various forms of capital held by Latina/o communities.

Hence, the purpose of this study is twofold. First, the study challenges traditional interpretations of cultural capital in educational research by demonstrating how 33 Mexican American PhDs activated community cultural wealth, as well as limited aspects of cultural capital, in order to navigate through oppressive educational institutions and structures to complete grad-

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uate school.[1] Second, the study extends current understandings of community cultural wealth as a conceptual framework for studying graduate school access and persistence for Mexican American students. I will first discuss the literature on graduate education, Latina/o doctoral student experiences, and the few studies that focus specifically on Mexican American PhDs. Then I will provide a discussion of the (mis)interpretations of cultural capital within educational research and the extent to which the concept of community cultural wealth can be integrated within broader understandings of cultural capital. Finally, I will (re)present how the participants' stories, based on an accumulation of experiences and knowledges, activated specific forms of resistant, aspirational, social, and navigational capital to access and complete graduate school, despite the numerous challenges they faced along their educational journeys.

## Graduate Education

A majority of the literature on doctoral student success focuses on graduate school socialization, mentoring relationships between faculty and doctoral students, and attrition; these are topics seldom disaggregated by gender or race/ethnicity (Antony 2003; Lovitts 2001; Weidman and Stein 2003). Only half of all doctoral students complete their degrees, a rate that has remained constant for the past 4 decades due to a variety of institutional sorting mechanisms that generate departures, such as program selectivity, socialization, and time-to-degree (Baird 1993; Lovitts 2001). Successful socialization processes in graduate school occur when there is an environment in which responsibilities and roles between faculty members and graduate students are articulated and opportunities for formal and informal interactions are present (Weidman and Stein 2003). In addition, an ideal environment involves faculty investment in students as future researchers and colleagues and less competitive cohorts (Weidman and Stein 2003). However, graduate socialization processes seldom mirror those characteristics because they serve as primary sorting mechanisms for determining which students have knowledge, skills, and abilities (i.e., legitimated forms of cultural capital) that emphasize traditional research values such as objectivity and independence (Gardner 2008b) and which students, namely students of color, approach research from a devalued, marginalized perspective using intuition and interdependence (Solórzano and Yosso 2001). Faculty members tend to seek graduate students who complement department cultures and who will potentially become viable contributors in their disciplines. Those who are unable to finish are perceived to lack academic ability (Baird 1993; Lovitts 2001). Rather than finding a nurturing environment that emphasizes community well-being, graduate students of color may encounter hostile and elitist environments and face socialization processes that "generally

act upon individuals uniformly, not allowing for many individual differences" (Gardner 2008a, 128).

Colleges and universities have limited infrastructures to track and disaggregate graduate student populations that leave prior to completing the dissertation, commonly referred to as *noncompleters* (Lovitts 2001). The lack of commitment to learn more about graduate student attrition is rooted in a deficit perspective, rather than consideration of any potential structural, cultural, and/or psychological barriers within graduate schools and programs (Deem and Brehony 2000; Ferreira 2003). Successful doctoral student socialization is directly related to how students perceive their faculty's encouragement as they engage in scholarly activities (Weidman and Stein 2003). For example, a case study of 10 faculty and 18 doctoral students in a mathematics department at a large, public research institution uncovered beliefs that some students in the program could not handle the rigor that the study of mathematics required because they lacked talent (Herzig 2002). In addition, faculty viewed classroom environments as places where students could "prove themselves," leaving students to learn mathematical computations on their own (Herzig 2002, 189). The doctoral students reproduced this assumption by focusing on individual success (i.e., "determination, focus, and luck" [Herzig 2002, 186]). Overall, doctoral students felt very little connection to their faculty, did not spend time with faculty outside of the department, and perceived that faculty did not care about them. Faculty members, however, are not the only ones who may assume that attrition is based on graduate student deficiencies; doctoral students also perpetuate these assumptions.

Competition within cohorts for financial resources, access to faculty members, and opportunities for research can result in marginalization and attrition (Herzig 2002; Lovitts 2001). When considering specific disciplines, doctoral students in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines, in contrast to those in the social sciences, have a shorter time to degree, are fully funded through research assistantships on campus, and are part of cohorts. Doctoral students in the social sciences and humanities disciplines are not necessarily guaranteed research or teaching assistantships and generally progress through their programs on an individual basis (Lovitts 2001). Although there is variation in financial assistance and formal student networks such as cohorts, even the noncompleters blame themselves for their departures from graduate school.

*Latina/o and Mexican American Graduate Education*

Although Latinas/os enter colleges and universities at higher rates than whites, they are less likely to enroll full-time at a 4-year college and complete a bachelor's

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degree (Fry and Taylor 2013). Latinas/os represent 47% of the graduate student population enrolled in education and business programs and 12% of the graduate students enrolled in engineering, physical science, and biological science programs, yet they attend graduate school at the lowest rates of any racial/ ethnic group (Council of Graduate Schools 2008).

The disparities in educational attainment are more apparent when examining the trajectories of different Latina/o ethnic groups. Mexican Americans, representing 63% of the Latina/o population, have the lowest levels of educational attainment in the aggregate, but they are considered the future of the US workforce (Ennis et al. 2011). Increasing Mexican American rates of educational attainment is imperative. As of 2010, only 57.4% of Mexican Americans over the age of 25 have graduated from high school and 10.6% over the age of 25 have obtained college degrees (US Census Bureau 2012). Solórzano's (1993) study of Chicana/o doctoral student production in California found that the rate of Chicanas/os receiving doctorates was significantly less than the rate of growth for the entire Latina/o population in the state. Furthermore, Chicanas/os were severely underrepresented in the sciences; Chicana/o doctorates were more closely distributed in the fields of education, social sciences, and the humanities; and "depending on the field, it would take an increase in production of 3 to 17 times for both males and females to reach parity in terms of their proportion to the population in their cohort" (viii). This relatively slow increase demonstrates that the share of doctoral degrees for Latinas/os and Mexican Americans, in particular, is unacceptably low especially in the sciences, even when the number of Latina/o undergraduates and graduate students has increased.

These statistical data, however, only impart one aspect of the larger puzzle in Mexican American educational attainment, particularly with regard to college completion and possible matriculation into graduate school. Unless solutions are created to assess and repair educational pathways at individual, institutional, and societal levels, countless Mexican Americans will continue to drop out of high school, leave college before completion, and depart from doctoral programs.

## Latina/o Graduate Education

Latina/o doctoral students face various challenges, including the lack of an adequate Latina/o presence in graduate programs, changing relationships with family brought about by the physical distance from the institution to home, limited family understanding of graduate education, adjustments to the academic rigor of doctoral programs, and the belief that someone made a mistake in admitting them into their graduate programs (i.e., imposter syndrome;

Figueroa et al. 2001). Latina/o doctoral student persistence is based on establishing small networks within departments or campuses, developing strong relationships with advisors, maintaining high educational aspirations, and obtaining a high degree of academic satisfaction (Vaquera 2004).

In a study on Latina doctoral student success, González (2006) found that a strong sense of academic self-efficacy developed in secondary school led to successful navigation of institutional structures, such as financial aid and supportive interactions with faculty of color and fellow graduate students. However, the Latina doctoral students also negotiated hostile campus climates, "discrimination . . . stigmatization and tokenism" (González 2006, 358). In response, they resisted academic socialization practices that seemed to disregard their backgrounds and cultures. Speaking Spanish, confronting discrimination, and asserting their voices as Latina researchers were examples of successful resistance against departmental attempts to "convert" them (González 2006, 359). Those who were unsuccessful in resisting culturally incongruent socialization processes felt marginalized and exploited.

Disaggregating further, a study of 17 Mexican American female JDs, PhDs, and MDs attributed their success to having mothers who were strong role models, having family support, and attending highly integrated schools as youth (Gándara 1982). Cuádraz (2006) offers another significant study on the educational life narratives of Chicana/o doctoral students who enrolled in their programs over a 10-year period beginning in 1968. Participants were often touted as the exception to the rule and applauded for their individual efforts. Their stories were used within social policies to focus solely on individual achievement rather than transforming institutional structures that could further increase rates of Chicana/o educational attainment.

As studies on Latina/o and Mexican American doctoral students attest, previous schooling, strong support from family and advisors, social networks in departments and on campus, and a strong sense of self-efficacy play important roles in completing the doctorate. However, these individual characteristics do not always account for institutional structures barring doctoral completion, such as overt and covert racism, sexism, and classism inherent in the design and implementation of graduate programs and curricula. It is these specific forms of oppression that lead "to self-doubt, survivor's guilt, impostor syndrome" (Yosso 2006, 156). In addition, department cultures maintain and legitimate only certain forms of capital, resulting in marginalization, silencing, and attrition commonly experienced by Mexican American doctoral students. Universities should interrogate systemic and institutional barriers if they are truly committed to helping Mexican American doctoral students persist at and complete graduate school.

## Conceptual Framework

Unfortunately, educational systems are not necessarily invested in providing equitable opportunities for Mexican Americans. The basis for my argument stems from research on the social construction of education and the ways in which educational systems serve as conduits for social reproduction (Bowles and Gintis 1976) in order to reproduce "the structure of power relationships and symbolic relationships between classes" (Bourdieu 1973, 71). Reinforcing power structures ensures that there is a range of workers in various arenas, which accounts for sorting mechanisms that push students out of educational systems at all levels. Based on this perspective, I contend that Mexican American doctoral students persevere despite the pervasive, hegemonic forces within institutions of higher education and ethnocentric processes of socialization that suppress and/or ignore the voices of oppressed communities. In the following section, I provide an overview of the extent to which the concept of cultural capital has been (mis)interpreted and incorrectly applied by educational scholars, resulting in the reinforcement of deficit-centered approaches to studying Mexican American student experiences. I also outline the concept of community cultural wealth, which is rooted in a critical race theoretical perspective and accounts for various forms of capital not necessarily rewarded or recognized within the field of education, yet which is cultivated within Mexican American communities. The intent of this section is not to juxtapose cultural capital and community cultural wealth but to provide a context for employing community cultural wealth, centering other forms of cultural knowledge in the educational discourse and "shift[ing] away from the assumption of an individual, personal possession of cultural capital" (Winkle-Wagner 2010, 46) to one that focuses on communal forms of capital.

### (Mis)Interpretations of Cultural Capital in Educational Research

Cultural capital is an extension of privileged knowledge and symbolic wealth transmitted through hierarchical systems from one generation to the next in order to sustain class status (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Cultural capital exists in three forms: embodied through "styles, manners, and cultural preferences contributing to cultural knowledge," objectified by development of "artifacts and cultural goods," and institutionalized through "academic credentials and educational qualifications" (Monkman et al. 2005, 11). Cultural capital is defined within a particular field, which is "the space in which cultural competence, or knowledge of particular tastes, dispositions, or norms, is both produced and given a price" (Winkle-Wagner 2010, 7).

Members of the dominant culture are rewarded within a field, such as in this instance education, with privileged knowledge that deciphers institutional symbols and language, positive reflections of their communities in educational curricula, and membership into the political and cultural elite. By understanding the expectations, unwritten rules, and trade secrets valued most within the field of education (Carter 1997), members of the dominant culture learn how to work with teachers and administrators (Lareau and Horvat 1999), ensure that students are tracked into academic courses that make them more marketable to colleges (Auerbach 2002), and enhance students' college applications and college entrance exam scores through paid consultants (McDonough et al. 1997). Although low-income communities and first-generation college students and their families have cultural capital, the field of education and the context of educational research ignore, devalue, and exclude their ways of knowing (Winkle-Wagner 2010).

The role of field in determining which forms of cultural capital are valued or excluded is even more evident when critically analyzing the function of graduate education, which is rooted in class-based and race-based structures. Perceptions of a graduate program, expectations for graduate study, and general interactions with faculty and fellow graduate students are dictated, in large part, by access to privileged knowledge and skill sets not readily available in an application packet or program booklet. Most aspiring graduate students struggle with obtaining "undergraduate faculty support through research opportunities and recommendation letters; graduate faculty support through a common research interest; . . . and . . . financial support" (Yosso 2006, 132), but Mexican American aspiring graduate students have added layers of racism, sexism, and classism that pervade their ability to access undergraduate research opportunities and faculty investment practices. Not enough research has focused on cultural capital in graduate school access. Based on the current literature about graduate school, it is reasonable to argue that if students are not holders of that privileged knowledge, they are likely to struggle with gaining access to faculty and to socialization processes that will determine who will be mentored and supported as future scholars. Possession of valued forms of cultural capital in graduate school helps students navigate through academic conferences, craft research proposals and grants, and hone writing skills through publication opportunities. If Mexican American graduate students are not socialized into the academy and encouraged to enter the professoriate, the pattern is repeated and the rates of increasing the number of Latina/o PhDs in general remain stagnant. As noted in the literature, there are Mexican American PhDs who accumulated assets from home and community to survive graduate socialization processes, but more research is needed to understand how marginalized forms of capital affect academic achievement and success.

*Critical Race Theory as the Foundation of Community Cultural Wealth*

Critical race theory (CRT) places race and racism at the center of political, social, and educational discourses. For Latina/o critical race scholars, racism is an inherent part of the struggles faced by Latinas/os in US society, but one must consider the intersections of language, immigrant status, accent, phenotype, and surname, as these aspects also contribute to the subjugation of Latina/o communities (Solórzano and Yosso 2001). The larger umbrella of CRT focuses on counter-storytelling, which is "a method of telling a story that casts doubts on the validity of accepted . . . myths, especially ones held by the majority" (Delgado and Stefancic 2001, 144) and the permanence of racism. Four tenets guide CRT scholarship: (1) racism is ordinary and not aberrational; (2) US society is based on a "White-over-color ascendancy" that advances white supremacy and provides a scapegoat (i.e., communities of color) for working-class communities; (3) race and racism are social constructions; and (4) storytelling "urges Black and Brown writers to recount their experiences with racism . . . and to apply their own unique perspectives to assess . . . master narratives" (Delgado and Stefancic 2001, 7–9).

In the mid-1990s, researchers defined CRT in education as "a set of . . . perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural, cultural, and interpersonal aspects of education that maintain the subordination of [students] of color" (Solórzano 1998, 123). Education is viewed as an institution that "operate[s] in contradictory ways, with the potential to oppress and marginalize co-existing with the potential to emancipate and empower" (Solórzano and Yosso 2001, 479). The critical race scholar in education can counter the deficit model by focusing on Mexican American students' and families' assets and lived experiences and, through careful analysis of the data, inspire action through the counter-stories constructed.

*Community Cultural Wealth*

Asset-based models such as funds of knowledge (Moll and González 2004; Vélez-Ibañez and Greenberg 1992) and community cultural wealth (Yosso 2005, 2006; Yosso and Solórzano 2005) have not only challenged deficit-centered discourses but helped scholars to reconceptualize how Latinas/os navigate educational pathways. It is important to understand what types of capital are forming within marginalized communities and how these forms of capital are applied (despite their supposed illegitimacy) while journeying through educational systems. Yosso's community cultural wealth framework was first introduced in 2005 as an organization of literature based on decades

of research on Latina/o educational experiences. Because wealth is not merely an accumulation of income but an accumulation of "assets and resources, [such as] stocks, savings, owning a home or business," Yosso (2006) theorized that assets and resources found in communities of color had the potential to support students along their educational pathways (40). She aggregated studies about these assets and resources into categories of capital that would "account for how students of color may simultaneously promote the practice of both dominant and transformative forms of cultural and social capital to achieve academic success" (Maldonado et al. 2005, 633).

The categories of capital within the community cultural wealth framework are aspirational, linguistic, navigational, social, familial, and resistant. *Aspirational capital* is parental transmission and maintenance of dreams and goals "beyond present circumstances" throughout the children's educational journeys despite real or perceived barriers "and, often, without the resources or other objective means to attain these goals" (Yosso and Solórzano 2005, 130). Mexican American children who know multiple languages and communication methods can serve as language brokers for their families and build "connections between racialized cultural history and language" (132). These real-world literacy skills engender *linguistic capital*, or the "intellectual and social tools attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style" (Yosso and Solórzano 2005, 132). By traversing through social institutions and dominant structures, Mexican American children gain *navigational capital*, which is a "set of social-psychological skills that assist individuals and groups to maneuver through structures of inequality . . . [and] acknowledges individual agency within institutional constraints" (131). *Social capital*, kinship networks and loose ties to other social networks and resources, helps children and families gather resources and information to navigate social structures and give back to social networks. *Familial capital* is nurtured through kinship networks and includes cultural identity(ies), as well as community history and well-being. "From these kinship ties, [Mexican American children] learn the importance of emotional, moral, educational, and occupational consciousness" (130). Finally, *resistant capital* is developed through awareness of and agency against forms of oppression as well as "the willingness to challenge [and transform] inequalities" and prove others wrong (155).

The accumulation of various forms of capital can provide the springboard for Mexican Americans to navigate through educational systems. From the standpoint of educational research, focusing on different forms of capital (in addition to cultural capital) can help affirm the values inherent within Mexican American communities and develop better strategies for accessing and completing graduate school.

Methodological Stance

This article is part of a larger study that analyzed the life narratives of 33 Mexican American PhDs along their journeys to the doctorate (Espino 2008). I employed narrative analysis, which "takes as its object of investigation the story itself" and analyzes how the story is ordered (Riessman 1993, 1). Context is especially important because it involves the "historical moment of the telling, the race, class, and gender systems the [participants] manipulate to survive and within which their talk has to be interpreted" (Riessman 1993, 21). This approach dispels dominant cultural assumptions and encourages reflexive relationships between the researcher and participants (Auerbach 2002).

*Participants*

The participant sample consisted of 25 females and 8 males of Mexican descent who successfully completed their doctorates at 15 different US universities before 2006. Recruitment e-mails encouraged participants from any discipline and were distributed widely through social networks and organizational list-serves such as the National Latina/o Psychological Association and the Society for the Advancement of Chicanas/os and Native Americans in the Sciences. Interested participants completed a demographic form that included open-ended questions about racial/ethnic identity(ies), gender, academic discipline, current occupation, pseudonym, and contact information. I ascertained participants' social class backgrounds during the interviews, as well as additional background information regarding their immigrant status and parental educational attainment. The participants were raised in Arizona, California, Florida, Michigan, New Mexico, New York, and Texas; two of them could trace their family lineage for at least seven generations in New Mexico. Three participants were born in Mexico, and one was born in Canada. Three of the participants identified as biracial (i.e., Mexican and white). The participants identified as poor/low income (four participants), working class (14 participants), and middle class (13 participants). One participant's social class identity was unknown because she interviewed once and never completed her set of interviews.

Twelve participants had at least one parent who received a minimum of an associate's degree; two identified as third-generation college students. All but one participant, who earned his doctorate in the 1970s, earned their doctorates between 2000 and 2006. I categorized participants' doctoral disciplines based on the National Research Council's (2006) taxonomy of doctoral fields: arts and humanities (3 participants), education (nine participants), life sciences (1 participant), physical sciences, mathematics, and engineering (5

participants), and social and behavioral sciences (15 participants). Twenty-two faculty members represented the most participants in the sample, followed by 6 researchers/analysts, 2 student affairs administrators, 2 secondary school administrators, and a therapist. Twenty-three participants spoke English and Spanish throughout the interviews and often alternated between the two languages, while 30 participants with varying levels of Spanish proficiency occasionally used Spanish descriptors.

I conducted all of the semi-structured interviews via telephone, with the exception of two participants I interviewed in person while attending two separate educational conferences. The interview protocol focused on participants' family histories, educational experiences, and the structures or mechanisms they employed to successfully complete the doctorate. Each audio-recorded interview lasted at least 1.5 hours (total of 101 hours), and participants were interviewed at least twice to ensure that the interview protocol questions were answered. Although in-person interviews offer unique opportunities to establish stronger rapport and trust with participants and observe nonverbal behavior during researcher and participant interactions, I was constrained by time and financial resources. To mitigate concerns regarding this form of data collection, I focused on being an empathetic interviewer (Fontana and Frey 2005), developing rapport and trust with the participants by listening carefully to their stories and providing opportunities for reciprocal conversations that would help "create the space for [us] to reflect on the meaning-making process together" (Jones et al. 2006, 166). Centering personal truths and experiential knowledge in this study meant that I made space for the lived experiences of individuals from working-class and middle-class backgrounds, as well as individuals who identified as first-, second-, and third-generation college students.

## *Data Analysis*

I approached the data through a narrative analysis perspective, which meant that my role was to (re)present participants' stories and (re)interpretations, considering five levels of representation. Participants first think about their experiences (attending to experience) and then decide how they will share those experiences with others (telling about experience). The audience will largely determine how those experiences are explicated, as the telling of experiences demonstrates how participants want to be "known" to the audience. The experiences are recorded and then (re)presented in text, which is a "fixation of language . . . into written speech" (transcribing experience; Riessman 1993, 11). The researcher-interpreter then critically evaluates the transcribed experiences and, based on her/his theoretical framework and positionality,

formulates similarities and differences in experiences across the sample. She/ he then discusses "what the interview narratives signify; editing, and reshaping what was told" (Riessman 1993, 13). The final level in representation is a reading experience, whereby participants or external readers encounter the written work and provide feedback on how the narratives are (re)presented.

The data from the larger study were analyzed as "verbal action . . . explaining, informing, defending, complaining, and confirming or challenging the status quo" (Chase 2005, 657). I began with a preliminary list of codes, based on participants' discussions of race, social class, and gender, as well as their responses to the interview protocol. I maintained a journal of my interpretations in an effort to (re)consider the themes that were emerging and the multiple interpretations that could explain the participants' life narratives. For the purposes of this article, I reanalyzed the data using a priori codes associated with the concepts of cultural capital and community cultural wealth, with particular attention to intersections of race, social class, and gender. By understanding participants' social locations (Cuádraz and Uttal 1999, 158), I uncovered participants' privileges garnered through membership in a dominant group such as gender (male participants) and social class (participants from middle-class backgrounds), which gave greater depth to my understanding of how various forms of capital were employed by the participants. As members of marginalized and privileged communities, the participants crafted narratives that explained the ideal world of educational equity and the real world of oppression they confronted or witnessed their families confronting in their educational life experiences, as well as those who knew of oppression only in the abstract.

## Trustworthiness

A critical tool in narrative analysis is the use of member checks, or external readers who can provide feedback on the (re)presentations and (re)interpretations of participants' realities (Jones et al. 2006). When asked to provide feedback on the transcription drafts, several participants added new narratives, requested edits to their responses in order to protect themselves when referencing racism, sexism, or classism in their interactions with colleagues and faculty, or returned the actual transcriptions with corrections. I utilized the finalized narratives when interpreting the data.

I felt an obligation to (re)present the participants' narratives in a responsible manner. Although these narratives are incredibly captivating and readers of this study will want to know more about the individual participants, I refrained from developing participant composites that provide in-depth information about each participant, especially because the stories shared include the ways

that participants confronted or may have reproduced oppression in their educational journeys and continue to confront it in their daily experiences. In addition, many of these participants are the only Mexican Americans or faculty of color in their departments, laboratories, and schools and may be easily recognizable depending on their discipline and social identities. In an effort to protect their anonymity, I do not include the names of any institutions attended, graduation dates, or ages, and I only describe doctoral discipline and general geographic location, if necessary, within the context of the narratives.

## Positionality

Disclosing one's "understandings, beliefs, biases . . . and theories" is helpful in addressing how the researcher (re)presents the findings (van Manen 1990, 47). My decision to analyze the life narratives of Mexican American PhDs was based on uncovering and addressing my own journey as a Mexican American/Chicana, middle-class, first-generation college student who is not proficient in Spanish and who is the first person in my extended families to obtain a doctorate. As a child and as a young adult, I was accustomed to being one of few students of color in classrooms and/or schools, and I articulated my survival by exceeding teachers' expectations of me. The lessons learned in secondary education informed my journey through college and graduate school. I enjoyed my graduate studies at the onset, but as I read more about Mexican American and Latina/o educational attainment and college experiences, I felt distanced from the research. I did not seem to fit the prescribed Mexican American characteristics and images crafted by educational researchers. Not "seeing myself" in the research made me feel marginalized from Mexican American communities and from the dominant culture that used my experience, along with that of fellow "high-achieving" Mexican Americans, to fuel the discourse that success is possible if you work hard enough. The concepts of cultural capital and community cultural wealth challenge me to consider how asset-based models facilitate better understandings of the complex experiences of Mexican Americans who may not and should not fit the deficit-centered discourse on Latina/o educational attainment.

## Limitations

This study illuminates the experiences of a small group of Mexican American PhDs who successfully navigated through educational systems, and it cannot

necessarily be generalized to the entire population of current Mexican American PhDs or those who aspire to earn the doctorate. In addition, similar to the patterns of utilization conducted on other asset-based models such as funds of knowledge (Marquez Kiyama and Rios-Aguilar 2013), few studies employ the entire community cultural wealth framework or test its analytical applicability (e.g., Moeller and Bielfeldt 2011; Perez 2012). Instead, much of the literature that cites this framework only focuses on a few of the marginalized capitals, seldom considering community cultural wealth as a whole or as a holistic, asset-based approach to understanding Mexican American and Latina/o educational attainment, especially in graduate education (e.g., Luna and Martinez 2013; Martinez 2012). This study focuses on extending the applicability in the framework, but the findings demonstrate that there were multiple instances in which the narratives were not interpreted as specific forms of marginalized capitals.

## Findings

For the purposes of this article, I centered my analysis on stories pertaining to access to, persistence in, and completion of graduate school, with particular attention to the various forms of capital that the participants employed, namely, navigational capital, resistant capital, aspirational capital, social capital, and valued forms of cultural capital. The findings are divided into two subsections: "Accessing Graduate School" and "Persisting in Graduate School."

### Accessing Graduate School

> You [should] have somebody, when you're entering a graduate program, who will literally hold your hand and help you get through it, because without the commitment of a scholar who will help you get through the program, there's no way you will succeed. (Isabel, Mexican/Chicana, humanities)

Isabel's stark advice is only affirmed in participants' narratives, which indicate that authority figures such as school administrators, counselors, and teachers in high school, as well as advisors and faculty in college/graduate school, served as obstacles to achieving educational aspirations and did little to nurture various forms of capital. Some participants' parents activated marginalized social capital by connecting with teachers' aides and cafeteria staff, many of whom they knew from childhood. Yesenia's (Chicana/Mexican American, working class, first-generation college student) mother, for example, sought

advice from the teachers' aides at the beginning of each school year, "*Ésta teacher es bíen maldita* [This teacher is very mean]. Go to this teacher, she's really nice." Utilizing her marginalized social capital within the community, Yesenia's mother found the best instructors. In turn, Yesenia learned how to utilize working-class networks in order to determine who would serve as advocates throughout her educational journey, even if they did not have privileged knowledge about education.

Although most of the working-class participants did not have access to social networks that could offer insights into applying for college and graduate school, they still believed that authority figures and those with access to valued forms of cultural capital would encourage them to pursue doctorates, but those expectations were unfulfilled. Teresa (Mexican American, poor, first-generation college student) stated that she was not advised to apply for graduate school, while faculty encouraged other students with lower academic grade point averages. Teresa shared that institutional agents underestimated her abilities because of her race, social class, and disability, and their neglect spurred her to "prove them wrong," A few years ago, Teresa participated in a conference presentation and saw her undergraduate professor in the audience:

> I told her, "I don't think you remember me, but I was in your under-graduate class. I have a PhD now." [My professor said] "Oh, Teresa, there was never any doubt in my mind that you would eventually earn a PhD," and I said, "But you never told me to even pursue a graduate degree." [The professor said] "Well . . . I was just so darned busy at that time. I knew you would be this successful, but I just never had the conversation with you."

Teresa was frustrated with how faculty sorted their undergraduate students according to what they valued in potential graduate students. All of the participants shared similar sorting stories, particularly along educational pathways and with specific academic degrees and disciplines (i.e., entering community college instead of a 4-year institution, not studying science, or earning an EdD rather than a PhD). Monique (Chicana, working class, first-generation college student), for example, was interested in pursuing a PhD in education, but a white female advisor told her, "I really see you as much more of an EdD type . . . because you're so practice-oriented. I don't know how you would fit into doing research." Monique was incensed that the advisor did not perceive her as a researcher and thought, "I'm gonna see what I have to do 'cause I'm getting a PhD 'cause I want this woman to know."

Although participants accumulated aspirational capital from family members, friends, and invested institutional agents throughout their educational journeys, this form of capital did not have enough currency to navigate entire educational systems. Aspirational capital is based on dreams and goals, but if

one does not know what is possible (aside from college), it cannot necessarily replace the privileged knowledge that informs individuals about graduate school. In Teresa's example, the faculty member only "acknowledged forms of cultural capital that she saw in herself" (Yosso 2006, 147), leaving Teresa to pave her own way. Her goal to "prove them wrong" is a clear example of how Teresa resisted negative messages about her abilities and career trajectory. By employing resistant capital, she managed not only to access graduate education but to become a faculty member who would later mentor other first-generation college students. Monique's drive to earn a PhD rather than an EdD was in direct response to the advisor's characterization of who she could be as a doctoral student. Monique recognized the structures of racism at play and used her resistant capital to fuel her motivation to apply for PhD programs and later receive multiple dissertation fellowships.

As evidenced in the narratives, few participants were guided through the graduate school application process by key informants. However, some participants acquired valued forms of cultural capital through their social networks with members of local communities of color, affluent white communities, university administrators, and faculty. Fernanda (Mexican, middle class, education) was born in the United States to Mexican parents who still lived across from a US border town until she enrolled in college. Because her father was a doctor, she identified as middle class, but she did not have the cultural capital valued in US educational systems to successfully navigate through graduate school. As a secondary school teacher, Fernanda remembered reading journal articles that informed her work as a practitioner and decided to contact one of the primary researchers in her field to discuss best practices. They began to correspond regularly, and the professor sent Fernanda several articles and resources she could utilize. A year into their correspondence, the professor encouraged Fernanda to apply to the doctoral program and offered her a research fellowship. She thought,

> Really? Is that even something that I could do? So [the professor] . . . kept calling and . . . I didn't even know what a fellowship was. I felt kind of stupid, to be quite honest . . . but I mean, how could I have known? I even felt like, "Oh, what do you mean you're gonna pay *me* to go to school? I mean, what have I done [to deserve this]?"

Fernanda's experience is an example of how the intersections of race and social class can reward valued forms of cultural capital to some but not to others, even if they are part of the "elite." Because of her willingness to establish a relationship with a professor in her field, she inadvertently accessed social capital and was rewarded for her diligence.

Similar sentiments were expressed by participants who did not believe they

deserved the educational opportunities offered because they had not earned them. Not all participants were offered these opportunities. Several discussed the challenges they faced in repeatedly applying to graduate school. When Nadia (Hispanic, middle class, education), who worked on campus after college, was first denied enrollment in a doctoral program, she met with the department chair, whom she knew through her connections with faculty across campus:

> I told her, "I'm not a moron. I'd like to get into this program. I know my GPA doesn't reflect what I can do. What can you suggest to me that I can do in order to get admitted the next go-round?"

The chair advised her to retake a few of her undergraduate courses and register for graduate classes in the department, which Nadia completed, but she was denied a second time. The third time, noting Nadia's determination, the outcome differed:

> Because I had done everything that she told me to [do] , she was gonna take a chance on me. I had a really good reputation at work [on campus], and I came across as mature, so . . . she wanted to see what I could do, . . . and [the first semester I] earned almost all As.

Nadia's story was an example of three forms of capital: aspirational capital, having high expectations for academic achievement by pursuing a PhD; navigational capital, fulfilling requirements to gain admittance into the doctoral program; and social capital, developing connections to the department chair through her university networks. Many of the participants' life narratives highlighted the role of academic advisors who supported and empowered the participants during their graduate study. Some advisors deciphered the hidden curriculum so that participants understood what was implicitly and explicitly expected of them throughout graduate school. A majority of the participants cited teaching assistants, many of whom were students of color, as the unsung heroes and heroines who inspired them to enter graduate school and who had profound effects on many of participants' aspirational capital.

Although a majority of the participants "lacked" valued forms of cultural capital, two participants noted that they did not even have forms of marginalized capital. Nieves stated that he was never interested in attending college, although he exhibited college-going behavior such as paying for his SATs and "ditching school" to visit a university in the area.

> People always say there's that one person, that mentor that saved them. I never had that. I did it on my own, got kicked around and stuff. I wish [my story] would've had a positive spin, but it really didn't. It

. . . had a negative spin, but it still led to good grades and . . . going
to college.

Nieves did not feel supported by his mother as he navigated college admissions
processes and pursued financial aid while declaring that his family had no
funding to contribute. As a result, "I got plenty of financial aid and suddenly,
I had all this money. If you get through the bureaucracy part of [college], it
seemed like a good deal." That early lesson was instrumental in helping Nieves
to deal with bureaucracy and find money wherever he could, including un-
dergraduate research opportunities, because "it was for survival. That was still
my instinct, like, 'This is just another financial aid opportunity.' Looks good
on paper, but . . . I still didn't know about graduate school, how it worked,
you know?" During one of the summer research programs, a faculty member
told him that if he wanted to attend graduate school, he should consider the
PhD instead of a master's degree because "you'll get more funding." Later
in his interview, Nieves provided an interesting counter-narrative of advantage
that led to possession of valued forms of cultural capital within his graduate
school search process and transformed him into a valuable commodity. On
the second day of his visit to a Research I institution on the West Coast, he
was informed that he had received a prestigious national fellowship. "The
next thing I know, I was the center of attention. This wasn't the affirmative
action grant, this was the white competition grant. Everyone wanted to be
my friend." Nieves perceived that he was a strong candidate without the
fellowship, but the department seemed to think otherwise, until the news of
the fellowship signaled the value inherent in perceptions of prestige. He
thought, "This is crap, but I'll take it," because admission into this particular
program would garner greater recognition for him in the future.

   After entering the program, he felt that the competitive environment was
a "political snake pit," but he maneuvered through the department culture
by staying "under the radar." In addition, he did not interact with faculty
very often until he reached candidate status, when the faculty determined that
he was serious about his research. Based on the poverty he experienced as a
child, Nieves was always concerned about funding, and he activated navi-
gational capital to circumvent faculty power structures that would have made
him beholden to these faculty members. His keen understanding of social class
and race helped him to observe the games that were being played around
prestige and the value of graduate fellowships. He used that cultural capital
to his advantage, but he maintained a marginalized position throughout grad-
uate school.

   Dr. O (Mexican American, working class, social behavioral sciences) provides
a final illustration of how accessing graduate school was based on Divine In-
tervention. Throughout his interview, Dr. O talked about the role of his mother

and the aspirational capital that she instilled in him through her example. However, he attributed his success to something greater than just his mother:

> I've always had a strong faith. And my mom would always talk about putting this in God's hands, and, I'll be honest with you, . . . I shouldn't even be sitting here, in my position, with this degree, given my history, because many people would've succumbed to it or just quit or just didn't have the support.

From high school to community college and a 4-year institution through graduate school, Dr. O believed that his journey was a miracle. A few years after earning his bachelor's degree, Dr. O received a brochure for a master's program.

> I open this [letter] and . . . I started to weep because everything that was in this letter . . . was everything that I was at least thinking about but couldn't articulate because I didn't know what I could do with this degree or what [social behavioral sciences] meant and fields you could go into.

At the beginning of his doctoral study, Dr. O's girlfriend became pregnant, and during the final years of graduate school, his mother was diagnosed with cancer. His faith in God never wavered.

> And I remember before every test, like clockwork, I always . . . kneeled down and prayed, and asked that I'm able to keep things in perspective and to do the best that I possibly can . . . and if it's good enough, then so be it. But my spiritual faith was just extremely important.

Dr. O's spirituality played a pivotal role in his accessing and persisting in graduate school. He was the only participant who discussed his spiritual beliefs, but it is possible that other participants relied on faith and prayer along their educational journeys. Dr. O's narrative challenges notions of individual merit and focuses more on the relationship with a higher power. Spiritual capital (Verter 2003) is not discussed in Yosso's (2005, 2006) framework, and further theorizations are needed to determine whether spirituality has currency in educational systems. However, for Dr. O, his faith was the only capital that guided him through graduate school.

*Persisting in Graduate School*

> I really want to share some of the trials and tribulations that we have faced. The only reason I'm sitting in this office is sometimes I think I'm

too stupid to know any better. To other people, it's really [having] strength and courage. Ten people standing beside me who faced the things I faced would have given up a long time ago. (Teresa, Mexican-American, poor, first-generation college student)

Uncovering forms of community cultural wealth and valued forms of cultural capital were challenging when considering how participants persevered in graduate school. At times, previous negative experiences and limited access to valued forms of cultural capital made the journey to the doctorate incredibly difficult. Although marginalized capitals led many of the participants to graduate from school, few had the currency to help participants cope with general challenges as well as racism. A third of the participants observed that they revisited old fears and doubts in their academic abilities during troubling times in graduate school. For example, as Fernanda (Mexican, middle class, education) drove with her mother to graduate school, she "just stopped and made a u-turn." She started driving back home.

My mom was like, "*¿Qué te pasa*? [What's wrong with you?]" I'm like, "No, no, I cannot do it." I was afraid of the unknown, going to a new place, and I think deep inside of me . . . I didn't think I could do it even though I didn't know exactly what a PhD meant. . . . It was like, "No, that's too much. I'm not that smart."

When prompted to explain why she was unsure of her academic abilities, Fernanda indicated that she had been judged by faculty during college for having a thick Spanish accent, which "made me feel like they really didn't think I could get a degree." When requesting information about a speech pathology major, an advisor responded, "You want to do what? Haven't you heard yourself talk? You're the one who should be receiving the services from a speech and language pathologist." Fernanda carried these negative experiences throughout college and graduate school, and the symptoms of imposter syndrome were further exacerbated as she struggled during her first year. Because she developed a strong bond with her advisor, she felt comfortable to periodically "break down" during their meetings and to threaten to leave. Fernanda described her advisor as very patient, an attentive listener to her frustrations, and someone who believed in her and helped her stay in the program. The social capital nurtured through the strong relationship between faculty member and student led to access as well as persistence in graduate school.

Most graduate programs are not designed to ensure the success of graduate students in general, although some faculty members resisted those mechanisms, as illustrated in Fernanda's example. For the most part, in an effort to maintain a level of prestige, graduate programs often develop mechanisms and structures

to weed students out of programs. One of the most blatant examples of racism was Darcy's (Hispanic, middle class, physical sciences) interactions with her graduate faculty, who actively sought to expel her from the program because she received a C in one of her first graduate classes. At first Darcy reasoned that the faculty's motivation was based more on the fact that she stayed at the same university where she had received her bachelor's degree, although the department admitted her knowing that Darcy was an undergraduate from that very program. She was placed on probation and required to retake the course. The fight continued, unfortunately, when a professor openly stated that Darcy was a "poor student . . . and was never gonna get the PhD." At that point, a high-ranking administrator in the graduate school with a reputation for advocating on behalf of students of color mediated the conflict:

> I never really saw it as a minority issue. I thought they didn't like me because I was staying on against what they thought was the accepted way. . . . The more I think about it the more I wonder if their insistence that I was a poor student had to do with being a minority.

After this incident, Darcy managed to obtain external funding for her research and rarely interacted with her department because she knew the faculty did not support her. "The accepted way" alludes to privileged behaviors and skill sets valued by the faculty in her department. By not adhering to the hidden curriculum, Darcy was labeled a "poor student," although she was able to garner prestigious national fellowships. By distancing herself from the program and from thinking about the situation as racism, she employed a self-preservation mechanism and precluded the faculty in her department from finding another reason to force her out of the program. Although one could interpret external funding as a form of resistant capital, Darcy was not ready to claim that her experience was based on racism.

However, external funding as a tool for navigating and surviving graduate programs cannot be overstated. Participants gained a sense of freedom through fellowships as well as enhanced social capital as they developed networks with other fellows from across the country.[2] Lynn (Mexican-American/Chicana, middle class, social behavioral sciences) discussed the value of attending an annual conference offered as part of her fellowship:

> The [fellowship] has been instrumental in me finishing, not just because of their deadlines but because of the support that you get when you go to these conferences. It's just so amazing to be in this rather large group of academics of color and . . . everything that you've gone through, they've gone through. It's an amazing group of people.

Although the prestige of obtaining external funding is part of valued forms

of cultural capital, participants were not necessarily focused on garnering greater prestige or legitimacy within their fields. Instead, many activated navigational capital as they sought avenues to endure hostile environments and racist circumstances found in department cultures and with faculty.

Despite the various obstacles participants experienced along their journeys to the doctorate, few were prepared for the final obstacle that was described as "the wall." Many participants described the last few months of working on their dissertations as more difficult than other obstacles they experienced. At least half of the participants remembered feeling mentally exhausted and questioning their decisions to obtain a PhD. Others, like Nieves, spent years, in their words, procrastinating and applying for teaching assistantships and fellowships rather than focusing on completing the dissertation. During those last moments, many asked for financial and emotional support from advisors and peers, and at least two participants requested medical and psychological assistance. In some instances, participants focused on the outcomes that would result from paving the way for others, knowing that their sacrifices would lead to better opportunities for their siblings, extended families, and future generations. As Fernanda reminded her Latina friends, "*Si una Gringa . . . no termina* [If a white woman doesn't finish her doctorate] it's okay. *Pero tú éres Mexicana y lo que tú haces* [But you are Mexican and what you do] reflects on your whole community]." Returning home would not necessarily disappoint their families, but the participants shared that they would later resent their decisions to quit. Pride and potential shame played significant roles in keeping the participants focused on completing their dissertations, perhaps in response to the aspirational capital shared by families and friends throughout their journeys. Facing the challenges of doctoral study was less of a concern than wasting such currency within their communities. Regardless of the obstacles faced, the participants, many of whom were the only Mexican Americans in their programs, knew that they had to persevere if only to help the next generation of Mexican American doctoral students.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to illustrate how community cultural wealth and limited access to cultural capital led 33 Mexican American PhDs to access and complete graduate school. Based on their life narratives, I contend that by the time participants entered graduate school, their aspirational, resistant, navigational, and social capitals provided some support in establishing an internal locus of control and motivation but not necessarily in uncovering privileged knowledge through cultural capital. Despite the obstacles, participants felt a high degree of self-efficacy in surmounting the obstacles; after all,

every participant in this study managed to navigate through various educational levels to earn the doctorate. I argue that these rationalizations, in part, are due to participants identifying as first-generation college students who were forced to pave their own education journeys regardless of their social class status. In order to achieve their educational goals, participants walked away from situations that could have been remedied through the restructuring of institutional policies and practices, although there was no accounting for changes in department culture. As Mexican American students navigate through educational systems, it is important to focus on marginalized forms of capital without allowing these aspects to cloak the role of institutional actors and structures that are constructed to prohibit and/or remain indifferent to Mexican American academic achievement.

As noted by Yosso (2006), cultural capital is often interpreted as privileged knowledge awarded to individuals rather than the accumulation of knowledges that are shared within communities and families. The ways in which participants positioned their narratives, however, seemed to focus on individual processes, individual hard work, and individual "hustle" in navigating educational systems, especially in the stories about accessing graduate education. What role do community assets have in supporting students who navigate educational systems that maintain individualism and competition rather than interdependence and cooperation? How can practitioners and scholars help students recognize their community assets? Is it possible for researchers and especially participants to envision marginalized capitals as valued capital within hegemonic and oppressive educational systems?

Based on participants' narratives, community cultural wealth provided currency in secondary school and during undergraduate education. In accessing graduate education, however, marginalized forms of capital had limited currency, especially because elitism and power is even more pronounced within graduate socialization processes. Although community cultural wealth encourages scholars to view educational experiences and pathways through an asset-based lens, participants were often reminded that they did not have the cultural capital necessary to access and persist in graduate school, as Nieves explains:

> You think that [being a first-generation college student] is all behind you. And then it comes back to haunt you at the end [of graduate school]. You still don't know how [graduate school] works. It was weird. It was like I had forgotten about it . . . for 5 , 6 years because I had done so well. I felt like the clueless person that didn't know how [graduate school] worked.

In essence, participants had to practice a form of biculturalism—one that uses whatever limited cultural capital they may have and one that uses their

community cultural wealth. Many of the participants used their limited cultural capital to determine that external funding was a valued commodity within academe. Participants had to be observant of what was valued, which is not necessarily experienced by white and affluent graduate students, who are most likely to unconsciously be rewarded with privileged knowledge. Mexican American doctoral students have to be intentional and vigilant at every step in their education, strategizing survival in academe even when they are not sure that they will be rewarded for their efforts.

Fortunately, participants' efforts led to greater opportunities, but most of the narratives depicted circumstances in which students "fell into" educational opportunities. Although participants demonstrated agency within oppressive institutional environments, they seemed ambivalent as to how educational opportunities occurred. This ambivalence becomes problematic when considering how participants, through academic socialization, may not only accept the hostile nature of graduate programs (a form of self-preservation) but could reproduce these socialization processes with their students in the future.

## Implications for Practice

By focusing on a community of scholars, researchers, and administrators who completed their doctoral degrees, the issue of access and retention in graduate school is inevitably manifested. There are ways to draw attention to the forms of capital inherent in graduate students' experiences that they can harness and further develop as they journey through their doctoral programs by encouraging interdependent and collaborative relationships among cohorts. As evidenced by several stories about admissions processes, faculty should be invested in those students who enter their programs and recognize how the machinations of prestige are leading to early departures for their students. In addition, although fellowships bring about individual prestige and enhanced social capital for students of color, institutions do not have to take responsibility for supporting these students or for changing the campus climate. Rather than contrasting access, retention, and completion rates and programs with other schools and institutions (another form of seeking prestige), institutions should conduct access, retention, and completion studies that incorporate students as co-investigators and contextualize the study within campus and department environments.

In addition, I interviewed 22 faculty members who have the opportunity to serve as role models on their campuses and their communities as publicly engaged intellectuals. Ideally, it is beneficial to have Mexican American and Latina/o faculty mentors; however, we cannot rely on Mexican American and Latina/o faculty to take on the sole burden of having to serve their com-

munities while also navigating through their own tenure processes. We also must hold non-Latina/o faculty responsible for supporting and empowering Mexican American students and students of color in obtaining PhDs, and we must empower Mexican American students to develop their own social networks across campus. In addition, we must be cognizant of the pressures Mexican American faculty experience when they choose not to serve their communities within the context of their professional work.

## Implications for Future Research

Few studies focus on the transmission of cultural capital from one generation to the next, much less on how families incorporate their community cultural wealth with increased educational attainment. Research should focus more on understanding the accumulation of assets within communities of color using community cultural wealth (Yosso 2005, 2006), funds of knowledge (Moll and González 2004; Vélez-Ibañez and Greenberg 1992), or new concepts that focus on families and communities and do not reproduce deficit models. Community cultural wealth is seldom utilized as an entire framework. Further research is needed to extend the community cultural wealth framework, especially within graduate education, and to include forms of capital that were not originally included, such as spiritual capital.

Along their journeys, these participants gathered knowledge, skills, and abilities from families and communities and activated their community cultural wealth, even when the dominant culture found little value in their culture, language, and traditions. Their successes, despite institutional and societal barriers, serve as inspiration for the next generation, but at what cost? As a scholar who focuses on incorporating asset-based approaches to educational research, I am troubled by the continued (mis)interpretations of cultural capital, especially in detailing the various ways in which Mexican American students are deficient in this privileged knowledge. Does our strategy when employing asset-based models inevitably focus on determining best approaches to learning the "game" or figuring out how to obtain valued forms of cultural capital? Or should the focus be on transforming the field of education and challenging those in positions of power who legitimate dominant forms of cultural capital? Should our research on marginalized capitals focus on seeking legitimacy, or is it better to remain in the margins, in "space[s] where we can generate hope and transformational resistance" (Yosso 2006, 152)?

After reflecting on participants' life narratives, I argue that the (mis)interpretations of cultural capital in educational research has created a dependency on demystifying a hidden curriculum that will always remain hidden to Mexican American communities. Access and success along educational pathways is a com-

plex process that should recognize marginalized and legitimated forms of capital. Mexican American communities must navigate through social systems controlled by the dominant culture with intentional strategies for uncovering legitimated forms of cultural capital while maintaining the value of culture and community through community cultural wealth. If we are to increase the rates of Mexican American PhDs, the focus must shift from solely possessing cultural capital to incorporating legitimated cultural capital with assets from home, family, community, and culture through community cultural wealth.

## Notes

1. The term *Mexican American* is defined as individuals of Mexican descent living in the United States. When drawing from participants' narratives, I employ personal racial/ethnic identifiers ascribed by the participants as well as terms employed by studies cited to describe Mexican American communities (e.g., Hispanic, Chicana/o, or Latina/o).

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