

I've Learned So Much from My Mother: Narratives from a Group of Chicana High School Students

This article explores, by way of students' stories, how Chicanas establish and maintain their identity. To what extent and how are race, ethnicity, family, language, school, peer relationships, and romantic relationships gender based? And how do young Chicanas manage conflicts emerging from traditional culturally prescribed gender roles as they pursue an education? Chicanas' answers to such questions offer unique insights into their adolescent experience, which provides a foundation for future research and theory, programs and curricula development, and social work interventions.

Key words: Chicanas; gender; Latinas; Marianismo; schools

Much of the research on Mexican American youths has been conducted under an umbrella of broader constructs such as Latino or Hispanic. The assumption of Latino homogeneity has pervaded the literature, obscuring important differences among Mexican Americans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Central Americans, South Americans, Spaniards, and others (Felix-Ortiz & Newcomb, 1995). Besides national origin, Latinos also are diverse in areas of education, living environment, family composition, language, religion, traditions, and socioeconomic status. Because some Latino subgroups are concentrated in specific areas of the country, study-

ing Latinos by geographic area may aid in understanding the unique cultural characteristics of larger subgroups. For the purpose of this article, we are using the terms Mexican American and Chicana or Chicano interchangeably.

Chicana or Chicano cultural norms have been described as focused on relational solidarity within the family and immediate circle of close friends (Collier, Ribeau, & Hecht, 1986). The *vergüenza* (shame) experienced by Chicanas who break cultural norms may isolate them from their families and *la comunidad*, also a central force in Chicano life. In the Chicano experience there is an interactive process between the individual and the collective that enables identity development. For the education of Chicanas, a pedagogy of community is critical. Thus, young people's identity development includes the individual journey within a strong community (Munoz, 1997).

In this interactive process, women play a central role. Gangotena (1997) noted that in the vision of *la familia*, women are never considered weak or passive. Gangotena stated that, "although age is a more important criterion for respect than gender, women

are important because they are women" (p. 80). Women hold the family together through the family's values and beliefs. Thus, the proverb, "*la mujer es el centro del hogar*" ("A woman is the central player in the home").

On the other hand, the literature about Chicanas and other Latinas points to *Marianismo* as a traditional source of strength. *Marianismo*, first identified by Stevens (1973), takes its name from the cult of the Virgin Mary in the Catholic tradition. The concept underlying *Marianismo* is that women are spiritually superior to men and therefore can endure all suffering inflicted by men. This concept traces its origin to the Spanish-Catholic colonial experience and not necessarily to the indigenous cultures' conceptions of womanhood before the Spanish Conquest. Contradictory ideals about gender roles may coexist, mixing different cultural traditions and contemporary feminist thought.

Although there is a trend toward more equality regarding decision making because of more women in the labor force, women still do the bulk of domestic work in Chicano families (Coltrane & Valdez, 1993; Shelton & John, 1993; Williams, 1990). Research has shown a perpetuation of the division of work within the home along traditional gender lines (Flores-Ortiz, 1996). In addition, the parenting practices of Chicanas have been found to have differential consequences for the development of group identity in contrast to parenting practices of middle-class European American (Segura & Pierce, 1993).

Marianismo influences the identity formation of young Chicanas when it is part of the identity of their closest female role models: mothers, grandmothers, and aunts. Research sug-

gests a greater inclination among Chicanas than among European American adolescents to adopt their parents' polarized sex roles (Griggs & Dunn, 1996). On the other hand, Chicanas' collective approach to identity development makes them prone to hear other voices. In the 13- to 19-year age group, peers and school voices have a strong influence. Researchers have shown an interdependence of schooling, work, and family influences in the development of identity of Mexican American women (Flores-Ortiz, 1996).

Mexican Americans have lower educational achievement levels than other Latino subgroups and the total population of the United States, although females do somewhat better than males. Some of the factors that young Chicanas often identify as affecting their success are racism, sexism, economic needs, family responsibilities, lack of support networks, and lack of role models and mentors (Flores-Ortiz, 1996).

The inadequate delivery of educational services during the K-12 period negatively affects the academic achievement of Mexican American women. According to Reyes, Gillock, and Kabus (1994), "by the end of their first year in high school, students' perceptions of caring and emotional support from both their families and schools and social support from peers deteriorates significantly" (pp. 362-363). More acculturated Chicana and Chicano students display more ambivalent attitudes toward school and school staff (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995).

Racial prejudice of classmates and school personnel was found to have a negative effect on the school experience of Chicana and Chicano students (Galguera, 1998; Suarez-Orozco, 1989; Suarez-Orozco &

In searching for an identity of their own, students may reject both traditional family and community values and the dominant society's prejudiced norms.

Suarez-Orozco, 1995). Attitudes, beliefs, and values of Chicana and Chicano students and teachers differed and were associated with differences among teachers and students' ethnicity and gender (Sheets-Hernandez, 1996). A recent study of ethnically diverse students' attitudes toward teachers found that bilingual and female teachers were rated highest and that students preferred teachers of their own ethnic group (Galguera, 1998).

According to the 1996 census, Mexican Americans complete college at a lower rate (6.5 percent) than non-Hispanic white people (24 percent). Some authors attribute this gap to the schools' failure to provide positive educational experiences to students from ethnic minority groups (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991; Trueba, 1989; Trueba, Rodriguez, Zou, & Cintron, 1993). Lower self-efficacy levels among Chicana and Chicano students in some instances were found to be products of their exposure to the educational system (Marsiglia, 1998). In addition, Chicana and Chicano students may not pursue secondary and postsecondary education at the same rate that non-Hispanic white students do because of their perception that their school achievement is not rewarded as much as it is for members of the majority culture (Ogbu, 1989).

The described challenges may lead to clinical depression. Recent research findings show a higher incidence of depression among Mexican American students, with females showing even higher rates than males (Roberts, Roberts, & Chen, 1997). Mexican American students tend to identify more barriers to education than European Americans, and Chicanas anticipate more barriers than Chicanos (McWhirter, 1997). Although Chicanas view school and schooling

more positively than Chicanos (Aptekar, 1983), they often experience stress that is related to the belief that males may feel threatened by their (Chicanas') educational accomplishments (Gonzalez-Hernandez, 1987).

When adolescents have a marginal experience in school, manifested, for example, in poor grades and behavioral difficulties, they feel alienated from the educational system and lack the aspiration to continue or succeed in this venue (Padilla, 1992; Rodriguez, 1993). The ways in which young Mexican American women and other young men and women of diverse ethnic backgrounds resolve these conflicts bear on subsequent academic performance by reordering their hierarchy of social identities. Cultural discontinuities and the enhanced influence of peers may lead some Mexican American students to adopt a marginal identity and an oppositional culture. In searching for an identity of their own, students may reject both traditional family and community values and the dominant society's prejudiced norms. For example, Mendoza-Denton (1996) found that Chicanas connected to youth gangs adopted a specific kind of femininity that not only confounds wider community notions of how girls should act, dress, and talk but also throws into question the very gendered category that girls are expected to inhabit.

Many Mexican American students successfully pursue a high school and postsecondary education while maintaining key elements of their culture of origin and integrating certain aspects of majority culture. Youth culture and perhaps a local neighborhood youth culture may be more important than other identities for Chicanas (Kandel, 1995). In highly

residentially segregated Chicano communities (barrios), neighborhoods are often an extension of home and are key sources of gender and ethnic identity. More research is needed to understand better how students develop their own identities and reconcile home and community norms, peer influences, and the norms imparted by schools.

In Chicano communities, as in other ethnically diverse communities, perceptions about the world often are passed on through culturally grounded narratives. Community-based narratives help adolescents understand the two worlds they live in (community of origin and mainstream society), guiding their interpretations of reality and prescribing their behaviors (Marsiglia & Zorita, 1996). They may tell adolescents what is possible and what is allowed. Through narratives, ethnically sanctioned norms that contain gender-specific content may be passed on.

Narrative Theory

Narrative theory conceptualizes human thought and behavior as based in narratives, a pervasive and transcultural mode of discourse through which people organize information and experiences (White, 1981). Not only are they primary means for making sense of experience (Cook-Gumperz, 1993; Fisher, 1987) and moral choices (Botvin, Schinkle, Epstein, Diaz, & Botvin, 1995), but also they serve as an organizing principle for thought and behavior (Howard, 1991). As McAdams (1993) noted, "We each seek to provide our scattered and often confused experiences with a sense of coherence by arranging the episodes of our lives into stories" (p. 11). More than thought, narratives are a meaningful communicative form through which

people express themselves while forming images of themselves and planning and understanding their own actions. "Much of what passes for everyday conversation among people is storytelling" (p. 28).

Narratives have a strong influence on adolescents (Johnson & Ettema, 1982). Their cognitive capabilities include the ability to think about the world and themselves in abstract terms, expanding from what is to what ought to be (Infielder & Piaget, 1958). The fundamental challenge of adolescence and young adulthood is to formulate meaningful answers to questions by which to form the basis for identity (McAdams, 1993). Adolescents often construct personal fables to affirm their uniqueness, and they learn that their peers engage in similar activities (Elkind, 1981). Thus, narratives provide adolescents with a means to understand themselves and the world and with a vehicle for expressing that understanding. We approached this study of the personal and school lives of young Chicanas from a narrative theory perspective to highlight the dynamic mix of gender and ethnic influences for their understandings of their own lives.

Method

Research has underscored the need to understand the school and neighborhood to understand students' experiences (Collins, 1995; Kumpfer & Turner, 1991; Moberg & Piper, 1995), and some researchers have recommended ethnographic methods for this purpose (see Brooks, 1994). Ethnographic study is desirable because of the richness of contextual and temporal data (narratives) that can be gathered about self-perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes, as well as detailed accounts of norms, school

and neighborhood climate, interaction and friendship patterns, and recreational and social activities. Four trained ethnographers were recruited, based on their familiarity and experience working with adolescents. Two spoke Spanish and English. After ethnographers and students developed a rapport, high school students were asked to share stories about what it was like to be a young Chicana. We ensured confidentiality of students' statements, and focus group sessions and interviews were tape recorded. Students were told that real names would not be used, because the focus of the study was the stories and not the identities of the people in the stories.

Field notes, personal insights, and theoretical considerations were recorded daily for all conversations and observations. After two weeks of observation, ethnographers began coding field notes and journals and prepared for more focused observation. Four focus groups were conducted with a total of 21 Chicana students enrolled in three English classes, ranging in age from 16 to 18. Later students were interviewed individually. All resided in the same predominantly working-class Mexican American community and attended the same high school.

All data were entered and analyzed using specialized software (The Ethnograph, 1996) for analyzing qualitative data. With the use of the coding and inductive processes suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990), the ethnographers gradually produced tentative field hypotheses. The hypotheses served as the basis for guided conversations (Gonzalez & Krizek, 1994) and continually more focused observations at the school and at neighborhood and community events. A set of themes emerged as

recurring patterns from different sources of data such as observations, interviews, and focus group reports.

Findings

Somos mexicanas: We are Mexican.

Rosita captured the first strong theme to emerge from the data, a sense of ethnic pride:

I am happy that I'm Mexican....
I like cultural things, like Mexican dancing. I even took Mexican dancing lessons like in 8th grade. But I like the food and the Mexican holidays.

Although the students reported a sense of being comfortable with their ethnicity in the safety of home and community, they faced some challenges in other environments. Stories about home and the neighborhood mostly conveyed a sense of belonging and unconditional acceptance. But in other neighborhoods, like downtown, they described how some expressions of culture were being scrutinized and regulated. Rosita for example shared a story about cruising:

I like cruising ... even though others do it, like blacks and whites and all, it's mostly a Mexican thing. . . . That's like our culture and people have been cruising down here for so many years, for like 30 to 40 years. They were cruising down Central, and now that it's against the law, it's like part of the culture has been taken away. It's bad.

"Cruising" in downtown was described like an excursion into a different world where rules were set up by other people. Rosita defended a culturally rooted activity that broke

the boundaries of what was comfortable for majority society. She cited the law as the source of the cruising ban, a law that was unfriendly to her community and culture. This sense of not belonging and not being accepted outside of the home and the community was a recurrent theme.

The same theme emerged from stories about school interactions with non-Chicana or Chicano classmates, as in Teresa's tale of being judged outside the safety zone of home and barrio:

I get judged really quick in school. When I go home, I don't. I'm not a mean person, I don't know if you guys think I look mean.... Ever since I was in grade school, I have been judged on my appearance. And I don't do that, judge people by their appearance.

The students were sensitive to being judged without being understood:

I won't put up with people saying things about me that aren't true. You know, there are people who I let get to know me, like who I am and what I'm about, but if someone doesn't know me, like they better not be saying anything.

Maria referred to this when she warned that "talking stuff about my mom . . . disrespecting my mom" would result in a fight. Teresa cautioned, "Watch your back and trust nobody."

It was difficult to assess how much the sense of not belonging was related to ethnicity and gender and how much was purely developmental. Carla noted, "I don't really care about being a minority 'cause, I don't let it bother me, 'cause I don't care what other people think." Peer communication was an important issue for the

students, with the school often being the main forum for peer relations, good and bad. Some of the young women participating in the study expressed concern about stereotypical views of some classmates, whereas others like Carla said that they did not care. Both groups of students could benefit from participating in a social worker-led peer groups where peer communication issues can be addressed and alternatives can be explored positively.

Aqui se habla "un poquito" de espanol A little bit of Spanish is spoken here.

Although students expressed pride in their cultural background, some were experiencing difficulties with the Spanish language. Sometimes people mistakenly assumed they were fluent in Spanish, and sometimes other Mexican Americans criticized their lack of fluency. Carmen said:

At my work, this lady, she put me down. She was like, "You're a poor excuse for a Mexican, you don't know Spanish." I was like, "Wow," I go, "It's not my fault." I understood that she used to talk stuff about me in Spanish. She did not know that I knew like a little bit, enough to understand that I knew she was talking about me.... I was like "Daaang..... I wanted to tell her that I knew but she would have pressed charges.

Interviewer: So, people just assume that you speak Spanish....

Carmen: Yeah, because I'm, just because I'm Mexican it's like you must speak Spanish.

Interviewer: How do you feel when people say that?

Carmen: I don't know. It's like, I want to learn it you know... but now, it's hard ... it's easier when you are young ... it's harder to pick up on it now.

Maria shared a story of how language affects her relationship with her boyfriend:

It's like when my boyfriend and his mother are around me and they speak Spanish. I'm like "Shut up already."... I get mad because I do not know what they are talking about.... They are talking about me 'cause they'll like look at me or something and laugh and I'm like "What are you guys talking about?" I did hear him asking his mom to buy him a car.

Even the students losing fluency used Spanish words intermingled with English as they communicated among themselves and with Spanish-speaking interviewers. Their continuing use of Spanish expresses both their cultural identity and ethnic solidarity. Non-Latino classmates and school personnel often do not approve of the unclear boundary between English and Spanish. At the same time, because many of them are not completely fluent in Spanish, they became the target of criticism from within the culture. Often they are perceived as acculturated and denying their roots. Carmen added a vignette about family pressure to learn or retain Spanish:

My grandma will be talking to me in Spanish saying little things to test me, and she will say more things until I cannot understand what she is saying. (Imitating her grandma and then translating)
"Ella dice, to no tienes una lengua mexicana" She goes, "You don't have a Mexican tongue" and I be like "Yes, I do! It just needs practice."

It appears that a little Spanish is enough to get them in trouble at

school and work but at the same time is not enough to be "a true Mexican" in the minds of some friends and relatives. School social workers can play a key role in forming "acculturation" groups, by which these complex issues can be addressed and by which students can foster the support they need as they attempt to reconcile the two cultures and the two languages.

Who are we?

Issues of identity were another recurring theme, which was evident in detailed accounts of self-image that focused on physical appearance, such as hair, height, and skin color. Laura described herself:

"I'm kinda tall, not actually that tall, but a little in between there. Um, I'm dark complected. I have short hair. It's straight, but I like to put half up and half down."

Another component was style preferences in clothing, makeup, shoes, and so forth. Rosita explained:

"I'm not the kind of person that wears the same style all the time. I'll be like one day, um, one day I'll be all dressed up like I am now, in like a halter top, short shorts, nice high shoes, and other times I'll dress like a tagger, all baggy and that."

Rosita appeared to fall in the center of a dress-code continuum that spanned the very feminine to a nearly masculine one used by *cholas* (Mendoza-Denton, 1996). Their different dress codes seemed to be an external expression of their degree of allegiance to traditional culturally prescribed gender roles. Students shared their perceptions about growing up female and how it differs from

growing up male in the Mexican American culture:

Rosita: Oh, it's totally different. Well, it depends on how your parents brought you up. My parents brought me up to be good. They believe that a girl shouldn't go out and should stay at home until she's ready to get married. Some parents aren't like mine and think a girl can do whatever she wants.... Guys, they do whatever they want anyways, because you know, their parents mostly let them do whatever. They've got more freedom than us girls. So, women are more tied down, I think-

Interviewer- And you think most families are like that?

Rosita: Yeah, I think mainly, unless they're like giving up and saying like if you're a bad girl, then you're a bad girl, [laughs] you know.

By differentiating between two types, the good girls and the bad girls, **Rosie illustrates the concept of *Marianismo***. The good girls are described by her like the Marias. They stay home until marriage. The bad girls are described as the Eves: They go out and behave independently like males, and their parents give up on them. On the other hand, males were described as carefree and privileged. **Monica explained how males' life was easier:**

"The only thing they have to worry about is getting girls pregnant, and maybe getting a job for drugs, or tagging, and gangs and stuff. But they don't have to worry about money if they get a girl pregnant. The girls have to worry about whether the guy has money."

Unwanted pregnancies were discussed repeatedly as one of their par-

ents' main fears—a female-only concern. **Rosita elaborated on pregnancy and equated it with another parental fear, death:**

It's hard because being a girl, it's like, your parents worry about you getting pregnant and just like getting killed. Because my cousin got killed two or three years ago down on Central. She got shot in the head by a gang member, and she had a little baby—she was supposed to get married the next month. You know, she didn't even begin to start her life—she'd done everything for her family, for her little boy and everything. Now she's gone.

The students repeatedly emphasized their independence and self-reliance. When they shared actual stories about their boyfriends, differences emerged between what they said and what they did. A number of the young women had boyfriends who controlled their behaviors. However, their stories provided a sense that they appeared compliant and submissive to support their boyfriends' self perceptions:

Maria: My boyfriend. I can't tell him something ... he gets mad . . . but we agree on things. We argue but we always settle it, we don't go to our friends. Like he don't like me to go wandering around ... like I used to always get my exercise, catching the bus and walking everywhere, and now I gained about five or 10 pounds and ... he gets mad because I complain about my weight and everything and he says, "It's your fault," and I'm like, "No, it's your fault." So, we argue and we only been going out for eight months and ... it's like ...

Josie: Being married! (laughs)

In some cases boyfriends were dictating and controlling their behavior in the public sphere, sometimes through implicit or explicit alliances among their boyfriends and their parents in enforcing a more traditional female gender role. Maria illustrated this dynamic:

He drives me practically everywhere ... he lets me drive his car. But, it's like, I don't take advantage like some girls say "Oh, he got a car and I gonna drive it here and there." It's like I just ask him to drive it to the store ... it's like I don't go nowhere without him ... I go everywhere with him ... to his house. My mom likes him. My mom is already planning to set the wedding date. My dad likes my boyfriend, too. Everybody likes him. He shows me a lot of respect. And he don't treat me ... like he don't drink, he don't do drugs, he don't smoke-nothing. He is very dependable. He wants me to move in. I was supposed to move in nextmonth. I kindascared about what my dad gonna think.

Students described the males in their families by using terms like "protective," "sticking up for me," and in some instances "strict." They avoided more typical feminist phraseology to describe them, and at the same time they made efforts to rescue the chivalrous aspects of their boyfriends' behavior. One student noted, "My boyfriend likes my parents to be strict; he doesn't really want me out when I'm not with him either." [laughs] Parents and boyfriends were portrayed as defenders of women's virtue and as gatekeepers between home and the outside world (Portillos, 1997).

Other students referred to fathers and brothers fulfilling a traditional role as defenders of the family honor. Through their comments the family and its individual members were described as the repository of their complete loyalty. Marilyn said,

If somebody beat up one of my brothers or sisters and we know who it is, my brother and my dad, and my brother's friends might get together to like find those people.... If somebody gives me a hard time, they'll always stickup for me. Since I'myounger though, I don't really hang with them. They like to go out and stuff.

Students were critical of fathers who did not fulfill traditional male roles: those failing as providers, maltreating their mothers, being unavailable or unhelpful to children, or failing to help with household chores. Such criticism of fathers often led to a stress on financial independence and the need for women to be able to support themselves. Although their families wanted the students to adhere to a "Marianista" code in a social sense, they were given the message that they needed to be self-sufficient financially. For example, Monica said,

My dad told me to get a job, and well, I wanted a job for myself because they didn't buy clothes for me, ever since I was probably in about 8th grade. They probably buy me like a couple things, but I had to be depending on myself. Because I knew, I couldn't depend on them. Plus I knew they had to take care of the others, you know, my brothers and sisters. I think that's how me and my two older brothers were. We all started working, and we did anything just to get money. We went outside,

through the neighborhood, mowing lawns, selling watermelons, just any old thing that would get us money.

Rosita added:

It's hard, because my dad, he don't have nothing. He's just laying around the house. He says he cleans-he does outside a little, but not all that he says. I have to clean, and help raise the kids. Now it's getting to where I have to buy my own food. I don't really eat. And like my boyfriend used to feed me. I don't know. I just need to depend on myself right now. I'm supporting myself. I'm trying to get myself out of high school. I'm trying to get myself a car, go to college. I'm doing everything on my own, and I'm proud of myself because of what I'm doing.

Some Chicano fathers appeared not to be fulfilling the prescribed cultural role of a provider (Davis & Chavez, 1985) but attempted to maintain their influence over the family. As this disjunction weakened their traditional hierarchical role in the family, some fathers used physical power to compensate for the moral power they were losing over their daughters. Cristina said,

I used to get physically abused by my dad. But that quit happening because I had told him how I felt about it, and I didn't like getting hit so. Like as a girl, I got punched in my face. But I told him how I felt-I just hated getting treated bad and you know, I'm supposed to be respected as a girl.

They were trying to defend a traditional sense of respect for females and at the same time they were trying to fit in environments that were not

very caring toward them. It appears that gangs were used by some members to protect themselves and make others respect them. Students who mentioned gangs noted that gangs were part of their environment, but they were not their primary reference group. When asked why, Rosalita and Marla answered,

I was not going to be in it (the gang). I mean, if they're not going to go and die for you, why should I? Like me and her (Marla) we kick it with gangs.

Marla added:

For me, it's like, when I was younger, my mom, she grew up in what's called (a neighborhood name), and when I was little I used to have friends, like my mom's friends, and I grew up with their kids, and we would like consider ourselves (a gang's name). But like the older I got, I mean like after a while, it kinda got, like, old ... And like a lot of the gangsters, mostly guys, have like girlfriends that are pregnant.

In their own way these young women were trying to work toward consistency in their relationships with the males closest to them. Social workers in schools can advocate in their struggle to maintain their independence and a sense of belonging at the same time.

Las مادر. Mothers

The mothers of the students interviewed emerged as strong moral voices and as a source of family pride. Most of the students identified their mothers as their strongest role models. Rosita said,

I've learned so much from my mother. Even though she has her

problems, she's very strong. I learned from her to be responsible, independent, and not to depend on anyone. I just do everything for myself. Like my boyfriend, I don't let him do nothing for me. All the money I need I earned for myself. ... My mom's been there for me; she tried to help me. She tried to tell me what's right and wrong, but it's like hard. I mean, I get mad at her because she's with my dad. Because, I don't know, she doesn't deserve to be treated the way she is, because my dad, he like, he emotionally abuses her, verbally abuses her and it's not right. So it's just, I don't like the way my mom puts up with it. I don't think she needs to. I think she deserves more than that.

As in Rosita's case, other students expressed anger about their mothers' relationships with their partners. Although they were preaching independence and self-sufficiency to their daughters, some of them remained in unsatisfactory relationships. Marla, added succinctly: "My mother always told me, 'Always be your own person. Don't ever trust a man to do it for you.'"

Social workers can be instrumental in helping the students understand the contradictions between mothers' behaviors and words. Also, social workers can help students value the wisdom shared regardless of whether they have role models, and encourage mothers' active participation in the school setting. The students who did not note their mother as a role model tended to maintain that they had no role models and that they were self-made. The following is an example of this:

Interviewer. Who do you look up to?

Linda: I don't know. I never thought about it.

Interviewer: Can you try? Is there anyone you'd like to be like when you grow up? It doesn't have to be in the family. Even an actor or actress or movie star. Anything.

Linda: No one really. I like to be myself. I'm just the way I am. Nobody really showed me how to be this way. I'm just the way I am.

Linda was at the nontraditional end of the Mexican American cultural spectrum. A lack of connection to family meant a lack of connection to culture. Most students, however, expressed a sense of pride in being Chicanas, although none of the participants used that term specifically.

Los maestros. Teachers

There was a general perception that European American teachers either were afraid of Chicanas or Chicanos or could not relate to them. "Favorite" teachers tended to be described as "understanding" and "funny." Lisa describes:

The one I liked the best was my kindergarten teacher. Her name is Miss P. (Spanish surname). She's really nice. She's funny. She gets along easy with other people. She understands you. . . . My other favorite was my 5th grade teacher. His name is Mr. C. (non-Spanish surname). I had class with him, and um he let you slide on homework and he'll give you a chance and he really understands people and everything.

In this example it appears that the teachers' attitudes rather than their ethnicity make them likable. Teresa, however, cited ethnicity as a determining factor:

I know of one white teacher. She's prejudiced and she had, well, it was a Renaissance festival or something and there was this one white girl in my class, and everybody liked her, she was like she'd help them out, help us out and um, and I guess she was like going with a Mexican or a black person, I don't know who, but that teacher had said, "You should stick with your own race." So there's like a lot of prejudice around here, well not a lot, but there are some people.

It is interesting that Teresa uses a racial term and not a cultural one to describe the teacher. In the Southwest, the term "Anglo" is often used to differentiate "others" from Mexican Americans. In some regard Teresa's terminology follows a race-based differentiation of people that is more common among African Americans. The following focus group discussion provides more insight into the role of race in teachers' perceived attitudes toward minority students:

Roberta (speaking to the group facilitator): Are there a lot of Mexican and black teachers up there [at the university]? I would prefer to have a Mexican or black teacher.

Facilitator: What students do you have here?

Roberta: We have like that, you know black and Mexicans.

Facilitator: What are most of the teachers?

Roberta: Mostly white, I mean 'cause if they are black or Mexican then they understand you more. They know where you are coming from. I mean like white teachers...

Melissa: They're all scared, all scared of us.

Students thought that some teachers lacked interest in their (the students') educational experiences, speaking of all ethnic minority students in general, not just Chicanas and Chicanos. They perceived some white teachers as instructors with little motivation or interest in teaching them. Students elaborated:

Roberta: Like if you don't understand something, then you a stupid kid (group laughing). Like if it is a person of your race then it is different, I think they can understand you better. Like you got to explain to the white teacher, you know, they can't understand.

Melissa: Not if they are white.

Roberta: They look at you weird.

Melanie: All my teachers are white. It's hard at school, the work is all hard, and they expect too much of you. It's supposed to be like one of the top schools in the state.... I don't think they really care about the students ... they are just there for their money.

Roberta: I mean some white teachers here you know, if they have a class with a bunch of minorities. They put the assignment on the board, they don't even explain, just do it.

Melissa: Like stuff from a book, a book report, they don't explain it.

There was a consensus about the lack of rapport with teachers and a need for more Chicana or Chicano and African American teachers to improve the quality of education. They expressed a belief that teachers from ethnic minority groups would be more caring. They appeared to be tired of explaining to others who they were. Social workers can act as a bridge, or in other words, act as cultural mediators between teachers and

students. Some students added that there were some white teachers who cared and understood them. Roberta's story illustrates this belief:

They'll show them, like some white people if they live here in our neighborhoods, they take the time, they like show you and stuff. There are some that live way out in (wealthy suburbs' name) or something like that.

Roberta spoke about place of residence and not ethnicity, that those who live around us understand us better. The theme of the outsider and the insider seems to be emerging here again.

Elfuturo: The Future

Students' aspirations reflected their conviction that they needed to depend on themselves only. Trisha said, "That's why my mom said I should stay in school, so I know I can always depend on myself." With regard to future goals, they either said, "I don't know" or had plans to accomplish something beyond the barrio (for example, college, professional careers, the army, traveling).

Rosita: I just want to go on to college. . . . I just want to be somebody more. 'Cause like my whole family, my dad's part of the family is all older than me, like all my cousins and stuff and my other family, I'm practically older than everybody else, so it's like I'm stuck in the middle, and they're like too young to graduate and they're really old. They're not that old, but they already gave up on high school—they can't graduate. I'm the first one that, I know I'm gonna graduate on time. I'm going to college, I know, 'cause like my mother's work will pay for

it. Well, like we'll pay the tuition, and they'll like pay it back. I don't know what I want to major in. I used to want to be a pediatrician, but I don't know.

The students had dreams and a positive outlook on the future, drawing strength from their families, especially mothers, their communities, and their cultural background to craft an identity. Social workers can recognize and nurture these identities and provide concrete services and direction for the pursuit of dreams that the Chicana mothers may have not realized.

Summary and Discussion

The students in this study can be categorized as "high school survivors." Most of them were on track to graduate, often against great odds. Many of their classmates were no longer at school. These groups of very resilient young women were eloquent and willing to share their stories and perceptions of their realities. Their ability to formulate and share their narratives can be seen as one of their positive features. As adolescents, they naturally presented a critical portrayal of the adults in their lives, particularly their teachers and fathers. Their mothers mostly were praised and were identified as their strongest role models. On the surface mothers promoted a Marianista code but were also sharing with their daughters a feminist ideal for their future, speaking of self-reliance, family planning, independence, and plans for attaining a college degree. The young women did not address issues of gender separately from other identities that mediated their experiences at school and home (Lorber, 1998). They were in transition in that traditional culturally based gender roles

were present in their repertoire of models as they crafted their own sense of womanhood.

Ethnic identity permeated the stories about family and community, imparting a sense of pride and belonging. A sense of not belonging, however, emerged from their descriptions of school life. Stories about home and community appeared to have been gendered, whereas, in stories about school, ethnicity was the more important source of identity and one that formed the big divide among people. Ethnicity, community, and place of residence blended as one in their narratives.

They identified people who were not like them (ethnically) but who understood them because they were part of the barrio's life. Those who did not understand them were described as quick at judging Chicanas. Their opinions and attitudes were not taken seriously because theirs were seen as uninterested outsiders. They were suspicious of teachers and "white" people in general.

They were critical of their fathers and boyfriends but without making them lose face. Some contradictions emerged between their discourse about independence and their relationships with their boyfriends. They appeared to have learned not only what their mothers said to them but also other more subtle messages about what was expected from them as women. The contradictions between the two sets of messages may affect these young women's abilities to attain their dreams.

These young women shared a sense of not belonging in some non-Chicano environments, like school while, at the same time, their Mexican identity was questioned within family and community settings. They navigated within two worlds-with

different understandings and expectations about gender roles-and sometimes neither world understood nor accepted them.

More naturalistic research is needed to continue unveiling issues that young Chicanas define as important. We need to understand how they construct and explain their realities, so we can avoid imposing views from the outside. Some of the constructs emerging from this type of research can be the basis for hypotheses guiding quantitative research efforts that may allow us to test and generalize the findings. Until then the results of this study need to be interpreted with caution as they only represent the specific group of students participating in the study.

The young women in the study told us that they do not want to keep explaining who they are. School social workers should guard against ethnocentric approaches to practice, such as designing interventions that require ethnic minority students "to explain themselves" or treat them as "different" from the worker or from some artificially developed standard. We need to understand who they are and support them in their processes of becoming better dreamers.

As they shared their stories, the students identified oppression at home and school. At home and in their communities, issues related to gender roles were discussed in depth. At school, gender issues took a back stage, and ethnicity gained the spotlight. When facilitating groups at school, we need to honor those concerns in that order. To address effectively gender issues with young Chicanas, we probably need to start addressing issues of ethnicity and perceived prejudice at school. In turn, to address issues of gender inequality, we need to address contradictory messages students may

To address effectively gender issues with young Chicanas, we probably need to start addressing issues of ethnicity and perceived prejudice at school.

be exposed to without imposing approaches to gender relations that are not grounded in the personal stories of the students. We need to learn how to be better listeners. Often their stories contain implicit solutions and alternatives. While we honor their stories, we need to help them sort out the contradictions and celebrate their accomplishments. As cultural mediators social workers in the schools can support students in undertaking these sophisticated process. Young Mexican American women would benefit greatly from social workers' media-

tion, support, and advocacy as they fulfill their dreams and celebrate their identities as Chicanas.

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