

“How to Make It Here:”

**A Qualitative Study on Generational Narratives of Survival and Success Among Latino/a
and White Communities Along the US/ Mexico Border**

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Statement of the Problem

Latino/a youth dwell in amorphous borderlands in constant movement, adjusting and adapting to systems of stratification that challenge their dignity and basic rights. I intend to engage Latino/a young adults in a discussion at the intersection of society, culture, religion, education, and immigration, seeking to expose prevailing stereotypes and misconceptions about the Latino/a youth community. In addition to anti-immigrant rhetoric, Latino/a youth also face ageism, thereby creating another level of oppression. I am interested in examining how informal oral tradition of success, home, community, and family affect the second and third generations post-immigration. Through these narratives, I hope to explore how Latino/a youths are creating their own space within the cultural memory of exile and return. Guiding concerns for this study involve defining the context from which Latino/a youth respond to living in between borders and their experiences of potential liberation and oppression in religious and educative classrooms. A child raised within a literal and metaphorical borderland receives many controversial and conflicting messages regarding vocality, welcome, possibility, identity, and ability. This study is designed to identify themes and contours of these stories.

While these second and third generation young adults create their own space within the borderland, they also carry forward defining characteristics of a community in exile. One way of gaining access to these defining characteristics of the children of diaspora is through hearing the “survival narrative.” In this study, a “survival narrative” may be best understood as wisdom, advice, oral histories, directives, or counsel passed down from an older generation to a younger generation designed to help the younger generation understand and succeed in contemporary U.S. culture. By asking participants to share a story of such a conversation with one or both of their parents, or another older member of their family, in which they discussed “how to

survive/succeed in the United States,” I hope to learn about these cultural narratives and their impact on the second and third generation youth. I will contrast Latino/a survival narratives with white survival narratives to determine differences in the messages regarding education and religion as survival tools on their journey toward acquiring social capital.

Thesis and Scope

The thesis of my proposal maintains that a primary method of accumulating and transmitting social capital¹ across generations is survival narratives, and the differences my research will reveal between Latino/a and white survival narratives will expose social conditions and norms that are in no way universal or balanced. Instead of focusing strictly on the ways religious and educative institutions are complicit in the oppression of Latino/a youth, my research also strives to examine the ways these institutions may utilize Latino/a survival narratives to support the acquisition of cultural capital. The primary theories for my research will stem from social capital, social ethics, postcolonial theory, and adolescent development theory. My major theorists include Pierre Bourdieu,² Michel Foucault,³ Gloria Anzaldua,⁴ and John Wall.⁵

Of particular use will be Bourdieu’s theory of social, academic and cultural capital and the ways family as well as education and religious institutions manage and control the accumulation of capital. I am interested in the generational narratives that teach children how to negotiate social and symbolic space, and the ways U.S. institutions and “habitus”⁶ help and hinder “success.” Likewise, when Bourdieu asks, “What does our thinking owe to the fact that it

¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press: 1998,) 69.

² Ibid

³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, New York: Vintage, 1995.

⁴ Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera: the New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987.

⁵ John Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood*, Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2010.

⁶ Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*, 6.

is produced within an academic space?”,⁷ I wonder about the common construction of academic space, how it contributes to inherited ideologies and priorities, and most of all, about the “unconscious,” or perhaps “uncritically claimed,” power of the educator. I find it uncomfortably fascinating how the simple construction of a learning space, when reified over time, contributes to the mobilization and defense of social spaces and the negotiation of different forms of capital. Additionally, Bourdieu locates the family at the very center of the struggle for social capital: “The family plays a decisive role in the maintenance of the social order, through social as well as biological reproduction, that is, reproduction of the structure of the social space and social relations. It is one of the key sites of the accumulation of capital in its different forms, and its transmission between generations.”⁸

Michel Foucault’s theory of panopticism will be helpful in this regard as my research will examine how diasporic communities and Latino/a youth negotiate the “power exercised without division”⁹ of dominant power structures (especially in religious and educational institutions) and how they undergird oppressive systems:

This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings.... All this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism.¹⁰

I am interested in the ways the Foucauldian theory of surveillance explains the critical public gaze toward both the adolescent and the immigrant, and emotive experiences unearthed by

⁷ Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*, 67.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 197.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

survival narratives that help us better understand the relationship between the power dynamics of the public gaze and its emotional manifestation in the lives of Latino/a youth.

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. It is also a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. In this way, a “borderland” is not merely a geographic space, but a life experience, a way of negotiating and surviving North American culture. My research strives to expose the social capital Latino/a youth need and acquire in order to manage and negotiate these border spaces in terms of education and religion specifically, and how these social capitals enabling survival are different from white capital.

Dr. Gloria Anzaldua, who writes of borderlands and the negotiation of space and privilege, calls the Mexico-U.S. border “*una herida abierta*, or, an “open wound”, where “the third world grates up against the first and bleeds... the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country -- a border culture.”¹¹ This close proximity creates a unique culture filled with great injustice but also great potential.

The adolescent development component will come from voices such as John Wall, who has written a particularly useful study on ethics and childhood, in which he examines the fundamental rights and expectations of children who could be postured as the “keepers of societies’ dreams and the bearers of its future.” Furthermore, Julie Bettie,¹² Evelyn Parker,¹³ and C.J. Pascoe¹⁴ have all done qualitative research with adolescents in public schools and churches, and they each offer a useful template. All of them used personal interviews to gather their data

¹¹ Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera: the New Mestiza*. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987). 25.

¹² Julie Bettie, *Women Without Class*, Berkeley: University of California Press: 2003.

¹³ Evelyn Parker, Ed., *The Sacred Selves of Adolescent Girls: Hard Stories of Race, Class, and Gender*, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010.

¹⁴ C.J. Pascoe, *Dude You’re a Fag*, Berkeley: University of California Press: 2012.

on how prevailing systems affected the adolescents' perception of race, gender, class, spirituality, and oppression.

Methodology

This dissertation is a liberation ethicist qualitative project. It is rooted in constructivist qualitative inquiry, and is specifically a phenomenological project. Creswell defines phenomenology as follows: "Researchers search for essentials, invariant structure (or essence) or the central underlying meaning of the experience and emphasize the intentionality of consciousness where experiences contain both the outward appearance and inward consciousness based on memory, image and meaning."¹⁵ The point and the risk of qualitative research is that you do not know what you are going to find, and you should not presume that you know. This dissertation aims to describe a process, and to do so rigorously by analyzing patterns that emerge in the data that are gathered through interviews and observations through the lens of social ethics. It would be ethically irresponsible for me to speak on behalf of others, especially those who represent a demographic I do not represent.

Therefore, I intend to employ De La Torre's hermeneutical circle¹⁶ to analyze the data I collect. According to De La Torre, the hermeneutical circle is a paradigm to "do ethics," which is "motivated by a passion to establish justice-based relationships from which love can flow," and "begins with the lived experience of oppressive social situations and proceeds by working out a theory and then a course of action that will dismantle the mechanisms that cause oppression."¹⁷ De La Torre's hermeneutical circle consists of five steps or stages, and begins with the experience of the oppressed. The stages are observation, reflection, prayer, action, and

¹⁵ J.W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Traditions*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998), 52.

¹⁶ Miguel De La Torre, *Doing Christian Ethics from the Margin*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 58-69.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

reassessment, which lead back to observation.¹⁸ The steps are constantly evolving and self-monitoring and correcting, and serve as a method not only of analyzing the data but as a method for understanding correct practice instead of simply correct theory.

I propose to do a qualitative study with self-identified Latino/a and white young adults who live in North Texas and Colorado. I intend to collect 15-20 interviews on survival narratives handed down from both Latino/a and white families. Based on results from the pilot study,¹⁹ I hope to document discrepancies between the ways Latino/a young adult and white young adults were taught to negotiate their educations, to experience religion, and to manage authority figures. These discrepancies will reveal systemic inequality in these areas. The method employed in this research will be one-on-one interviews.

The format would be personal interviews of self-identified Latino/a and white young adults ages 18-25. I intend to set up an initial one hour interview, and send the questions/prompts one week before the interview for contemplation. After the initial interview I will follow up with a brief post-interview of about 15 minutes to offer a summary of notes and ask for corrections or additions.

I choose to interview young adults instead of children for two reasons: young adults will have a longer experience with survival narratives and the maturity and cognitive skills to critically reflect on them. I will use snowball sampling of young adults from universities, community organizations, and churches in 3-4 cities where I am already familiar with young adults in this age range.

¹⁸ De La Torre, *Doing Christian Ethics*, 69.

¹⁹ Cari Myers, *How to Make it Here: A Qualitative Study on Generational Narratives of Survival and Success Among Latino/a and White Communities Along the US/ Mexico Border*, Unpublished pilot study, University of Denver: Denver, CO, 2016.

Research Questions:

Pending proper IRB approval, my overarching research question is as follows:

“How do survival narratives contribute to the accumulation and transmission of capital across generations, and what do the differences between Latino/a and white survival narratives expose about inequality in social conditions and norms?”

Primary questions for the subjects will be the following:

Initial questions:

- Growing up, what was your family like? How many people were in your family?
- Where did you live?
- Were you close to your extended family?
- Where is your family from? What is the story behind that journey?

Deep questions:

- How did your family and community highlight your transition to adulthood?
- When you faced hard times or adversity, what messages did you receive about how to survive?
- What conversations did you have with your family about “how to make it here, “ or how to succeed?
 - At school:
 - Did your parents talk to you about homework?
 - Did your family talk to you about going to college? What did they say?
 - Did you work during school?
 - At church...
 - What did they tell you about faith and religion?
 - Were you connected to a religious tradition or community?
 - Have you ever felt excluded from a religious community?
 - Regarding authority figures:
 - What did they tell you about dealing with authority figures?
 - Did you have any experiences where you needed this advice?

Deeper questions:

- You are looking back from the end of your life and reflecting on your life in its entirety. What last piece of advice would you give to the person you love the most?
- What was the most significant advice you received and who gave it to you?
- What were your thoughts about this advice or wisdom you were given? Did you implement it or discard it? Why? What narratives will you carry forward?

Significance of the Research

My research will contribute by adding survival narratives to the body of literature on cultural variations, especially as related to youth and inequality. I am proposing that the survival narrative is a form of cultural capital which exposes inequality in religious and educative institutions. My target audience is those teaching and administering in public school systems and ministers and congregations in evangelical churches sharing geographic space with Latino/a youth. An ideal outcome would be some reappraisal of pedagogical systems undergirding the silencing of some groups and the privileging of others. A realistic outcome would be raised awareness among teachers regarding ways their classrooms are furthering the marginalized experience of these youth, and among evangelical churches to recognize the privilege they gain by the oppression of these groups. I would propose that these churches examine the ways in which they might actively engage in offsetting this imbalance.

Chapter Outline

Section 1: Section one will contain introductory materials such as the research question, the literature review, a description of my positionality, a definition of the intended audience of the dissertation, and an explanation of the methodology.

1. Chapter one will introduce my thesis, my position toward the research, the statement of the problem as it stands, and why the study focuses on religious communities and education.
2. Chapter two will include a literature review, detailing the contributions of Bourdieu's theory of social capital, Foucault's panopticon, Wall's youth development ethic, and Anzaldua's borderland theory and how each theory contributes to the research.
3. Chapter three will be focused on the methodology and will name the theorists (Creswell, Pascoe, Bettie, and Parker) who contribute to the design of the study and how they help

construct my methodology. Chapter three will also contain an explanation of specific qualitative method and specifics of the study (scope), will describe the sample chosen, will reveal goals for the study, and will forecast predictions and potential weaknesses.

Section 2: Section two is dedicated to revealing the findings of the study.

4. Chapter four will reveal what the research shows about survival narratives surrounding specific themes related to authority figures. Chapter four will describe Latino/a narratives followed by white narratives, and will conclude with emerging messages from common themes.
5. Chapter five will reveal what the research shows about survival narratives surrounding education and specific themes related to the importance of education to the family/ community and why. Chapter five will describe Latino/a narratives followed by white narratives, and will conclude with emerging messages from common themes.
6. Chapter six will reveal what the research shows about survival narratives surrounding religion and specific themes related to the functioning of community and family and the ways religion helps or hinders negotiation of borderland and adolescent development. Chapter six will describe Latino/a narratives followed by white narratives, and will conclude with emerging messages from common themes.

Section 3: Section three contains conclusions from the study and implications for U.S. religious and educational institutions, as well as potential for further research.

7. Chapter seven will use the themes emerging from the study to address the implications for religious and educational systems as they serve Latino/a and white communities. Chapter seven will conclude with potential action steps available to these institutions indicated by the findings and goals for future research.

Bibliographic Method:

My bibliography includes sources from potential comprehensive exam book lists: Adolescent Development, Social Ethics, and Postcolonial Theory. Also included are texts from classes which have directly contributed to my dissertation proposal so far: Hispanic Ethics; Postcolonial Theory; Studies in Race, Gender, and Class; Social Construction of Selfhood; Fanon, Foucault and Friends; Ethnographic Methods; Ethical Methodologies; Ethics Canon: Qualitative Methods; Education and Social Change; Religion and Diaspora; Ethics and the Agency of Youth; and Youth Ministries. I have conducted preliminary research into the DU “Dissertation and Thesis” catalogue using the key words “Latino Youth and education,” “Latino Youth and religion,” “Hispanic youth and education,” “Hispanic youth and religion,” “survival narratives,” and “Survival narratives and Latino youth” in order to access similar previous research. I have also employed these keywords in ATLA Religion, WorldCat, and EBSCO.

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