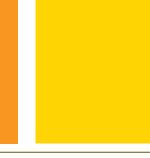# Latino men and the college presidency: an intersectional analysis of identity, power, and marginalization in higher education

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Latinx/a/o college presidents represent less than four percent of all college and university presidencies in the United States (Gagliardi et al., 2017). Although the percentage of Latinx/a/o students enrolling in postsecondary education has nearly doubled in the past decade (Snyder et al., 2018), the percentage of Latinx/a/o college presidents has decreased, with only 3.9% of the total presidencies in 2016 compared to 4.5% in 2006 (Gagliardi et al., 2017).

Although research about minoritized college presidents has grown in recent decades (Cole, 2020; Commodore et al., 2016; Eddy, 2010), less is known about the way in which their various identities interact with systems of oppression, especially higher education systems.

To conduct an in-depth exploration about how Latino college president men make sense of their various identities in higher education, this research paper was framed by the following research questions:

1. How do Latino college president men ascribe meaning to their various identities within the context of higher education leadership?
   a. In doing so, what informs their masculine identities and their understandings of it?
2. How do Latino college president men navigate systematic oppression within higher education contexts?

LITERATURE REVIEW

I operationalized intersectionality by avoiding generalizations about who Latino men are and represent (Lopez et al., 2018). Specifically, I explicitly state that Latino men experience power and oppression differently. In this study, intersectionality is operationalized to understand how Latino men who hold marginalized identities navigate higher education leadership. In addition, it is important to consider leadership and institutional context. Scholars such as Urrieta (2009) have studied how Latinx/a/o education activists navigate issues of identity and bias within the context of US schools.

Latinx/a/o leaders in US schools navigate what Urrieta refers to as "whitestream institutions" – institutions that ascribe to predominately White and Eurocentric cultural norms. Because of the history of the United States and the influence of European ethnic groups in our society and education, people of color remain minoritized even in educational settings where they are numerically larger (Blauner, 1994).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In addition to using Hurtado and Sinha (2016) intersectional lens for studying Latino men as a theoretical framework, this study also applied Chicana feminist theory. Because this study is most closely associated with operationalizing intersectionality as a mode of analysis for understanding the lived experiences of Latino college president men, I rely on scholars from other disciplines that have applied an intersectional lens for studying marginalized populations. I apply the work of Hurtado (2020) on intersectional Chicana feminisms to operationalize my use of intersectionality as an analytical framework for social justice, political orientation, and epistemological practice (Hancock, 2016).

METHODOLOGY

Phenomenology is concerned with the interpretation of lived realities or experiences, which in this study takes place through my interpretations of my participants' lived experiences in higher education (Moustakas, 1994). I use phenomenology, more specifically hermeneutical phenomenology, as a methodological approach. Over the course of 2 years, I used the following elite interview strategies to identify and recruit participants for this study (Davies, 2001): (a) leveraging existing sponsored connections from professional networks and involvement with associations, advisors, and mentors (Harvey, 2011); (b) direct and indirect connection to participants by virtue of my employment; and (3) purposive and snowball sampling (Maxwell, 2013).

To capture an in-depth understanding of the participants' lived experiences, this study used two different methods of data collection: an individual semi-structured interview and an individual unstructured interview.

FINDINGS

I present three key findings: (1) the influence of women or *mujeres influyentes* shaping identity and motivations; (2) the influence of education shaping identity and leadership pathways; and (3) bias and stereotypes associated with Latino men in leadership.

The influence of *mujeres influyentes* shaping identity and motivations

All participants talked about the central role that family plays in their lives and careers. Over half of the participants talked about the vital role those influential women or *mujeres influyentes* in their family played in shaping their identity and motivations. Participants' strong views of *mujeres influyentes* in particular and other key relatives (e.g., grandfathers) served as key markers of identity and career/educational motivators. Some of these relationships developed naturally as a result of having strong bonds with their relatives or in some instances as a result of being under abusive relationships. Most importantly, *mujeres influyentes* played a crucial role in shaping their core values (e.g., empathy, love, humility) which ultimately shaped their leadership styles and perspectives.

The influence of education in shaping identity and leadership pathways

All participants talked about the transformational role of education in shaping their identities and leadership pathways. All 12 presidents agreed that having a terminal degree was vital to achieving the college presidency. However, while this expectation is becoming more ubiquitous across all individuals who are interested in achieving the college presidency (Gagliardi et al., 2017), participants talked about the necessity of having a terminal degree because of the likelihood of being questioned about your credentials as a Latino man. This belief was even more prevalent for working-class, first-generation college student backgrounds, which was the

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majority of the participants.

Biases and stereotypes associated with Latino men in leadership

As underscored by one participant, there are societal stereotypes associated with the profile of a college president (e.g., white, heterosexual, man). He elaborated that this stereotype is exacerbated by negative media depictions of Latino men. According to most participants, negative stereotypes associated with Latino men are not helpful to their career prospects and ability to lead. Participants also talked about the various microaggressions and racist incidents they faced, particularly earlier in their career when they did not occupy positions of high power and influence. Several also talked about being careful around using Spanish, even though having Spanish language proficiency was clearly an asset to their jobs, especially for those who worked in schools and regions with a high immigrant and Latinx/a/o populations.

DISCUSSION

Participants from this study talked about how their intersecting identities, core values, and perceptions of masculinity were informed by *mujeres influyentes* in their families. They drew motivation from honoring the lives of their mothers and *mujeres influyentes* in their life, which is consistent with research about the significance of maternal influence and Latino men's inner motivations, including their desire to honor their mothers' sacrifices. Participants' close relationships with family members also added to Patron's (2020) assertion about optimistic and assets-based understandings of Latinx/a/o family involvement and support, this time from the perspective of senior leaders. This study found that participants were highly aware of how potentially problematic notions of certain masculinities (e.g. image of being a "tough guy," fear of being vulnerable) could have interfered with their ascension to the presidency.

Participants described the role that education had in their lives and their career trajectories. Moreover, graduate education played an integral role in the process of socialization and career advancement, in addition to how participants view their notions of masculinity within the context of higher education. While participants were able to talk about gendered experiences that they experienced earlier in their life, it was generally not until graduate school that they were able to isolate how their racial and masculine identities interacted with one another while shaping the way in which they perceived their surrounding environments. Critical to this research, participants also talked extensively about how they leveraged their education and identity to overcome systems of oppression, namely higher education systems and neoliberal constructs or ideologies (Singh, 2021).

These stereotypes and biases highlight the pervasive culture that prevails in higher education settings where White cultural norms and ideologies are perceived as the standard. These men often felt the need to "play the game" while being careful not to become a "*vendido*" or "sellout." Thus, by speaking the "university vernacular" while staying true to who you are and your *cultura*, these men navigated higher education spaces very vigilantly, which is also consistent with recent literature on faculty of color (i.e. pretenure, tenured, adjunct) in leadership positions, as well as Latinx/ a/o faculty who are men (Salinas et al., 2020).

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

First, research shows that leadership development programs in the P-20 pipeline have garnered the attention of educational practitioners and scholars. Participants in this study talked about the meaningful interactions they had with family members and educators from a young age, and how these interactions shaped their identities and ability to overcome systems of oppression. Instead of waiting until graduate school or later in life like the participants in this study, institutions and educational leaders should develop more formal opportunities or spaces for men of color to explore their leadership potential and identity development from a young age.

Second, this study led to revisiting scholarship and practice related to racial bias and stereotypes in educational settings. This implication is twofold. First, in terms of research implications, more scholarly efforts should be aimed towards understanding why and how presidential search processes continue to select mostly White cisgender men for college presidencies across the country, even though student populations reflect a different demographic reality. Second, search firms and search committee processes must adopt research-based practices to inform how their searches processes are conducted. Furthermore, these search committees ought to be made up of individuals that reflect their student populations, including race, gender identities, abilities, and ideological diversity.

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