

Introduction

Latina Girls Transforming Cultures, Contexts, and Selves

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I have to stick up for myself, because if I don't they're going to . . . you know how girls have been treated unfairly a lot, so when I think about me being a girl I want people to start respecting my sex.

—Fourteen-year-old Mexican American girl
in northern California

What do we know about Latina girls? Based on national reports (e.g., Coalition of Hispanic Health and Human Services Organizations [COSSMHO], 1999), the common perception of a Latina adolescent is a girl who makes poor choices and who will likely drop out of school, become a teenage mother, or be the girlfriend of a gang member. Despite this popular perception, most Latina girls do not fit the negative images typically portrayed in the media. Regardless, most research on Latina girls focuses on teenage pregnancy, depression, violent and pathological behavior, and suicide. Since research and news articles overwhelmingly focus on negative behaviors, little is known about the majority of girls who are problem-free or “fully engaged” in their environment and well-being (Pittman et al., 2003). As a result, there is little to guide teachers, adult allies, or parents on how to support Latina girls to help them succeed and to make positive contributions to their communities.

This volume is a “wake-up call” to practitioners and researchers that most Latina girls do make positive life choices, and many transform the

homes, schools, and communities where they experience discrimination, limited opportunities, and institutionalized racism into safer, more equitable spaces.

Who Are Latina Girls?

To be consistent with current terminology, we define girls as Latina if they have at least one parent whose country of origin is in South or Central America, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, or the Dominican Republic. We use the term “Latina” because it includes women whose origin is Mexican, Central and South American, and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. We also use the term to recognize and acknowledge the struggle for self-identity that Latinas who reside primarily in the Western region of the United States have undergone. However, some authors in this volume have chosen to refer to Latina girls as Hispanics.

Placing Latinas under one heading may appear problematic because they have distinct migration and cultural histories, as well as different levels of education and income. Research has only begun to tease apart the implications of these differences and how they impact the self-identity and self-development of Latina girls (Epstein, Botvin, and Diaz, 2002; Erkut and Tracy, 2002). While we do not address the topic of labeling specifically in any of the chapters, the intent of this book is to contribute to the field of positive Latina self-identity.

The need for this book is clear. Latinos are the fastest-growing racial ethnic minority in the United States. Latina girls now constitute the largest minority group of girls in the country, making up 15.2 percent of the total number of American girls (COSSMHO, 1999). Currently, Latinos make up a large proportion of the population under age eighteen in many of the largest school districts across the United States: 65 percent in Los Angeles, 50 percent in Dade County Florida, 53 percent in Albuquerque, New Mexico, 49 percent in Denver, 47 percent in Tucson, 35 percent in Chicago, and 24 percent in Boston (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001a). While these populations are growing rapidly, there is a lack of empirical data available to guide services, education, and advocacy campaigns for these young girls.

Latina girls living in the United States have unique challenges and strengths as a function of living in what Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) calls the borderlands. That is, these young women have the unique opportunity to

incorporate their cultural traditions with mainstream U.S. dominant culture. This can include coordinating cultural traditions with school and peer cultures (Cooper et al., 1998; Denner and Dunbar, 2004) and sustaining their family unit by being in charge of the family's communication with the English-speaking world (Orellana, 2003; Weisskirch and Alva, 2002). At the same time, they often must respond to low expectations by others in order to pursue their goals and stay connected to their culture (Denner et al., 2005).

Latina girls also have the opportunity to examine their cultural values and beliefs against the dominant mainstream U.S. culture and to create themselves as transcultural individuals. The term "transculturation" is defined as a multidimensional construct involving social interrelationships, language, media use, participation in rituals, and group identification (Ortiz-Torres, Serrano-Garcia, and Torres-Burgos 2000). Transculturation is different from the term "biculturalism" in that people who are bicultural share or fuse two cultures. Transcultural Latinas identify with one culture and also incorporate behaviors from another culture. The transcultural process is complex and is characterized by simultaneous behaviors, perceptions, and cognitions that could have different, even contradictory, manifestations as these young girls interact with the dominant U.S. mainstream culture. This process of transculturation presents both challenges and opportunities for Latina girls.

Research on Latinas

The last ten years have seen an explosion in research on female development but few positive studies of Latina girls. Books like *Those Loud Black Girls* (Fordham, 1993) and *Raising Their Voices* (Brown, 1998) show how African American and European American girls question, subvert, and accept social and structural constraints. A few books have focused on Latina girls' high-profile risk behaviors such as gang involvement (e.g., Dietrich, 1998; Sikes, 1998). Some recent books on Latino children (e.g., Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco, 2002; Stanton-Salazar, 2001) study strengths in the lives of U.S. Latinos but do not focus specifically on gender. The only existing volume of research to focus on girls' strengths that includes some chapters on Latinas is *Urban Girls* (Leadbeater and Way, 1996). One recent book titled *Women without Class: Girls, Race, and Identity* (Bettie, 2003) shows how Latina and white adolescents negotiate

gender, class, and culture through an ethnographic study of students at one high school.

A large body of research on Latina adults in the United States challenges simplistic notions that a person's culture or ethnic background causes certain behaviors or identities. These studies use a structural and social psychological perspective to critically examine gender and power over time. For example, several books include research on how Latina women build from cultural strengths to overcome obstacles (e.g., Espín, 1999; Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Romero, Hondagneu-Sotelo, and Ortiz, 1997). A recent book by Hurtado (2003), *Voicing Chicana Feminisms: Young Women Speak Out on Sexuality and Identity*, shows how the values of familism and *respeto* do not impart a unidirectional influence on how people live and develop their identities. Instead, through a critical analysis of multiple systems of oppression, Hurtado describes how Chicana feminist thought is situated at the borderlands, where a critical consciousness allows women to move across borders. She also reminds us that border crossing sometimes results in a cost to one's sense of self. The current volume adds the experiences of Latina girls to this growing library of books that critically analyze gender, context, and migration across borders.

Research has not kept up with the rising numbers of Latino youth, and the few published articles are scattered across many discipline-based journals and books, making it difficult to get an overview of the field. When there are debates that attempt to integrate findings and advance theory, they typically focus on how Latinas differ from women in other ethnic groups, and whether acculturation increases risk (e.g., removes protective cultural values) or decreases risk (as a result of increased family income). Most of this research uses a comparative model which assumes that Latinas have an inherent deficit when compared with European American girls and tells us little about the girls' lives.

We include here a few findings from comparative studies in order to challenge the myth that by the time Latina girls are eighteen they will be in trouble, simply because of their heritage or culture. For example, only 32 percent of Latina adolescents have had sexual intercourse by age eighteen, compared with 35 percent of European American and 65 percent of African American girls (Blum et al., 2000), and rates of eating disorders among Latinas are similar to those of other ethnic groups (Granillo, Jones-Rodriguez, and Carvajal, 2005). School dropout remains an area of concern, with 23 percent of Latinas not completing high school, compared with 7 percent of European American and 11 percent of African American

girls (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001b). But even here, research fails to account for the diversity within racial and ethnic groups. And we know little about the vast majority—77 percent—of U.S. Latinas who *do* complete high school.

We have chosen to avoid using a comparison model in this book because it is inevitably a cultural deficit model that results in one group being positioned as superior (usually the majority group) and one group being positioned as deficient (usually the minority group). Instead, we look at variation and commonalities within the group we call Latinas. Following suggestions by Cooper et al. (1998), this book tells a detailed story about Latina girls' lives rather than how they differ from other ethnic groups. We believe this information is more useful for developing programs and policies to support these girls' positive development, and for generating research and theory that give voice to stories that have not been heard.

The Theoretical Context

The information in the current volume is crucial for helping programs and schools build resiliency and empowerment and for informing research and theory. A popular mantra attributed to Karen Pittman is “problem free is not fully prepared.” We are not naive enough to suppose that the girls in this book are “problem free.” Many come from households and communities where limited resources, fear of crime, and physically demanding work create daily stress and health problems. However, the girls in these chapters are more prepared than many to confront life's challenges because they are actively engaged in transforming systems of oppression and creating their own language of well-being. As suggested by many (Galambos and Leadbeater, 2000; Gibbs, 1998), there is a dire need for research to examine the normal developmental processes of ethnic minority adolescents and the ways they succeed rather than how they fail. To this end, the chapters in this book illuminate not only the challenges these young women face but also how they handle those challenges.

Several theoretical perspectives help us position the research in this book within a larger conversation about culture and adolescent development. Ecological systems theories (Bronfenbrenner, 1989) describe development as a process that occurs as people interact with their immediate (e.g., family) and more distal (e.g., school) contexts. Theories of social

capital have been used to understand the role of schooling and academic achievement among Latino students. Research shows how families, peers, and institutional brokers provide both instrumental and emotional support to help youth avoid risks and achieve their goals (Denner et al., 2005; Denner et al., 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Theories of identity challenge the utility of demographic categories for describing their life experiences. Phinney (1996) argues that it is critical to examine the “subjective sense of ethnic group membership (i.e., ethnic identity)” to understand what importance, if any, group membership has for individuals. Finally, theories of multiple worlds describe how youth move between their homes, schools, and communities (Cooper et al., 1998; Phelan, Davidson, and Yu, 1997). In all these theories, competence is not a static part of an individual’s personality; it is an aspect of the person’s smooth movement between the roles, practices, and expectations in each world. These theoretical frameworks provide much of the backdrop for research on the institutions, relationships, and personal characteristics that shape Latina girls’ lives.

Overview of the Book

This book brings together new research on Latina girls across disciplines to highlight the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, and social class to provide a more complete, nuanced, and accurate account of these girls’ lives and lived experiences than has been available up to this point. Each chapter in the volume critically examines the people and environments in which these young women live, the schools they attend, the programs in which they participate, and the homes in which they live. The authors invite the reader to witness the girls’ lives by highlighting the ways they negotiate decision making across risks (e.g., poverty and pressures to have sex), opportunities (e.g., community programs and extended family), and expectations (e.g., gender role expectations from family, peers, religion, and community).

This volume also updates research on gender role norms in today’s Latino families. Until now, most studies have referenced relatively dated studies (e.g., Vazquez-Nuttall, Romero-Garcia, and de Leon, 1987) to support a static view of traditional gender roles and the prevalence of machismo in Latino culture. The chapters here show the complex ways that

gender roles get played out in contemporary Latino families, and how Latina adolescents are negotiating them.

This book includes research on Latinas from across the United States, focusing primarily on regions in California, New York, Connecticut, Chicago, and Texas. It presents descriptions of the lives of Latina girls from diverse backgrounds with regard to country of origin, generation/immigration status, rural and urban setting, and social class. The authors use a range of methodological and theoretical approaches from psychology, anthropology, sociology, geography, public health, ethnic studies, and women's studies. Across chapters, there are different and complementary data sources, including surveys, interviews, observations, and focus groups. At the same time, all maintain a focus on the dynamics through which Latinas explore identities and confront the challenges in their lives.

No one book can represent the full range of Latina girls' experiences in the United States. Due to space constraints and lack of available research, we have not addressed certain topics in depth. These include the role of religion in girls' lives, bilingualism, the *quinceañera* (fifteenth birthday celebration), Latinas in the Southwest (Arizona) and Florida (Miami), and the lives of girls in centers of new immigration such as Georgia and North Carolina. Neither do we include chapters on lesbian and bisexual Latina girls, or on those who are working to transform systems of oppression that go beyond their immediate communities. In addition, there are no studies of Latinas who have one non-Latino parent, and few chapters focus on Latina girls who are not of Mexican descent. We hope this book will encourage those who are conducting research with these populations to add those voices to the conversation.

The goal of this volume is to challenge the stereotype of the troubled Latina girl in a family with traditional gender roles. This book was created in an effort to build a research base to inform both theory and practice. As stated by Fine and coauthors (2000, p. 125), we aim to "contribute to a reshaping of the 'common sense' about" Latina girls. To this end, we bring together research on the majority of young Latinas who tend to choose positive and healthy behaviors and report happiness in their lives, many of whom are working to improve their lives and the lives of others. Each chapter provides examples of how girls regularly transform their relationships and institutions in order to flourish and succeed as they face interpersonal and institutional challenges. The chapters challenge much of what appears in the media about these young women being in "crisis" and

instead focus on the issues and experiences that characterize the majority of Latina girls. Our focus is primarily on adolescent girls, aged twelve to eighteen, and on studies that provide us with the most up-to-date information on Latina girls living in the United States.

This is the first book to pull together research on the positive aspects of Latina girls' lives, and we consider it an important first step. Together, the chapters in this book address the following broad questions:

- What are the specific challenges Latina girls in the United States face in the early twenty-first century?
- What are the ways that girls are actively responding to these challenges?
- What strategies do they use to negotiate healthy decisions and create opportunities?
- How are girls' experiences affected by culturally based gender expectations from Latino culture and the broader mainstream U.S. culture?

The Organization of the Book

The book is organized around four developmental processes that are essential for Latina girls to thrive during adolescence. These include negotiating family relationships, overcoming institutional barriers, accessing institutional support, and developing initiative. Arranging the book in this format allows us to highlight and investigate the complex, creative strategies that Latinas use to negotiate in and around expectations from their family, peers, and the wider community.

Part 1: Negotiating Family Relationships

Research on families typically describes how parents influence their children. The chapters in this section push beyond this dynamic to look at relational processes and how children transform and get support from family members, peers, and teachers. The four chapters in this part by Guzmán et al., Ayala, Gallegos-Castillo, and Romo et al. describe how girls actively participate in the socialization process by challenging gender role expectations and negotiating new cultural norms in interaction with their mothers. The girls in these studies are resisting oppressive traditional cul-

tural norms, especially in regard to gender roles. In some cases, they transform traditional gender roles as a way to both resist and accept them.

The chapters show how girls are constructing identities and creating spaces in response to limits and negative expectations about who they should be. They are developing pride in their ethnic identity and building a bicultural identity that embraces and resists expectations from both cultures. The chapters also show how relationships are sources of both challenge and support for making decisions about sexuality.

Part 2: Overcoming Institutional Barriers

This part includes chapters by Lopez, Hyams, Rivera and Gallimore, and Marlino and Wilson that describe how Latina girls are actively engaged with their institutional and community contexts. The research describes the different ways that Latinas respond to expectations about their behavior in their schools, and how they seek out people and institutions to assist them to achieve their goals. In particular, the chapters show that Latina girls often have high aspirations for their education and career possibilities, see education as a path to upward mobility, and are able to seek out resources that can help them pursue their goals. These chapters also describe the ways in which helping others is a salient part of how they think about their futures. In addition, for some girls, sexuality is a site for negotiating institutional barriers.

Part 3: Accessing Institutional Support

This part includes three chapters that describe community- and school-based efforts to support Latina girls. Strategies to engage girls include critical reflection, nurturing cultural literacy, building on aspirations, and identity exploration. Harper et al. describe a program that encourages girls to challenge cultural and community norms about sexuality when they interfere with girls' ability to make healthy choices for themselves. The chapter by Reyes portrays a cultural literacy group in which Puerto Rican girls negotiate and learn about their histories. Finally, Fairlie and London describe the findings from a national study of computer and Internet access. Their data show a dramatic increase in Latina girls' use of technology in the last few years, and they highlight programs designed to increase the number of Latinas in the sciences, engineering, and technology. The authors of these three chapters show how Latina girls

are avoiding risk by challenging gender stereotypes, accessing opportunities, and transforming out-of-school spaces into places of identity development, opportunity, and critique.

Part 4: Developing Initiative

The three chapters in this part describe the ways Latina girls maintain a positive view of their lives, even when faced with challenging circumstances. Developing initiative includes personal strategies (Larson, 2000) such as reframing other peoples' expectations of who they should be and making positive choices. The chapters provide examples of how Latina girls are confronted with expectations from adults and peers about who they should be and how to behave. In response, they develop strategies that include moving between languages and roles to succeed in and be a bridge to different social and cultural worlds. Girls also find strength in their cultural identity.

The chapter by Thakral and Vera focuses on subjective well-being and challenges the stereotype that poor Latinas are not happy or satisfied with their lives. Flores describes how Latina girls respond to pressure to engage in risky behaviors by drawing on cultural values and relationships and by developing identities that help them avoid engaging in sex and drug use. Russell and Lee reframe our perceptions of teen mothers to show how some Latinas have used the birth of their child as an opportunity to make positive changes in their lives.

Conclusion

To solicit chapters for this volume, we put out a national call for abstracts, through listservs and e-mail letters to researchers who have published on Latino/a adolescents. We targeted people in the fields of psychology and health that we know best, and we sought out researchers in other disciplines whom we had never met. As a result, the chapters in this book reflect much of the best social science research that focuses on the positive aspects of Latina girls' lives, but that pool of research is still quite limited. Most research still focuses on risks in Latina girls' lives, not on the ways these girls are succeeding. The reason for this lies in the lack of research funding to study girls' strengths. Some of those who do write about how Latinas succeed have had to fit this story within a larger study designed

to address teen pregnancy, delinquency, or depression. The fact that we found fourteen chapters is testament to the creativity and commitment of those authors.

In the tradition of qualitative research, we consider it important to acknowledge the influence of our own histories and training. Jill was raised in a two-parent, middle-class family, the daughter of a Cuban-born, Jewish mother and two New York–raised parents. Her interest in Latina girls comes from being challenged to have a critical consciousness about gender and the role of privilege, as well as living in the state of California, where Latino culture is an increasingly dominant influence on the food, language, and attitude of the population. Bianca was born in Guatemala and immigrated to California as a young girl with her mother and younger brother. She has firsthand experience with what it is like to negotiate Latino culture and dominant U.S. mainstream culture. Bianca is clear that the process of transculturalism is dynamic and dialectical, providing a strong education in human behavior. Her interests in Latina girls stem from her commitment to give voice to their positive experiences as a way to create social justice for Latina women. In the last chapter of this book, we describe our position on this topic in relation to the book in more detail.

In conclusion, this book is about hope, or *esperanza* in Spanish. It is about our hope that Latina girls living in the United States will continue to succeed, and that the public will see beyond the cultural and gender stereotypes that are currently used to characterize Latina girls and restrict their opportunities. We offer this book with the expectation that by gathering an array of research studies into one volume, we will bring to the fore the experiences of the majority of Latina girls who are choosing positive and healthy behaviors and are working to improve their lives in tangible ways. We also believe the book will help to create a climate in which research is used to support girls in their quest to negotiate positive life pathways. Finally, we see this book as a space for girls' voices to be heard, so Latinas and non-Latinas alike can begin to recognize and repeat others' strategies to maintain their culture while resisting stereotypes and transforming systems of oppression.

This book was produced in the spaces between family (husbands, children, and other relatives), friends, and work (both paid and unpaid). During the time this book was being conceived and compiled, Jill gave birth to a daughter. As we submit this book to the publisher, Jill's daughter has just turned one year old. For the last six months, she has spent weekday

mornings in the care of a woman named Esperanza, who gives her undivided attention and love, even while her own children are in the care of her sister. As Romero (1997) so beautifully articulates, we feel it is critical that this book does not obscure the social order that is constructed between the Latina women and the white women and children they care for. Clearly, this book would not have been possible without Esperanza and her family.

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