

POWER, BORDERS, AND IDENTITY FORMATION: UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD OF CHICANA/O STUDENTS*

Marc Pizarro

The struggle for definition has not only defined the Chicana/o experience itself, but research on Chicana/o populations as well. The term “Chicano” emerged from the social upheaval of 1960s America as a symbol of the efforts of Mexican-descent peoples in the United States to define themselves.¹ The reality lived by the Chicanas/os of the 1960s was that they were neither “American” nor “Mexican,” neither white nor black, and often, simply invisible. Through the development of a discourse that addressed the marginalization of Chicanas/os (occurring via external and inaccurate definitions of the group) the Chicana/o experience itself became better understood in all its intricacies.

This discourse led to an increasing awareness of the importance of identity in understanding the Chicana/o experience and the need to deconstruct identity and its centrality to both Chicana/o failure and success. Unfortunately, however, attempts at this deconstruction have continually suffered from an inability to incorporate the complexities of Chicana/o identity that became blatantly apparent in the wars waged over self-definition (as seen, for example in the arguments over the proper ethnic label to identify Mexican-descent individuals living in the United States). Contemporary research into Chicana/o identity has been severely limited by its own, often unacknowledged, struggle with defining that which it has analyzed. While researchers have recently placed increasing emphasis on the importance of social and ethnic identity in understanding the position and future of Chicanas/os (as well as other “minorities”), the fact remains that just as the complexities and realities of life on the margin have made uniform self-definition for Chicanas/os all but impossible, these same complexities have confined the world of identity explored in research to narrow corners of the Chicana/o experience. Chicana/o identity research has thus over-emphasized analyses of identity grounded in self-chosen ethnic la-

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bels, ethnic values, and/or ethnic practices; none of which address the depth of Chicana/o identity.

After looking at the obstacles confronting researchers, this paper attempts to move towards deeper levels of understanding Chicana/o identity through qualitative analyses of identity formations among Chicana/o high school and college students. The students' own discussions of their experiences reveal the complexity of identity, the themes that remain constant across individual experience, and the way in which power is central to Chicana/o identity formation.

Contemporary Research on Chicana/o Identity Formation

The two main arenas in which Chicana/o identity has been best explored are social psychology and post-colonial social theory. The work in each area has made fundamental contributions to our understanding of the Chicana/o experience and identity. At the same time, however, each has also been constrained by specific limitations.

Post-colonial theorists have pushed the discourse on identity forward by suggesting that ethnic/racial, gender, sexual and class identities are neither static nor firm; rather, they are continuously intersecting and evolving as a function of various social forces. A number of writers have effectively demonstrated the most current manifestations of the fluid identities which constitute our perceptions of self and others. The theorists who have specifically looked at Chicana identity have: exposed the interwoven nature of sexual, gender, racial, and religious identities,² articulated the contradictory and shifting nature of this identity as influenced by the inherent borders integral to the Chicana experience,³ and suggested that by acknowledging the power of "Xicana" identity as an evolving and syncretic embodiment of (in particular) spiritual and sexual identities we can move towards recreating identity and transforming Chicana experiences through imagination.⁴

While these are powerful progressions in our understanding of the Chicana/o experience, the core of this discourse exists on a theoretical plane which is inapplicable to our understanding of the daily manifestations of these social creations. Thus, while some of the most poignant revelations within the discourse on post-colonial identity have advanced contemporary thought and understanding of the social phenomena at play in constructing the "Chicana/o," they have not suggested, in any thorough fashion, how we might dissect these

forces to understand their local essence and, most importantly, use that understanding to assist Chicana/o communities.

At the same time that these theories have evolved, a number of more applied analyses of ethnic identity (using Social Identity Theory and other social psychological frameworks, for example) have sought quantification of the links between specific aspects of identities and other individual characteristics as a means of discovering the connection between ethnic identity and behavior. While this work has suggested important considerations for educators, by pointing out the potential links between cultural ties and effective negotiation of the school culture, it is often accompanied by tendencies to oversimplify the construct of identity into labels and categories that betray the progress made in the Chicana theory just mentioned. Oftentimes, this work attempts to find meaning and interpret individuals' lives through statistically significant relationships between variables that do not allow the researcher or the reader to discover the essence, the evolution, and the impact of identity formation on Chicanas/os.

Carlos Arce initiated critique of this work 15 years ago, as he explained that:

Virtually all studies of Chicano identity have been too exclusively focused on the ethnic aspects, without adequately examining an individual's private definition and categorization of his or her total social identity. If such a distinction were adopted, it would be possible to assess the importance of ethnic identity in the broader framework of a multidimensional social identity. For Chicanos, ethnic identity is not simple or unidimensional. It potentially operates on multiple levels (on a private to public continuum), each of which has several components that may be ethnic in general character.⁵

Unfortunately, much of this critique is still valid with regard to the most contemporary social psychological research on identity. Virtually all of the empirical research on Chicana/o identity bases analyses on statistical relationships between quantified variables that relate to small facets of ethnic identity. For example, Hurtado, Gurin and Peng make important innovations by considering socio-historical contexts and macro-social forces in understanding ethnic identity, but they base their findings on links between individuals' self-chosen labels, cultural loyalty measures, and background factors.⁶ Similarly, Bernal and Martinelli edited an important work on Mexican American ethnic identity that, while providing some important insights into identity through interdisciplinary works, did not address the social processes involved in multi-level identity formation (and instead looked at relationships like the connection between

perceptions of the out-group and self-perceptions, and between demographic characteristics, self-chosen labels and gender).⁷

Earlier, Rodriguez and Gurin engaged in a project that further highlighted the methodological obstacles confronting identity research. As they pointed out, their analysis of the links between ethnic identity, inter-group interaction and political consciousness is limited by their use of labels as ethnic identity indicators and by their inability to assess inter-ethnic interaction beyond its frequency (thus not considering "context, type, or quality of contact").⁸ These are limitations faced in other research such as García's early work on Chicana/o ethnic identity and its connection to political consciousness, and more recent work by Hurtado and Hurtado, Gonzalez, and Vega, considering the relationships between ethnic identity and academic performance among Latinas/os.⁹

Just as important, this research overlooks the contributions of Chicana post-colonial theory as it does not integrate analyses that consider the intersection of different facets of Chicana/o social identity. By focusing exclusively on ethnic identity, this research is unable to understand the whole of social identity and the way in which other facets of these identities interact with and possibly reinforce ethnic identity.¹⁰

Nevertheless, this research has been crucial to the emerging construct of identity in that it has moved toward increasingly complex models of explaining Chicana/o identity.¹¹ In so doing, it has pushed researchers to try to understand how ethnic identity is created and connected to individuals' daily lives and behaviors. Unfortunately, the methodological approaches undertaken in this research have not matched the complexity of these models and have even skirted around the models themselves because of the difficulty of quantitatively analyzing processes of identity formation. Still, these efforts suggest the possibility of conducting research through which identity can be more fully understood with regard to its influences, formative processes, and multiple manifestations.

Gurin, Hurtado and Peng, for example, address the limitations of research that analyzes identity and its potential influences by using ethnic labels and correlational data, and they also discuss the potential intersection of different identities and the importance of developing methods that are more responsive to the nuances of individuals' actual lives and the influences on them.¹² Phinney also mentions the importance of analyzing context in future identity research

to understand the linkages between ethnic identity and gender, familial characteristics, socioeconomic status, and the ethnic diversity in the community.¹³ In addition, Saenz and Aguirre discuss situationally shifting identities influenced by context and inter-ethnic interaction.¹⁴ Knight et al. provide perhaps the most comprehensive example of the contributions of previous identity research in this area. While acknowledging the difficulties and shortcomings of this research, proposing a social cognitive model of ethnic identity development, and suggesting further exploration and testing of the model, they explain the progress they have made in their work:

This model suggests that the social ecology [of students' lives] is causally linked to the content that is socialized by familial and nonfamilial agents. The socialization content is, in turn, causally linked to the nature of children's social and personal identities, including ethnic identity, and the acceptance of ethnic values that guide behavior. The model also suggests that children's cognitive development and socialization practices through which the socialization content is transmitted are causally linked to the timing of the development of their ethnic identity and its respective behaviors.¹⁵

They go on to add, however, that

It is apparent that although there has been considerable research on Mexican American-Anglo American differences and recent research on the Mexican American family, *there has been little research bearing directly upon many of the most important features of the model.*¹⁶ (emphasis added)

Overall, as this final statement highlights, while work in Chicana post-colonial theory and Chicana/o social identity theory has made critical progress in the thinking surrounding identity, both areas have made fundamental sacrifices in the means by which they attempt to explain the social phenomena at work in the formation of identities among Chicana/o communities. In short, although there are insights into a number of potential relationships between identity, background factors and behaviors, there is still no clear understanding of what constitutes Chicana/o identity and the means by which Chicana/o identities are formed.

Qualitatively Operationalizing Chicana/o Identity

Before turning to the deconstruction of Chicana/o identity, clear definitions of the terms employed in the analyses are required. First of all, Chicana/o refers to females and males of Mexican descent living in the United States.¹⁷ Chicana/o

identity refers to the social identity that Chicanas/os establish for themselves. This social identity is simply how given individuals define themselves in their own social world, specifically with regard to social groups in which individuals place themselves (and with which they interact), along with the conscious significance they place on these groups and interactions. Thus, Chicana/o identity theoretically includes the identity of all Chicanas/os, including those who define themselves as upper-middle class or as homosexuals, for example, and those who do not consciously ethnically identify. It also includes Chicanas/os who define themselves as Catholic, Mexicano and working class simultaneously, as another example. This investigation, therefore, considers the self-perceptions of all types and categories of Chicanas/os so as to understand the full complexity of Chicana/o identity formations.

The definition of Chicana/o identity used in this project began with the development of a general framework of Chicana/o identity that attempted to incorporate all the potential arenas of Chicana/o identity formations identified in the literature, and in interviews with the participants. It was determined that family identity is important, but that it is a precursor to social identity, and that school identity is also important (with regard to outcomes), but that this is heavily influenced by familial and social identities in general. Thus, the construct of Chicana/o identity included the potentially significant realms of: class, community, gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, and religion/spirituality (along with family and school).¹⁸ Additionally, participants included other realms of identity formation when relevant. In short, the construct of Chicana/o identity, as operationalized in this paper, encompasses those social realms in which Chicanas/os have the potential for significant interactions with others. The specific means of operationalizing identity departed from those employed in quantitative analyses which define the terms that determine the nature of an individual's ethnic identity. Instead, the students were asked about the social issues that were important to them to discover the role of different arenas of identity within their overall social identities, and, more importantly, they were asked to explain who they are in their own minds and which identities were most pertinent in their lives. The rationale underlying this approach was the need for researchers to understand how individuals define their own identities and why, so as to avoid defining students' identities through measures that are unable to grasp the value, meaning, and influences behind an individual's response to specific

statements related to identity. In the project, Chicana/o students at a major university, a community college and a high school in metropolitan Los Angeles completed surveys and participated in interviews. Through open- and closed-ended questions, the students identified their self-constructed identities and the forces at work in their development.

As mentioned, students' identities were understood through their responses to the social issues they deemed important (such as racism, sexism, and community issues) as well as who they said they were in their social worlds. These issues were covered repeatedly in each of the research tools through multiple questions (asking students, for example, to identify the most important issues in their social lives from a list as well as simply asking students to define themselves in their social world). Students spent thirty to forty-five minutes completing surveys and those interviewed spent one to one and one-half hours discussing these issues, while some also participated in a second interview of similar length. The interviewees were also challenged with regard to the strength of their beliefs through discussions of opposing views. Each individual student's responses were then analyzed to determine the nature of their identities and the influences on them. Afterward, each student's experiences were incorporated into an all-encompassing model. The analyses in this paper are based on data collected through surveys with over 150 Chicana/o students, as well as interviews with 13 students.

The Sample

Students volunteered to participate in the study after the author made presentations explaining the project in their classes (during the winter of 1996). The total sample surveyed included 158 Mexican descent students (37 from a four-year university, 37 from a community college, 32 high school seniors, and 52 high school freshmen).

The four year university is a major research institution and, at the time of the study, 13.01 percent of the student population was Chicana/o, while 58.8 percent was white. At the university, the author recruited participants through the Chicana/o Studies classes being offered, attending all of the larger classes in Chicana/o Studies (10 in all), but also sought participants in three non-Chicana/o Studies classes which had significant numbers of Chicana/o students. These classes were an education course and a sociology course, both of which

dealt with minority issues, and a Spanish class for native speakers. The Chicana/o Studies classes were about 90 percent Chicana/o, while the non-Chicana/o Studies courses averaged about 30 percent. Later discussions with participants indicated that the students in Chicana/o Studies courses included Chicana/o Studies majors, students interested in Chicana/o issues, as well as students who were uninterested in Chicana/o Studies but needed to fulfill a diversity requirement. The participants in non-Chicana/o Studies classes similarly indicated that they enrolled in these classes for diverse reasons.

The community college is at the edge of a large Chicana/o barrio and, at the time of the study, 59.6 percent of the student population was Chicana/o (another 16 percent were non-Chicana/o Latinas/os), while three percent were white. At the community college, the author also recruited students through six Chicana/o Studies classes as well as through three non-Chicana/o Studies history classes. Chicana/o Studies classes were about 99 percent Latina/o, and history classes were about 95 percent Latina/o. Discussions with participants indicated that the students also held a wide variety of interests and reasons for being in the classes from which they were recruited. Few students in Chicana/o Studies courses, however, had an interest in pursuing this as a major field of study and most were interested in training for a specific career in business.

The high school is in the middle of a Chicana/o barrio (the same one served by the community college) and, at the time of the study, 99.1 percent of the student population was "Hispanic." At the high school, the author recruited 9th and 12th graders through mandatory English classes (5 classes for each grade level). The response-rates of these two groups were impacted by the fact that the freshmen were all given class time and credit for completing the survey, while none of the seniors were formally given class time to do the survey, and only two of the classes were offered any type of credit.

All 13 interviewees volunteered to participate in the interviews after completing the surveys. Four individuals from each site were randomly selected from subgroups of the sample. A male and a female student who were recruited through Chicana/o Studies classes, as well as a male and a female who were recruited through non-Chicana/o Studies classes were selected from the college and university samples respectively (one additional university student was also interviewed). At the high school, a male and a female in the ninth and also in the twelfth grade were selected. The interview sample was crucial because the

interview data were exceptionally detailed and rich and serve as the heart of the project.

Clearly, a number of issues affected the sample obtained at each site. In terms of general demographics, it seems that the sample is fairly representative of the larger Chicana/o population as most of the students are working class (75 percent are working class while another 16 percent are middle class; the remaining participants were unable to provide this information) with limited education (63 percent and 66 percent of fathers and mothers did not attain the equivalent of a high school education while 18 percent and 19 percent respectively went only as far as a high school diploma). Additionally, most of the participants are second generation (63 percent), with a significant first-generation immigrant population 24 percent and a smaller third generation group (13 percent).¹⁹ Gender distribution in the sample reflected that in the classes sampled (there tended to be slightly higher numbers of females in these classes, and 60 percent of the participants were female). The sample is limited by the fact that it only includes students, that it is more likely to include better performing students (since those poor performing students who actually attend class are less likely to complete a written survey, regardless of whether or not they get credit for it), and that it is more likely to include students who feel they need to be heard or have an issue that they want to talk about. Additionally, in the community college sample and, in particular, the university sample, the students are likely to have some interest in Chicana/o issues due to the use of Chicana/o Studies classes for recruitment into the study.

While we can assume some possible effects of these factors on the results of the study, the data obtained and the lack of any relationships between the findings and certain unique characteristics of subgroups of the sample provide no conclusive evidence of this impact. In fact, the subsequent analyses discuss the entire sample as a whole (rather than each site individually) because the trends in the data are constant within and across each sample (while the main distinction is simply the degree of feedback provided, as university students provide the most detailed responses and high school students the least). In short, it appears that the processes of identity formation are constant across the subgroups of the sample, particularly given the breadth of the model employed in understanding these processes (which accommodates the multiple variations in the students' experiences).

The discussion now turns to: 1) the importance students placed on each of the potential realms of identity formation, 2) the influences on these varying emphases, as well as, 3) the overall model of identity formation suggested by the research and the implications for both understanding Chicana/o identity formation and its possible transformation.

Los Angeles Chicana/o Students Identity Formations

As mentioned earlier, two important facets of Chicana/o students' social identities are school-based identities and familial-based identities. These are key aspects of how they see themselves in their social world, although not the most central. That is, for most students the familial identity is a grounding force in their life, and they find solace and release in their familial roles, while school is seen as important as a means towards change and improving their condition in life. Still, the most common way Chicana/o students define themselves in their social world is through the other arenas of identity, and it is the identities that emerge in these other areas that both shape school identities and are guided by familial identities. What follows is a brief glimpse at each of the areas of potential identity formation for Chicana/o students, followed by a more in-depth model explaining the forces at work in students' lives that lead them to place importance on specific areas of identity over others.²⁰

Spiritual/Religious Identities

Despite the importance placed on religion in "traditional" research on Mexicana/o and Chicana/o populations, the students themselves did not emphasize religion or religious issues in their lives. While many practice religion regularly, few saw this as a central component of their identities (only half of the university students, 26 percent of the college students and six percent of both high school freshmen and seniors discussed the importance of a religious issue). Rather, religion is viewed as an assumed part of who they are and it is given little thought or emphasis in daily life beyond its ritual, often unconscious aspects. Interestingly, the most common discussions about religion in the surveys (reflected most often in university students' responses) emphasized the fact that students were questioning their religion (usually Catholicism) and had problems with the teachings and/or practices of the church. Some students, in fact, had stopped practicing altogether, while others had looked to

their indigenous roots for a new spiritual grounding. Regardless, in almost every case, religion was not a core facet of how students defined themselves and the identities they had developed over the course of their lives.

Community Identities

Community played a similar role in identity formation, although it was given slightly greater significance. While many students (about 30 percent at each site) felt that the issues of their communities were of importance to them (particularly those related to gang violence and drug-dealing), the fact remained that these issues were not central to their identity formations nor were they major influences on their social worlds. Students were concerned about younger siblings and their safety, but also felt that there is little they can do about these concerns beyond simply keeping themselves and their families safe. Other students had strong bonds to their communities and took pride in them, but for the most part these feelings were secondary to other aspects of their identities. The few students whose communities played a fundamental role in the formation of their identities were those with strong affiliations to gangs. Gang affiliations are often based on physical location, and thus, location/community is critical to their social identities as gang members. Still, for the vast majority of the students, social identity was influenced little by the communities in which they lived.

Sexuality-Based Identities

Sexuality is another of the less significant realms of identity formation for the majority of Chicana/o students. Most did not give any thought to the role of sexuality in their daily experiences and this assumed aspect of their lives played no role in their identity formations. A small number of students (five percent and eight percent in the community college and university respectively), however, placed a great deal of significance on the role of sexuality in their identity formations. The Chicanas/os who discussed the centrality of sexuality in their identities are gay and lesbian students and they explained that this is the core, and often the only pertinent aspect, of their social identities. Who they are is defined almost entirely by their sexuality and, for many, by the fact that their experience as homosexuals is heavily determined by the covert and overt discrimination they experience from both Chicanas/os and mainstream society.

Gender Identities

Gender was similarly manifested in the identity formations of Chicanas/os, although it was of much greater significance in the overall identity formations of the students (27 percent of high school freshmen, 44 percent of high school seniors, 62 percent of community college students and 75 percent of university students referred to the importance of gender issues to them). In the responses of both males and females, gender was cited as an important issue. While a smaller number of males mentioned gender issues, those who did, discussed the fact that they are burdened with more severe stereotypes as minority males (by store owners and the police, for example) and with greater expectations with regard to providing for their families. Males did not deem these as central arenas of their identities, but rather simply as issues they had faced. Like the males, the Chicanas often linked the salience of gender in their identity formations to their experiences as racial/ethnic minorities. A number of the Chicanas more deeply emphasized the role of gender and gender biases within the Chicana/o community. Interestingly, however, these experiences were deemed to be normal aspects of the Chicana experience, and even as unchangeable by many. Similar to other students' discussions of gang violence, these women saw gender and gender bias as something they observed and even experienced, but something that they, in turn, did not make a central emphasis in their lives or a key facet of their identity. This was both because of the perceived, unchangeable nature of gender bias that seemed to underlie their feelings, as well as the fact that, for many, this gender bias was entrenched in racial issues that were more central to their identity formations.

Class Identities

Class was one of the least significant aspects of identity for Chicana/o students. Like community, the students (three-fourths of whom are working class) acknowledged that class issues were a reality in their experiences, but these were never central to how they defined themselves nor to the issues they felt were most pertinent in their lives. Thus, the students mentioned economic hardships faced by their families, but each of the class-based issues they raised were seen as the product of specific circumstances which they and their families would change through continued effort. Most of the students who focused on class issues in any significant way, however, did so by integrating issues of race

into these discussions. That is, they discussed the class position and economic hardships faced by Chicanas/os as a function of their race. In these cases, the economic issues discussed were important to the students and part of how they defined themselves, but it was the racial aspect of their identity that they were emphasizing. Eight percent of community college, and 14 percent of university students, however, had more developed class identities, grounded in an awareness of economic inequality in society.

Racial/Ethnic Identities

It is racial or ethnic identity that is the core of the students' identities (the distinctions between ethnic and racial identity will be covered in the next section). When students discussed the issues that are important to them, roughly 70 percent refer to racism. When they talked about the most severe difficulties they have faced, 12 percent of freshmen, 35 percent of seniors, 49 percent of community college students, and 73 percent of university students refer to race issues. When they simply explained who they are in their own minds, *race and ethnicity were most often at the center of their discussions*. Students talked primarily about the significance of racial discrimination and differential treatment on the basis of race. These are issues and experiences that are not only important to them, but central to how they define themselves. This became clear when students were asked simply what they are—17 percent of freshmen, 31 percent of seniors, 36 percent of community college students and 54 percent of university students answered with a racial or ethnic descriptor. The significance of these figures is even greater when we consider the number of students who did not provide responses indicative of social identities but rather focused on personal characteristics (65 percent of freshmen, 31 percent of seniors, 27 percent of community college students, and 14 percent of university students). Given the critique of previous identity research mentioned earlier, it is also important to make reference to the students' self-chosen ethnic labels. The most striking findings with regard to these labels were that many students used multiple labels throughout their discussions; suggesting that there is a significant degree of variation in the use of labels even for individuals. Most importantly, of course, is the simple fact that their social identities are most frequently grounded in their racial/ethnic experiences and identities.

In short, Chicana/o students revealed critical patterns both in the arenas of

identity formation that were important to their social sense of self and in the intersections between these different areas. While the students are all touched in some way by each of the areas of identity formation addressed here, many of these issues are not crucial to how they view themselves in their social world. Each of these issues and areas of identity formation is, therefore, part of their lives, but most are not critical to students' social identities, while some are only important as they are interpreted through the lens of another facet of identity (this is a key theme that will be addressed in the following section). Overall, the survey data suggest that it is racial/ethnic identity that is the pivotal arena of Chicana/o students' social identities.

Racialization, Intersection, and Identity

The reality of Chicana/o students' identity formations, is far more complex than the previous, brief explanations portray. Many of the students, for example, blended the discussions of the different aspects of their social identities. Most commonly, Chicana students discussed gender issues when asked about race/ethnic issues and vice versa. To a lesser extent, Chicanas/os integrated their discussions of their racial and class-based experiences and identities. It is in the interview data, that the nuances of identity, its formation, and its most significant influences are all revealed.

First of all, as in the surveys, the interviews revealed that race is by far the most dominant facet of students' identities. Nine of the thirteen students interviewed brought up race as a central part of their development. A few students provided examples of this as they responded to a question asking which of a number of issues is important to who they are:

[Race is] really the basis of who I am. Like, I mean class will always change. You can get poor. . . . you can always change everything, to a certain degree, but your ethnicity is who you really are. It's not something that's instilled in you . . . You're basically born into it.

I have to say race, ethnicity and culture. And the reason why my race is very important to me, [is because it's] my roots, where I come from . . . With culture, it all stems from heritage for me. Things that my ancestors went through . . . I believe that my culture is being targeted in [an] immigrant bashing type of way.

. . . [Race] it's always been very important. . . . See, I grew up in [the barrio]. And we went to . . . elementary school [there], me and my brother. And then, when it was time to go to junior high in the late seventies, it's gangs

and so it's crazy. So my brother and I, we went out to school in the [white area]. They had better schools. So we got bussed. We always had pride in being Mexicanos, but I think it was more emphasized when we went out there, where me and my brother were [two] of the few Mexicanos who were in the honors classes, who played sports, and were good at it. It was kind of like we were representing Mexicans. So it became a little more important. . . . we always took pride in it.

While the students interpreted race/ethnicity in many different ways, it was clearly the dominant theme in their discussions and usually with reference to the sociopolitical position of Chicanas/os (based in the larger context of racial discrimination). As the first student explained, race/ethnicity is something that Chicanas/os can neither avoid nor change.

In addition, five of the 13 students interviewed felt that their socioeconomic status was a key part of their development and who they are (four of whom felt it was central), but three of these students viewed class as part of their ethnic or racial experience. One student provided a good example as she discussed experiences and issues that dealt with class, but also integrated race issues into this discussion:

[Class] was the big problem for me as I was growing up, class. Because I've always been discriminated [against]. We grew up in a upper-middle class environment and we were the only minorities, my sister and I, growing up with most of the student population [in] elementary school being Anglo. . . . And growing up I always felt like an outcast. They would say like racial remarks like "wetback" and [another Chicana's] name was Rosa so they used to call her "Rosarita Beans." Things like that, so class was a big problem for me because even when I went to my girlfriends' house, they lived in these big houses up in the hills where[as] we lived in a small little underdeveloped, I guess, impoverished house where my mom kind of always made us feel embarrassed for living there. She never liked us bringing friends over . . . So class in that sense like, that was a big problem for me growing up.

Another student provided a more detailed example of how Chicanas/os link race and class:

I mean race, race was important. Races fighting against other races and being put down . . . Yeah. . . . and the different levels of society. You've got your upper class, middle class and lower class. Most of the lower class is two races, Mexican and Black. Middle class, you've got your Orientals, some Whites, some Mexicans and stuff. . . . And your upper class: all the white collar society. All your executives [are] mostly Anglo. . . .

MP: . . . when did it become an issue for you?

When I started working, I was working in a bank and I'd see the separation. I'd see supervisors, the majority of supervisors were all white, you know they were the decision makers. They handled your money, they handled your paycheck. . . . it was hard for someone of a different race to climb that ladder. You saw more white people getting promoted, more white people getting the job spots and all that. That's when I started seeing that this ain't right.

As these examples show, while students brought up other realms of potential identity formation that are involved in their development, many are embedded within the construct of (if not confused with) race itself in their discussions. Class, for example, is most often either consciously or subconsciously deemed as something that is a part of or defined by being Chicana/o (as seen in the two excerpts above). With regard to their total identities, race/ethnicity was the most important realm in which students defined themselves.

Later, when asked whether the different realms of identity were linked (in their lives), students explained how race encompassed many of the different realms of identity formation. One student provided a good example of how the different facets of identity are linked when asked if the issues he had been discussing were connected or distinct.

I'd say distinct in their definition but connected in their function. . . . Well, I can give you a definition of each one of these issues, like what it means to me, like separately. But, if I discuss gender, sexuality is going to come up, class is going to come up, spirituality and religion is going to come up, community is going to come up, race and ethnicity is going to come up. I can't talk about one without the other, they're all connected in the way they operate, in the way they affect me.

In fact, seven students felt like all of the different realms of identity formation were related and mentioned this within their discussion of specific issues. More specifically, race was seen by many as encompassing: class, religion, family, community, and gender. Similarly, when students were asked about the importance and impact of specific aspects of their racial/ethnic experience, they also lumped these issues into their larger racial experience so that issues like language background, immigrant status, and skin-color were not central to identity formation beyond the fact that they were used by non-Chicanas/os as criteria for determining their racial status and were all, therefore, related to racial discrimination.

Two students did a good job of explaining what they and their peers meant when they linked the different realms of identity. As one student said, the

family incorporates a number of different areas of students' identity development. She referred specifically to religion, sexuality, gender and class within the cultural aspects of family life and identity formation. Another student was more specific as he explained that there are different categories within the linkages of these different identity themes. He linked gender, race, and sexuality as related identity themes in their connections to discrimination, while then linking community, class, religion and race (again) as a more general area of identity development.

. . . they're all connected . . . I think I would view like community, class, race and like religious spirituality more in one sense. Gender, sexuality and then race would be kind of more in terms of discrimination that's going on out there. . . . I would say like gender, sexuality and race in terms of discrimination; others . . . community, class, race and spirituality are more separate.

This student cut to the heart of the distinctions within students' identity development, suggesting that their racial/ethnic experiences can be perceived in two ways: as political in response to discrimination (racial identity), and (although he does not emphasize the other aspect) as cultural (ethnic identity).²¹ The political facet of this identity is linked to discrimination and, therefore, to gender as well as sexuality (depending on the individual), while the cultural aspects are linked to family, community/class, and religion. Still, there is no black-and-white categorization of these different areas, as specific experiences shape individuals in different ways. Class, for example, is typically incorporated within students' interpretations of their experiences as Chicanas/os, but it is linked more to the cultural aspects of these experiences rather than as a political, discrimination-based area. This is simply because most students do not have a class consciousness. One student, however, clearly interpreted class as a political issue and his configuration of identity linkages is quite different. Similarly, gender can be seen both as cultural and as political, depending on the individual. In fact, only a few students felt gender and gender discrimination were crucial issues which they *had* to deal with, while most saw gender and differential treatment of males and females as something that is embedded in local, familial histories and not addressable. This is not to suggest that gender is never a crucial arena of identity formation for Chicanas/os. Rather, as the next section explains, gender becomes central in Chicanas' identities when power is asserted across gender lines in ways that parallel or exceed the exertion of racial

power. It is critical to acknowledge that the unique gender dynamics within the Chicana/o community (e.g., the often-discussed role of machismo) are not central to how most students define themselves because of the fact that other facets of identity formation are dominant.

The most important finding overall then is simply that there are two distinct realms of identity formation within the Chicana/o student population, the political and the cultural. Not all students have both, but the distinction clearly exists. Furthermore, as students describe themselves and their identities, they reveal that their ethnic-cultural identity is that part of their experience as Chicanas/os that is local and embedded in the lives of all Chicanas/os. In many ways, it is an assumed facet of identity because most believe these are internal, intrinsic and universal Chicana/o experiences and characteristics. It is the racial-political identity that is, therefore, the most dominant in Chicanas/os perceptions of self. Their sense of self evolves from experiences with, and observations of discrimination in their communities and schools. It is also reinforced through the life experiences of their families and their own experiences with racial confrontation.

Power and Identity Formation

Despite the prevalence of a central racial identity among Chicana/o students, there are some whose social identities are not grounded in their race or ethnicity. It is in looking at these students—comparing the whole of their experiences to those of the others—that we can begin to understand the forces at work in Chicana/o identity formation. First, by returning to the students whose social identities were most firmly grounded in race, we can understand the means by which their identities are shaped.

As might be expected, those students with strong racial identities are deeply influenced by their social contexts. There are two primary means of influence: interracial interactions (in heterogeneous contexts or in homogeneous contexts with authority figures of a different race) and parental influence. In each instance where Chicana/o students developed a strong racial identity, they experienced interactions with members of another race where it was made obvious that they were in a position of inferior status and power. Additionally, some of these students had a parent who helped them negotiate these experiences and reinforced the importance of race through positive messages. The role of con-

text in identity formation, therefore, is based primarily on that to which a Chicana/o student is exposed. Background characteristics like immigrant status and socioeconomic status influence identity formation, but mainly as they impact the individual's interracial interactions and the importance parents place on education and race, for example.

There are a number of instances when the students talked specifically about the racial confrontations critical to the process of identity formation. One student discussed the significance of race on two separate occasions:

And we had a substitute one day [in sixth grade] and everybody, the whole class was messing around, it was [a] ruckus. And the teacher came up to me and she said, "If you don't like it you can go back where you came from." And then she told that to my friend and we were the only two Mexicans in the class and I think there was one black guy. . . . And so that was the theme of the day, like every time everybody else messed up it was "Shut up, shut up!" but when we messed up it was "Go back to Mexico!" And so we already knew by sixth grade I guess we were already socialized like not to make a big deal out of it. . . . And in junior high like it was more evident. You know like, if you ditched, they had to call the cops. But if like a white kid ditched, they would just send X teacher to go get him. So like that was different. I was constantly like suspended, expelled.

Another student's experiences (as she worried over getting into college) reflect a somewhat less-direct, racialized incident whose connotations, however, are quite clear:

. . . I was still worried about whether or not I was going to [get into the university]. I mean I graduated with like a three-nine [3.9 GPA]. But I was still really worried. . . . probably because I had a counselor who I despised in high school. I told her I wanted to go to [the university] and she saw my grades and she said, "You know I don't think you're going to get into [the university]" and she said, "But you might, because you are a minority, so you might get in." And, I thought, I know it plays a big part, but it still really upset me that she said that. . . . I had good grades and she was just like, "I don't know if you'll get in, but you might because you're Mexican."

Some students also described how the messages conveyed by family members were important to their dealing with these issues and their identity formation itself. For example, one student provided the following explanation when she was asked where her pride, which she mentioned earlier, came from:

. . . My uncle because he was like another father. He was the kind that'd listen to you, and like you could say whatever you wanted to him and he would help you out, just tell you, "You're Mexican and you have to be proud

of it 'cause that's who you are." My grandpa too, he sat me and my nina down to talk about where we come from so that later on it won't be a question to us. . . .

Finally, other students describe powerful racial confrontations outside of the school that are critical to their evolving views of themselves:

But a lot of the cops, they treat me bad. . . . me and my friend, we were in my car and they stopped us. I turned off the car and he told me to turn down the radio, and I turned it down, and for no reason he took out a gun and put it on my head. And both of 'em [the police] were white. And my friend had a beanie with the Mexican eagle on the front. He took off his beanie, he threw it on the floor and stepped on it. And he pulled me out of the car and then he put my hands on my back, he took out that little black [rubber stick]. . . . And he smacked me in the head with it and he told me that we were in [a white neighborhood], and . . . what were we doing over there, that we belong in [the barrio]. That over here that it's pure white people . . . and that us wetbacks should go back over there. . . . And, but there's nothing I could do about it. It's just hate, that's why. . . . my dad too, they treat him bad. Because they arrested my dad because supposedly he was hitting my mom, but it was just a neighbor calling because they were arguing. And they were two white cops too and they tied my dad from the hands and feet and they dragged him all the way to the cop car.

These explanations provide clear evidence of the racial confrontations and issues that lead to strong racial identities among Chicana/o students while they also help us better understand the identity formations of the other Chicana/o students.

One of the students' who did *not* have a racialized identity had a sense of social self that was firmly grounded in his sexuality. The importance of sexuality in his identity construction evolved from the fact that he was gay. Being gay had a significant impact on him in that he was forced to confront this difference in various arenas of his life. It is interesting that this student also attended high school with a predominantly white student body, and that both of his parents had strong Chicana/o identities as embodied through their beliefs and jobs (both of these factors contribute to strong ethnic identity formation in other Chicana/o students). As he explains, however, an overriding factor in his experience is the fact that he shared the socioeconomic background of the upper-middle class students in the private school he attended. This was important because he felt he had a great deal in common with his fellow classmates, and that he could identify with them (which was not the case with other

Chicanas/os who went to school with a majority of whites from a significantly higher class background). Furthermore, this student never encountered racial bias or discrimination from his teachers or peers. In fact, it is only with regard to his sexuality that he ever faced any form of bias or discrimination, and it is in these contexts that he was made aware of his lower status and lack of power as a result of being gay.

Similarly, one of the other students whose social identity was not grounded in her ethnicity also lived and went to school with a majority of white students who shared her same class background. She too felt a common bond with her classmates and the core of her identity was actually based in aspirations for upward mobility. Both descriptions suggest that in those cases where Chicana/o students attend school and reside in neighborhoods where they are one of only a few Chicanas/os (or other minorities) and where they share the class backgrounds of their peers, they may not have experiences with discrimination and bias that force them into positions where they must acknowledge the lack of power they have.

Two other students grew up and attended schools in predominantly Chicana/o contexts but did not develop central racial identities. As they explain, neither experienced nor witnessed any form of racial discrimination. The first student discussed the fact that he has led a fairly sheltered life in which most of his time is spent in a tight circle of family members, and it is they whom he interacts with almost exclusively. The second student, although she has not faced racial discrimination, has been made aware of gender bias through observations within her family and of her mother's struggles. These are issues that are clear in her world and she has felt the constraints of gender bias in her own life and the lack of power she is granted as a female.

In looking at the lives of all thirteen Chicana/o students, who represent a variety of different experiences in and out of school, we can see that *power* is central to their identity formations. Students' encounters with power are best understood in those arenas of their social world in which they have little or no power. This does not mean that other areas are non-existent, but simply that these are less important facets of their identities. In fact, virtually all arenas of potential identity formation impact most students. The fact that some students are considered the norm in a specific social realm (e.g., with regard to gender or sexuality) makes these issues unconscious, sublimated aspects of who

they are. These are not fundamental means by which they identify themselves simply because it is around social difference that these individuals define who they are and are outwardly defined by others; particularly when this difference is coupled with some form of subjugation.

One student provides a good example of the role of power in defining his experience as a racial minority:

. . . when I went to high school, like that's where everybody goes, the raza, the black, brown, everybody. So then I started seeing my Chicano friends and started hanging out with them and that was probably one of the first times I really thought about race because I noticed the difference. Because when I hung out with white dudes, like X white boy was "big nose," you know, you joke around. This white boy was "big butt" . . . and I was always "beaner." Like that was the joke. . . . it was like good-hearted so I thought, but then I thought about it and thought, "No, that's bullshit, that's fucking racist." And so then I just told all my white friends "Shine you" and started hanging with the Mexicans again. And they always said, "Oh, look he changed he became a gang member," you know that's what the white dudes would say. And like to me, I was kind of like reacting against the way they treated me. And I was hanging with the Mexicans and we were a smaller number so, you know, you have to defend yourself some way, so we were numbers. You know, white boys got . . . the [new] Jeeps and the [new] Honda Accords and stuff and they were so cool you know. And the only thing we had was power. We were like, you don't walk by the tree. White boys walk by the tree, you get fucked up.

This student helps us understand not only the means by which power is used to define Chicana/o social identity (externally), but the way in which some Chicanas/os react to their lack of sanctioned, institutional power by taking physical power over their immediate surroundings.²² As one student excerpt detailed earlier, race is a facet of identity that cannot be changed. It cannot be avoided because difference is not only obvious, but it is reinforced through power and concretized borders that separate whites and Chicanas/os, males and females, and hetero- and homosexuals.

In essence, these students expose the reality of *border identities*. While the physical border between the United States and Mexico marks a clear distinction between power and subordination, the Chicana/o experience is almost always blatantly stamped by symbolic borders conveying the same message. Just as Mexican residents (especially those who live near the border) are made well-aware of the line in the sand that marks the fundamental distinctions in power held between the United States and Mexico, there are lines drawn that

distinguish Chicanas/os from other “Americans” with regard to power along race, class, gender and other lines. Chicanas/os are continually reminded of the borders that separate them from the dominant society as the power held by whites, males, and heterosexual society demarcates difference and, in turn, defines their social selves. Just as the U.S./Mexican border may soon be marked by an “impenetrable” wall designed to ensure that Mexicans cannot cross that boundary, Chicanas/os are socialized to understand that they cannot cross the social borders that mark their identities in this country.

While most Chicanas/os develop racial identities fairly early on in their lives as a function of their exposure to racial difference, bias, and/or discrimination, it is through experience and an evolving familiarity with the invisible, but blatant, borders of power dominating their existence that their racialized identities are cast and hardened. This is reflected in the more well-developed racial identities of the university students who have had greater and more intense experiences fighting to maintain a positive sense of self—through daily life in a predominantly white institution that discourages difference—given the side of the power border to which they have been relegated. The dominance of these racial borders is further evidenced by the fact that in those arenas where the borders of power are less evident or less emphasized, such as class, community, and religion, the possibility for concretized social identities (grounded in these areas) is minimal. Still, as some students reveal, there are other borders differentiating power with regard to gender and sexuality (for example) that are more dominant in certain individuals, and which correspondingly become central arenas in which identities are formed. Chicana/o students’ identities are, therefore, most often racialized and *always* grounded in power inequalities and the borders that signify them.

Conclusion

The experiences of Los Angeles Chicana/o students in 1996 help us understand the complexities of Chicana/o identity and the means by which power and its borders govern the formation of their social selves. This analysis provides insights into the evolution of Chicana/o identity, as we understand the separation of cultural/ethnic and political/racial identity formations. As the data indicate, Chicana/o students are engaged in a number of different social realms that are affected by an equally diverse number of social characteristics.

While issues like class, community, religion, and culture are important parts of students' lives, it is those areas of their world in which social difference is made quite apparent to them that their identities become crystallized—by virtue of their lack of power along a given axis as evidenced through interactions often grounded in discrimination. For the majority of Chicana/o students, the fact that they are made well aware of their lack of power becomes critical to their understanding of their place in the world. This is the means by which they then define their own identities.

These findings are crucial to the future of identity research because they expose the need for advancing complexity in the means by which we study identity and—as Chicanas/os of the 1960s demonstrated in their effort to define themselves—the critical contributions Chicanas/os can make to our understanding of identity when they are included more intimately in the research process.

The most pivotal contribution of this research will be in applying this new understanding to the larger Chicana/o experience and making connections between identities and the success and failure of Chicana/o students. Preliminary analyses suggest that there are critical connections between academic success among Chicanas/os and the influences of parents on developing strong, educationally grounded racial identities. These findings suggest the urgency of continuing our explorations of identity with other Chicana/o communities; considering the connections between identity formation and the overall experiences and outcomes of Chicanas/os. Future analyses may lead us towards interventions that can reshape identities and empower Chicanas/os. It will require a continued dedication to innovative, qualitative explorations of identity to pursue these leads and uncover findings that are not simply rich, but also laced with transformative possibilities.

NOTES

- ¹ At the time, “Chicano” was used. In this paper I refer to “Chicanas/os” to signify that I am consciously discussing both females and males of Mexican descent who are living in the United States.
- ² Moraga, C. 1983. *Loving in the War Years: Lo que Nunca Pasó por sus Labios*. Boston: South End Press.
- ³ Anzaldúa, G. 1987. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute.

- 4 Castillo, A. 1994. *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press. Also see, Perez, L. 1993. Opposition and the education of Chicana/os. Chap. 20 in *Race, Identity and Representation in Education*. New York: Routledge.
- 5 Arce, C. 1981. A reconsideration of Chicano culture and identity. *Daedalus* 110:182.
- 6 Hurtado, A., P. Gurin, and T. Peng 1994. Social identities—A framework for studying the adaptation of immigrants and ethnics: The adaptations of Mexicans in the United States. *Social Problems* 41:128-151.
- 7 Bernal, M., and P. Martinelli, eds. 1993. *Mexican American Identity*. Encino, Ca.: Floricanto Press.
- 8 Rodriguez, J., and P. Gurin 1990. The relationship of intergroup contact to social identity and political consciousness. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 12:235-255.
- 9 García, J. 1981. Yo soy Mexicano: Self-identity and sociodemographic correlates. *Social Science Quarterly* 62, no. 1:88-98; García, J. 1982. Ethnicity and Chicanos: Measurement of ethnic identification, identity, and consciousness. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 4:295-314; Hurtado, S. 1994. Latino consciousness and academic success. Chap. 1 in *The Educational Achievement of Latinos: Barriers and Successes*. Santa Cruz, CA: Regents of the University of California; Hurtado, A., R. Gonzalez, and L. Vega 1994. Social identification and the academic achievement of Chicano students. Chap. 2 in *The Educational Achievement of Latinos: Barriers and Successes*. Santa Cruz, Ca.: Regents of the University of California.
- 10 Phinney, J. 1993. A three-stage model of ethnic identity development in adolescence. Chap. 5 in *Ethnic Identity: Formation and Transmission among Hispanics and Other Minorities*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- 11 Keefe, S., and A. Padilla 1987. *Chicano Ethnicity*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press; Knight, G., M. Bernal, C. Garza, and M. Cota 1993. A social cognitive model of the development of ethnic identity and ethnically-based behaviors. Chap. 12 in *Ethnic Identity: Formation and Transmission among Hispanics and Other Minorities*. Albany: State University of New York Press; Phinney, 1993.
- 12 Gurin, P., A. Hurtado, and T. Peng 1994. Group contacts and ethnicity in the social identities of Mexicanos and Chicanos. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 20:521-532.
- 13 Phinney, 1993.
- 14 Saenz, R., and B. Aguirre 1991. The dynamics of Mexican ethnic identity. *Ethnic Groups* 9:17-32.
- 15 Knight *et al.*, 1993, 229.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 This term has been used in a variety of ways both in research and in the popular media, but for the entirety of this work I will use this simple definition. I do not include generational status as part of the criteria for inclusion in this group because many of the first-generation participants immigrated at a very young age and have been socialized as Chicanas/os. Additionally, whenever Chicana is used it is in reference to females of Mexican descent living in the United States.

- ¹⁸ Employment is another potentially crucial realm of identity formation, but since the sample in this research consists of students, this was not a primary focus. Still, students were able to bring up the role of their jobs and employment in their identity formations when relevant.
- ¹⁹ As mentioned, the distinctions between first generation immigrants and second generation Chicanas/os were often blurred. For example, some of the first generation immigrants came to the United States at such a young age that they have no memories of Mexico, while the families of second generation Chicanas/os immigrated to the United States a very short time before their births. Almost none of the participants in this study are recent immigrants.
- ²⁰ This general description is based on the survey data collected, while the more detailed analyses in the following section are based on both the preliminary and follow-up interviews.
- ²¹ Other identity researchers have noted these potential distinctions in both theoretical discussions and in analyses of quantitative data. See Gutiérrez, L. 1989. Critical consciousness and Chicano identity: An exploratory analysis. In *Estudios Chicanos and the Politics of Community: Selected Proceedings of the National Association of Chicano Studies*. Ann Arbor: McNaughton and Gunn Lithographers, 35-53; Rodríguez, J., and P. Gurin 1990. The relationship of intergroup contact to social identity and political consciousness. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 12:235-255.
- ²² This example also illustrates the intricacies involved in the formation of gang identities as this student was involved in gangs during his high school years. While these identities are fairly uncommon for the vast majority of Chicana/o youth, those who form identities around location and gangs are responding to unique experiences with, and manifestations of power in their daily lives.