12-2021

"The only way I feel connected is through other Latinx friends": Latinx Ethnic Identity, Social Connection, and Sense of Belonging at a Southeastern Predominantly White Institution

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"THE ONLY WAY I FEEL CONNECTED IS THROUGH OTHER LATINX FRIENDS": LATINX ETHNIC IDENTITY, SOCIAL CONNECTION, AND SENSE OF BELONGING AT A SOUTHEASTER PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Jasmine M. Koech
December 2021

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

Research demonstrates that Latinx students enrolled in Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) face challenges in locating a sense of belonging and creating social connections on campus (e.g., Dueñas & Gloria, 2020). A lack of sense of belonging and limited access to affirming social connections can have negative consequences on ethnic identity development (e.g., Jones & Galliher, 2014). Our study sought to further investigate the experiences of Latinx students at a southeastern PWI, their experiences with locating a sense of belonging and social connections on campus, as well as their experiences navigating their ethnic identity development. Focus group data was collected from undergraduate and graduate Latinx students ($n = 20$) and our sample included both domestic students and international student perspectives. Data was analyzed using a critical-constructivist grounded theory (Levitt, 2021) approach. Findings indicate two core categories: 1) navigating ethnic identity with intersecting identities, and 2) creating a sense of belonging and connection with other Latinxs. Our preliminary conceptual model shows ethnic identity is utilized to locate a sense of belonging and social connection on campus with other Latinxs, and that sense of belonging and connection then functions to affirm and support ethnic identity development. Our findings have implications in clinical, institutional, and advocacy realms for PWIs to provide Latinx-specific resources and services.

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CHAPTER ONE

"THE ONLY WAY I FEEL CONNECTED IS THROUGH OTHER LATINX FRIENDS": LATINX ETHNIC IDENTITY, SOCIAL CONNECTION, AND SENSE OF BELONGING AT A SOUTHEASTERN PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION

Latino/a identity encompasses anyone who has emigrated from, or has ancestors who emigrated from Latin America and/or the Caribbean (e.g., Barerra & Longoria, 2018). Recently the label of Latinx has expanded the use of Latina/o, as it is more inclusive of variations in gender identity than the traditional masculine/feminine binary (Torres, 2018). Latina/o/x identity is complex as it frequently conflates racial identification with ethnic identification (e.g., Soto Vega & Chávez, 2018). As a result of this conflation between race and ethnicity, Latinx individuals may rely on various forms of identity labeling, or marking (c.f., Gonzalez et al., 2017), to help them navigate the complexities of their ethnic identity and how their ethnic identity connects with other salient identities (e.g., race, sexual orientation, citizenship status). Marking is a process by which individuals make their identity known to others (Gonzalez et al., 2017). The process of marking may allow Latinx individuals to be identified by, and to identity other members of their ethnic group, thereby expanding their social connections. Research has provided insight into the relationship between the importance of social connection for a sense of belonging of Latinxs in college, especially those enrolled in predominantly White institutions (PWIs; e.g., Dueñas & Gloria, 2020). However, more insight is needed

to examine the potential cyclical relationship between ethnic identity, social connection, and sense of belonging for Latinx college students attending PWIs.

Research has frequently sought to examine ethnic identity development for Latinxs within more diverse settings (e.g., Else-Quest & Morse, 2015; Gonzalez, 2017), which may not be applicable to PWI environments. Latinxs attending PWIs struggle with locating a sense of belonging and connection that is frequently combatted by utilizing counterspaces (e.g., Sánchez-Connally, 2018), or spaces on campus where a student feels accepted, a sense of belonging, and support typically with other members who face marginalization as a result of social identities that are oppressed (e.g., Case & Hunter, 2012). However, less is known about the bidirectional relationship of ethnic identity affirmation for Latinxs (many of whom have multiple salient identities) and the process of identifying a sense of belonging and connection within a PWI environment. The current study seeks to better understand how Latinxs within a PWI affirm and label their ethnic identity, how they locate a sense of belonging and social connection (and with whom), and how their social connections and sense of belonging may function to affirm ethnic identity.

Ethnic Identity Process

Identity exploration is a part of human development in which individuals begin to determine their sense of self (e.g., Erikson, 1968; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985). Ethnic identity is related to the extent to which an individual feels as though they have affiliation/similarities with a particular ethnic group in terms of cultural heritage and attributes (Cokley, 2007; Phinney & Ong, 2007; Quintana, 2007). Phinny (1996)

proposed that ethnic identity exploration involves a three-step process: 1) unexamined ethnic identity, 2) moratorium or exploration, and 3) achieved ethnic identity. In Phinny's (1996) model, the first stage emphasizes that an individual's relationship to their ethnic identity is a result of the community in which they are raised. This individual's family upbringing can be positive, neutral, or negative. The second stage is characterized by an individual's interest in learning more about their ethnic group, and can be heavily influenced by their environment. Specifically, in this stage, individuals are exposed to people from other ethnic groups and may be exposed to discrimination. Exposure to discrimination can facilitate a desire to learn more about the history, traditions, and current social standings of their ethnic group. The second stage can be important for early college students as their search for a greater understanding of their ethnic group may prompt individuals to seek ethnic group-specific clubs, organizations, or coursework. The final stage is characterized by an individual's secure, confident sense of self as being a member of their ethnic group.

Even though Latinxs are now the largest ethnic and racial minority group in the United States (US Census Bureau, 2021), more work is needed to fully understand the process of ethnic identity development for this group as well as hindrances and encouragements for this process. Additionally, exploration is crucial for this group as Latinx individuals can be of any racial group. These overlapping and interlocking identities require an intersectional lens when examining ethnic identity processes and influences (e.g., Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw's (1989) Black feminist scholarship on intersectionality acknowledges that individuals carry multiple social identities

simultaneously that intersect and interlock with systems of oppression and privilege, causing variations in experiences in daily life. Intersectionality is a crucial lens for work with Latinxs as Latinxs can carry an array of social identities outside of racial and ethnic identities that must also be centered and respected.

Research indicates that parents can facilitate the ethnic socialization process for their children by educating them about cultural practices, and prepare them to potentially experience discrimination as a result of their ethnic group affiliation (e.g., Umaña-Taylor et al., 2013). Specifically, Umaña-Taylor and colleagues (2013) note that family not only teaches youth how to navigate and adapt to their environments, but also serves to instill in youth a greater understanding of their ethnic identity. Additionally, their work also demonstrated a bi-directional relationship between adolescent ethnic identity navigation regarding social environments and familial ethnic identity messages. In other words, though parents typically jumpstart the ethnic identity process, the social world very much influences the ethnic identity development of young children and adolescents. Social worlds can include exposure to peers and influence the amount of diversity in their environments (e.g., seeing other races and ethnicities; Kandel & Andrews, 1987; Else-Quest & Morse, 2015).

Additional research supports the finding that social environments and peer exposure outside the home can contribute to the ethnic identity process. For example, Else-Quest and Morse (2015) compared ethnic diversity in schools and the impact this diversity (or lack thereof) has on ethnic identity exploration. Else-Quest and Morse (2015) found that being a member of the majority ethnic group present in school offers an

experience with a rich social network that supports a positive ethnic identity development. Though this finding indicates one way to influence a positive ethnic identity development process, additional consideration is required to determine what happens when individuals are not in a diverse environment during phases of, and experiences that contribute to, ethnic identity development processes.

Ethnic Identity Labeling

Ethnic identity isn't always solidified prior to a transition outside of the home of the family of origin, such as moving for college. Specifically, adolescents and young adults attending universities are still developing their general identity, as well as their ethnic identity. Therefore the social environments associated with the university setting can contribute to the process of ethnic identity development. Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) are universities where more than 25% of enrolled students are Hispanic/Latinx (e.g., Garcia, 2016). HSIs for undergraduate or graduate education provide an environment where Latinx students can get support while developing their ethnic identity, through offering a more heterogenous environment than a PWI. Research indicates that within the HSI environment, students use Latin American country of origin identity versus the panethnic labeling of Hispanic or Latinx (Gonzalez, 2017) when they self-identify their ethnic identity. Additionally, Gonzalez (2017) noted that country of origin labeling in HSIs was used to identify within the microsystemic (e.g., ethnic clubs and organizations), the exosystemic (e.g., citizenship status and political affiliation), and the macrosystemic (e.g., societal and familial norms, institutional influences) university environmental social levels. The reliance on country of origin, versus panethnic labels,

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among students attending HSIs in this research may indicate that ethnic identity could be narrowed and use more specific labeling in an environment with more Latinx diversity. Or in other words, being more specific with heritage could be easier for Latinx students when in a more heterogenous environment with many other Latinxs.

Furthermore, the choice of ethnic identity labeling could be influenced by the composition of the environment considering non-Latinx presence, even in an HSI. For example, Gonzalez (2013) found that Latinx students utilized the panethnic identity label even when communicating with non-Latinx individuals in an HSI environment. However, the participants indicated that when they were communicating with other Latinxs, they would label their ethnic identity more specifically using their country/ies of origin. This suggests that, in other environments, Latinxs may identify more broadly when communicating with non-Latinxs who might not be aware of the nuanced ways Latinxs differ (e.g., by country of origin). Further, it's plausible that within a PWI where the interactions amongst non-Latinxs are more common than amongst other Latinxs, given the homogeneous environment, ethnic identity labeling choices could be impacted.

Ethnic Identity, Microaggressions, & the College Environment

While it is crucial to focus on positive aspects related to ethnic identity development, it is also necessary to acknowledge negative experiences that contribute to the ethnic identity development process. A negative experience that could contribute to the ethnic identity development process at a PWI is discrimination (Brittain et al., 2014). Microaggressions, defined as verbal or behavioral slights, which communicate biases or negative attitudes and may be either intentional or unintentional (Jones & Galliher, 2014;

Sue et al., 2009) are one example of discrimination commonly experienced by Latinx people. According to Jones and Galliher (2014), experiencing microaggressions on a daily basis has been shown to have both an expected and a surprising effect on ethnic identity exploration. Specifically, discrimination experiences can predictably undermine positive ethnic identification leading to an internalization of negative, harmful stereotypes and experiences (negative effect). Experiences of discrimination can also have an unpredictably positive effect by centering the importance of belonging to the ethnic group, and a sense of belonging can assist to negate future experiences of discrimination.

While microaggressions are experienced on an interpersonal level, they can also be experienced on an institutional level. Microaggressions from institutions may be easier to identify than microaggressions experienced interpersonally (e.g., Robertson et al., 2016). Research by Robertson and colleagues (2016) found that Latinx students were somewhat better at identifying institutional microaggressions (e.g., listing several Latinx courses in course catalogs but not offering them) when compared to interpersonal microaggression experiences. Additionally, this work noted that when students identified experiences of microaggressions, they responded by locating counterspaces (e.g., faculty connections, fraternity or sorority involvement, and/or creating new Latino-friendly/inclusive organizations) (Robertson et al., 2016). The utilization of counterspaces thus provides a space for participants to heal from microaggression experiences and potentially provide a sense of belonging.

Latinx Ethnic Identity & Sense of Belonging

Not all students are able to attend, or are aware of the option to attend an HSI for their educational experience. Therefore, it's crucial to examine how a more homogenous environment such as a PWI can significantly impact their experiences with ethnic identity exploration and sense of belonging. In addition to considering the impacts on ethnic identity, research has also documented the importance of individuals with marginalized identities experiencing a sense of belonging when enrolled in a PWI (e.g., Dueñas & Gloria, 2020). Latinx students document a lower sense of belonging at PWIs compared to White students; their sense of belonging increases with interactions and connections with other non-White peers and they find support in counterspaces (e.g., Dueñas & Gloria, 2020). Counterspaces function to foster a sense of belonging within PWI environments, and to provide support in processing negative experiences (e.g., Von Robertson et al., 2016).

In some cases, counterspaces for Latinxs at PWIs may be available in environments that are expected to provide support and a sense of community. For example, Garcia (2019) found that Latinx students found their sense of community on a PWI campus through multicultural sororities and fraternities. Specifically, participants noted they could share their culture openly with their Greek letter community, which promoted feelings of safety and belonging on campus. Students also noted a strong bond between multicultural Greek letter organizations, as they frequently invited one another to events leading to a wider circle of minority community and cultural diversity on campus. In other words, students noted that their sense of belonging did not come from

the university as a whole, but rather from the multicultural groups they were connected to through their Greek letter organizations.

Service learning is also linked to increased sense of belonging not only on campus but also within the community for Latinx students enrolled at a PWI (Pak, 2018). Specifically, Pak (2018) found that service learning can be a strategy utilized to support Latinxs in locating a sense of belonging by offering them an avenue to connect to the Latinx community within, and outside of, the university setting. Therefore, students are directly connected to other Latinx individuals, which increases their sense of belonging to both the environment they are in as well as to their ethnic identity.

Other researchers have examined a sense of belonging from participation in a cohort where the ethnic identity process is emphasized and encouraged throughout the undergraduate career. Specifically, Case and Hernandez (2013) developed a four-year program where each year in school marked a different depth of ethnic identity exploration and affirmation for cohort participants. Participants felt more connected to their ethnic identity throughout their trajectory in the program and university. Additionally, since the cohort was based on ethnic identification for qualification, participants readily had access to older cohorts of students also expanding their ethnic identity. Indeed, participants reported forming close friendships with other cohorts, thus increasing their overall sense of belonging on campus. Therefore, seeking a sense of belonging from other ethnic group members seems to also increase a sense of ethnic identity across time.

In the brief summary provided, it's clear that Latinx students enrolled in PWI environments need to be able to access spaces that provide a sense of belonging in a variety of ways. The creative utilization of counterspaces provides a missing sense of belonging for these students. However, it is not clear how long it takes them to locate these spaces or how their ethnic identity is impacted before locating counterspaces. Additionally, more information is needed to examine the process of Latinx students' self-conceptualization of their ethnic identity that emerges when their social environment transitions away from family or origin into a PWI environment.

There is a dearth of research that further examines the complexities of an abundance of negative experiences for Latinxs within PWI environments (e.g., Brittain et al., 2014). Our research team acknowledges these negative experiences and does not seek to negate these experiences by presenting an overly positive account of PWI navigation for Latinxs. However, we are intentionally motivated to examine the strengths of the Latinx community in their navigation of a PWI environment, and include an additional component of narratives that are not solely about experiencing oppression and discrimination.

Current Study

Transitioning to the college environment could influence ethnic identity development for Latinx individuals, especially if the college environment varies in diversity from their upbringing. Much research shows that Latinx students create a sense of belonging regardless of campus-type by finding counterspaces comprised of other students who share their ethnic identity (e.g., Garcia, 2019). However, additional research

is needed to examine how a lack of sense of belonging in a PWI environment impacts the ethnic identity development of Latinx students prior to locating counterspaces. As PWIs by definition have less ethnic diversity on campus, it is imperative to examine how Latinx students find a sense of belonging that affirms their ethnic identity and acknowledges their other salient identities in an intersectional, all-inclusive manner. Our research question was what are experiences of Latinx students' ethnic identity affirmation and locating a sense of belonging and social connection within a PWI environment?

CHAPTER TWO
METHOD

The current study sought to explore experiences of Latinx students enrolled in a southeastern predominantly White institution (PWI). We completed four total focus groups with participants who identified as Latinx/a/o, Hispanic, and/or by Latin American country of origin/region of heritage. Each focus group discussed topics including identity, community connection, and general well-being within the university context as well as the general sociopolitical context. Critical-Constructivist Ground Theory (CCGT; Levitt, 2021) was utilized to analyze participant responses to the semi-structure focus group interviews.

Of significance, one focus group was removed from data analysis because participants mostly spoke in Spanish during the interview. Given that the co-facilitators encouraged the students to be present in the focus group as their authentic selves, we did not request that the participants speak in English. The co-facilitators (first and second authors) who were present for this focus group did not have the required fluency to be able to ask clarifying questions or to have participants expand on responses, though they were able to follow the conversation. As this focus group was significantly different from the other three with respect to limited interaction between facilitators and participants, this focus group was removed from the overall analysis.

Participants

After 5 participants from the fourth focus group were removed, there were a total of 20 participants, as shown in Table 1, including 16 (80%) undergraduate students and 4

(20%) graduate students. Participant ages ranged from 19-30 ($M_{age} = 21.95$, $SD = 3.75$).

The dominant self-identified sexual orientation was heterosexual ($n = 16$, 80%), followed

by queer ($n = 2$, 10%), gay ($n = 1$, 5%), and pansexual ($n = 1$, 5%). Participants' gender

identity included cisgender men ($n = 10$, 50%), cisgender women ($n = 9$, 45%), and a

gender queer person ($n = 1$, 5%). Five participants were international students from a

Latin American region (25%).

Recruitment

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, participants were recruited

via email, posted flyers, and snowball sampling. Flyers were posted in public spaces on a

university campus in the southeast part of the United States requesting self-identified

Latina/o/x, Chicana/o/x, and/or Hispanic students at the university to participate in a

research study to better understand Latinx students' experiences, community connection,

and belonging at a PWI. At the completion of the focus groups, participants were given

additional flyers to disperse to friends who may be interested in participating as well.

Recruitment emails were sent to self-identified Latinx professors on campus as well as

each college within the university to forward on to students. Participants indicated

hearing about the study by word of mouth from friends ($n = 13$, 52%), email notifications

($n = 9$, 36%), the flyers posted around campus ($n = 2$, 8%), and links on a message board

($n = 2$, 8%). Participants were included in the study if they: a) self-identified as Latinx or

with Latin American heritage, b) were at least 18 years of age, c) currently enrolled

within the university, and d) willing to attend the two-hour, in-person focus group.

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Interested participants contacted the second author with their availability to attend a two-hour focus group. The author verified if interested parties met the inclusion criteria then matched potential participant availabilities with facilitator availability to schedule four total focus groups between November 2019 and March 2020. The first and second authors co-facilitated each focus group. The number of participants in each focus group ranged from four to nine.

Procedure

Individuals who were interested in the study contacted the authors to coordinate a time for participation in one of the focus groups. Participants arrived to a private, reserved room on campus to complete the two-hour focus group. Each focus group included the first and second authors as co-facilitators and the participants. Participants consented to being audio recorded and provided pseudonyms and their pronouns. In the event participants did not wish to identify a pseudonym, one was selected for them during the transcription process. Audio files were transcribed for data analysis. Participants received a $25 Amazon gift card for participation.

Participants participating in the focus group responded to a series of semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix). Interview questions included how participants identify racially separate from ethnically, where they find a sense of belonging at the university and local community, where they find support on and off-campus, how they connect with their cultural heritage, and their experiences in the current political climate.

Focus groups were discontinued due to the COVID-19 pandemic halting in-person research in March 2020. Due to the cessation of data collection, the authors suspect saturation was not reached. Saturation refers to ceasing data collection when no new data is presented, no new themes emerge, and the study can be replicated (e.g., Guest et al., 2006; Fusch & Ness, 2015). Though participant narratives did not satisfactorily reach saturation, the researchers began to see replicated responses, which indicate potential for future research to replicate and add to our findings utilizing our research question.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory is a qualitative approach that firmly situates the interpretations of the data collected as primary to reach the goal of developing a theory to explain a specific phenomenon (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). Constructivist grounded theory methods (e.g., Charmaz, 2017) allow for the development of detailed explication to center the narratives of certain experiences by utilizing a hierarchical data analysis procedure coupled with a consensus that participants and researchers co-construct meaning during the research process. Critical grounded theory methods (e.g., Bryant & Charmaz, 2013) utilize hierarchical data analysis procedures as well, but situate the interpretation of the data within larger sociopolitical contexts with goals of promoting social change and/or transformation. Critical-constructivist grounded theory (CCGT; Levitt, 2021) is a grounded theory approach that combines the constructivist grounded theory approach of co-creating meaning with participants with critical grounded theory approach of situating

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interpretations of meaning within experienced sociopolitical structures that includes

processes of power, privilege, and oppression operating.

CCGT (Levitt, 2021) was utilized in our interpretation and analysis of

participants' responses to semi-structured interview questions and their commentary with

one another during the focus groups. The steps of CCGT are intentionally acknowledging

the interplay of researcher positionalities and participant identities (Levitt, 2021). The

first step that was taken in data analysis is unitization, or more specifically, creating

meaning from smaller units of data, where each unit contains a central idea relating to

study questions. We completed this step by taking each line of the transcription from

each focus group and deriving meaning from responses participants provided using

paraphrasing or direct quotes when possible (e.g., the response was short enough it could

be copied as a unit). This step was completed for each focus group separately. Labeling

units required a reflection of key concepts as step two. We began with focus group one

and then sequentially went through the focus groups noting when key concepts were

repeated throughout later focus groups as well as adding in new key concepts when

something novel was mentioned. Throughout the data analysis process, constant

comparison of units is utilized to build categories that reflected patterns of meaning in

participant responses. For step three we compiled all the initial categories together and

began summarizing initial categories into more condensed categories. The categories will

be presented in the results section with relevant participant quotations. The fourth step

included comparing categories to one another to develop more abstract meanings and

combining them into condensed clusters. The clusters are presented in the results section

as the second level, above categories. Finally, the fifth step focused on creating core categories that represented key concepts by combining clusters. For this analysis, our core categories are 1) navigating ethnic identity with intersecting identities and 2) creating a sense of connection & belonging with other Latinxs. The presentation of results works backwards to first discuss Step 5's core categories, breaking them down into Step 4's clusters. Within each cluster we will review Step 3's categories and demonstrate each category with participant quotations. Data analysis was completed without the assistance of a qualitative data analysis program.

Researcher's Positionality and Self-Reflection

All members of the research team included Latinx-identified researchers, which lends personal expertise lenses to aspects of the research question. Specifically, the research team included a counseling psychology doctoral student who identifies as a Latinx (Mexican descent) cisgender woman, an assistant professor of psychology who identifies as a Latinx heterosexual cisgender woman (second author), and an assistant professor of psychology who identifies as a Cuban gay cisgender man (third author).

In accordance with Levitt's (2021) recommendations to support methodological integrity, the authors utilized group consensus, dividing teamwork, and regular team feedback. Group consensus is determining as a group that the results can be seen as objective to multiple people, recognizing analysis can vary (which deepens the comprehension of the findings), and finally encourages researchers of different levels of power to be involved in the analysis. We completed this task by having frequent meetings between the first and second authors during the data analysis process to discuss emerging

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narratives and experiences. Dividing teamwork allows for a utilization of researcher's expertise to be applied to specific tasks, ensuring an improved quality of outcomes. Dividing teamwork included separating translation tasks from analysis tasks to utilize the unique skillset of the third author. Regular team feedback included extensive conversations throughout the data collection, analysis, and manuscript preparation process. Regular team feedback typically included conversations of bias and assumption management and corrections between the first and second authors over conceptualization and analysis process of each data analysis step. Biases were self-identified by the authors individually and team-identified during research design, data collection, data analysis, and manuscript preparation processes. The first and second authors met intermittently to discuss any biases and assumptions in the labeling and condensing of themes that were emerging from the participant narratives. Employing team feedback methods allowed for conversations to rectify biases to the best of the research team's abilities to center participants' narratives and experiences. Team feedback methods allowed for correction of labels utilized in each step of the CCGT process and overall discussion of core categories, clusters, and categories during analysis and manuscript preparation (e.g., results section).

The research team members have extensive experience in qualitative research, and value the disclosure of identities, biases, and assumptions as important steps in the research process. This paper serves to center the narratives of individuals who have a variety of experiences attending a PWI within the southeastern region of the United

States in regards to the interactions between their intersecting identities and sense of

belonging and connection.

CHAPTER THREE
RESULTS

Two core categories developed from the research question for Latinx participants (undergraduate and graduate students) currently attending a southeastern predominantly White institution (PWI), including: 1) navigating ethnic identity with intersecting identities, and 2) creating a sense of connection & belonging with other Latinxs. Both core categories include clusters, and each cluster includes categories with representative quotes to emphasize narratives and experiences. Additionally, the core categories interact to create a cluster describing the cyclical nature of ethnic identity affirmation and social connections amongst Latinxs (See Figure 1 for a visual representation of the hierarchy and interaction). Our analysis emphasizes that within a PWI environment, Latinx students (regardless of undergraduate or graduate status) express the process of navigating their ethnic identity (some in conjunction with intersecting identities), which leads to seeking out a community of other Latinxs. These communities help the participants to reinforce their ethnic identity as well as offer unique connections and support, allowing participants to more feasibly navigate their PWI experience.

Core Category 1: Navigating Ethnic Identity with Intersecting Identities

The first core category is navigating ethnic identity with intersecting identities and broadly centered around two main topics: 1) indications of the salience of their ethnic identity on a PWI campus (versus prior environmental contexts), and 2) intersection of their ethnic identity with other salient identities that influences their experience on a PWI campus (and current geographic location). The core category was made up of two

clusters: 1) centering of ethnic identity within a PWI context, and 2) intersectionality experiences & ethnic identity.

Centering of Ethnic Identity within PWI Context

This cluster did not have lower-level categories included. Therefore, we will present quotations to emphasize the experiences captured with this cluster. There were multiple examples of participants reporting how they remain connected to their culture while attending a PWI. Participants additionally expressed ways in which they affirm their ethnic identity for themselves as well as outsiders who interact with them while they are navigating the PWI environment. Examples included visiting Latin American countries, connection with family, communicating in Spanish, attending sporting or religious events, and interacting with Latinx media (e.g., music, television shows). Participants emphasized the importance of remaining connected to their identities while in a PWI environment and the effort required to affirm identity in this context. Some participants indicated participation in specific activities where they feel connected to their ethnic identity, such as Selena:

> Uh for me, since I'm White passing I feel like I have to prove that I'm Mexican to myself, like a lot. Uh, so like my mom cooks Mexican food most of the time and um I'll tell anybody who asks me about being Mexican and like I'll tell them as much as I can and um I have the privilege to be able to every few years get to visit my grandmother's house in Michoacán and I also started taking a ceramics class, like the clay and stuff, and um I'm going to try to make some dishes and then I'm going to instead of like using the kiln here at the school, I'm going to try to do it

with the pit fire (Selena, 20, Mexican, undergraduate student, queer, gender queer person).

Other participants reported ways they would utilize marking to express their ethnic identity to others. Participants frequently listed multiple ways they affirm their ethnic identity in the PWI environment. Jan-Marcos said:

For me it's just being like really loud about who I am and my identity. On my social media platforms, all of them, I've changed, like on my email and things like that my signature has like my full name, that's kind of been like my way to kind of honor my heritage and my culture . . . during the summer when I have my windows down like I'll play my Spanish music . . . I have a flag hanging in my window of my car, I have the little one that has the yellow strings on it. Anywhere that I can just kind of like make this space my space. That's kind of like how I've gained authority over my identity and reclaimed that power (Jan-Marcos, 22, Afro-Latino, undergraduate student, gay, man).

Overall participants in this cluster were very motivated to complete marking behaviors so that non-Latinxs in a PWI environment would be aware of their ethnic identity. Participants noted that this marking made their ethnic identity more present for them in a PWI environment as well. This is important to note as participants were not motivated to conceal their ethnic identity in an attempt to blend into their homogenous environment of non-Latinxs.

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Ethnic Identity & Intersectionality

Participants who indicated their Latinx ethnic identity was not their only salient identity described their experiences navigating all their salient identities simultaneously, sometimes in an integrated manner. They highlighted the difficulty they experienced when trying to use only one identity and the decision-making process that ultimately lead them to identify with multiple labels. This cluster had three categories: 1) Afro-Latinx experiences, 2) Latinx + queer experiences, and 3) Latinx + "foreigner" experiences.

Afro-Latinx Experiences

Two participants throughout the focus groups identified as Afro-Latinx and discussed their experiences combining their ethnic and racial identities. One participant, Jan-Marcos, indicated he was the first Afro-Latinx generation in his family as a result of the blending of his African American heritage and his Latinx heritage:

> I've always also considered myself kind of like a first generation like Afro-Latino in my family because on my mom's side of the family that's Hispanic or Latin, nobody in my family is Black and then on my dad's side of the family that's African American nobody is Hispanic…and like I was kind of put in a position where I had to pick one…but as I got older and kind of became more aware of myself, I realized I didn't have to pick, I could be both, um, and that race and ethnicity are different at the same time, so you can-you don't have to be mutually exclusive, you can be both (Jan-Marcos, 22, Afro-Latino, undergraduate student, gay, man).

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A different perspective was captured by J, who demonstrated that she struggled to establish her identity as a Latina as a result of not fitting the phenotypical stereotype representation of a Latina:

> Yeah, I'm realizing that more, cause like especially when I was younger, um, I didn't really fit in with any group because, I don't know most people thought like 'oh you're White' and 'you're Black and White.' And I'm like 'no I'm not.' Like I'm trying to explain so many times 'no, I'm a Latina' like 'I'm Afro-Latina'…not everyone has to have like a specific look… cause I struggle with like not looking Latina (J, 20, Afro-Latina, undergraduate student, heterosexual, woman).

Both quotes above noted a process that was needed to navigate their Afro-Latinx identity in their individual manner. The two quotes also functioned to highlight that Afro-Latinxs can come from various heritages (African American/Black + Latinx, or Afro-Latinx descended). Unfortunately, data collection halted before additional Afro-Latinx experiences could be captured.

Latinx + Queer Experiences

Ethnic identity was also noted to exist in tandem with an identity of queerness. Participants highlighted that there was not much sense of support regarding a combination of ethnic identity and sexual identity. Without support in this regard, one participant discussed how they utilized their intersecting identities regarding ethnicity and sexuality to form their own support and pride:

> I have two salient identities for me like my queerness and my Latinidad . . . support for my Latinidad itself just doesn't exist for me . . . I have had to learn

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how to weaponize kind of in a sense, my Latinidad and Queerness. So, I'm read as

a loud, annoying, very extraverted person, and it's like, because I had to shelter

everything about me growing up, especially in a Catholic school. So, it's like now

that I'm here I finally learned to weaponize those identities to protect myself. And

so a lot of people get scared by the fact that I'm very much in their face about like

'yeah I'm Queer and I'm Latino like what are you gonna do about it' (Patito, 20,

Latino, undergraduate student, queer, man).

As opposed to Afro-Latinx experiences, participants with queer and Latinx

identities felt the need to separate these identities to avoid experiencing discrimination

within their separate groups. Specifically, experiencing ethnic discrimination and racism

within the LGBTQIA+ community or experiencing homophobia and heteronormativity

within the Latinx community encouraged participants to focus on only one identity in

those spheres. Participants emphasized the importance of finding a space within a PWI

where they could be brown/Latinx and queer was vital to feeling their identities were

affirmed.

Latinx + Foreigner Experiences

Several participants were international students attending the university. When

discussing their ethnic identities, they expressed a variation in how ethnic identity is

conceptualized within the United States versus within Latin America. Specifically, it was

noted that the term "Latino/a/x" is typically a United States term that encompasses

anyone from Latin America and descendants of Latin America, whereas within Latin

America it is more common to indicate ethnic identity in terms of skin color (e.g., White)

or country of origin. One participant embraced the new terminology and noted they think it applies to them:

Well I guess it depends a lot on the context. In Brazilian context, I'm for sure White, but I've got to notice in America, things are different. Here I have been hanging around more with *Latinos* and so I think I'm Latinx (Isaac, 30, Brazilian, graduate student, heterosexual, man).

Other participants felt the label of Latinx was confusing and debated if it was applicable to them:

So actually when we got here I started thinking are we actually Latinos? I'm not sure. I just say 'no, I'm from Chile.'… Yeah. Like it's not such a strong word for me when I talk about the Latino community. It's like a place where I can be myself but also it's something that I wasn't used to before I came here so it's not maybe as strong as it would be for other people (Toña, 22, Chilean, undergraduate, heterosexual, woman).

Several participants noted they were international students and we were fortunate to include both international graduate and international undergraduate students. Conversations of Latinx identity and a self-placed label of "foreigner" (adopted over the use of the phrase international student) highlighted their unique layered experience within a PWI of having to reconfigure their ethnic identity personally as well as interpersonally. The quotes above suggest that some students were able to invoke the Latinx label easier than others.

Overall, the cluster of ethnic identity and intersectionality highlighted three examples of ways in which a blanket panethnic labeling of Latinx students within a PWI environment erases nuances of experiences with ethnic identity and other salient identities. The nuances in overlapping salient identities were further emphasized in the participants with the same identity combinations noting very different experiences navigating their salient identities (e.g., both Afro-Latinx participants reported vastly different experiences with deciding to use the label Afro-Latinx). Participants repeatedly highlighted how being in a PWI environment influences the salience of these identity intersections.

The core category of navigating ethnic identity with intersecting identities captured narratives of how being enveloped in a PWI environment alters the salience of Latinx identities as well as the intersections of Latinx identities with other salient identities. Participants highlighted methods employed to mark their ethnic identity for themselves and non-Latinxs. Participants also provided examples of experiences navigating ethnic identity exploration coupled with intersecting identities to more complexly engage with ethnic identity in the PWI environment.

Core Category 2: Creating a Sense of Belonging and Connection with Other Latinxs

All participants indicated the importance of locating a community of other Latinxs to help navigate the PWI experience. Having the community of Latinxs available was important for social connection, building stronger friendships, facilitating a sense of belonging, and allowing a counterspace for participants to show up as their authentic

selves. The core category included two clusters: 1) social connection with other Latinxs, and 2) other Latinxs as sources of support and understanding at a PWI.

Social Connection with Other Latinxs

Participants across the three focus groups strongly noted the importance of meeting other Latinxs while attending a PWI and building social connections with other Latinxs on-campus and in the greater community. Connections with other Latinxs facilitated stronger bonds, allowed for more authentic expressions of self, and revealed a deeper understanding than connections with non-Latinxs. Two categories are included in this cluster: 1) stronger ties with other Latinxs, and 2) more authentic self with other Latinxs.

Stronger Ties with Other Latinxs

Participants discussed the depth of connection felt amongst Latinxs that is absent from social connections created with non-Latinxs. Participants also reported that in some cases they preferred to be friends with other Latinxs over being friends with outgroup members (e.g., non-Latinxs) within the PWI environment. This preference was due to feeling more strongly connected with other Latinxs because of the similarity in cultures and an understanding of heritage. Participants indicated feelings of familiarity similar to family members. One participant said, "I feel mostly connected when I'm at Mexican parties . . . we had a Día de los Muertos party so I saw the decorations and everything and it just like felt so homey. I felt that feeling of oh this is family celebrating" (Paola, 21, Mexican, undergraduate student, heterosexual, woman). Participants noted feelings of strong connection even upon meeting other Latinx students on campus for the first time.

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Selena said, "Yeah, the first time I went to a [university Latinx organization] meeting, it was just-I love like we hug each other even though we don't know each other and you don't get that with White people" (Selena, 20, Mexican, undergraduate, queer, gender queer person).

Participants also noted that connections between Latinxs developed much quicker than connections with non-Latinxs. Patito said:

You get two Latinos in a room and all of a sudden it's like they're family, they could have never met before, you get two White people that have never met before and they're sitting there shy as hell, and they're like trying to talk and they're like 'what do you do', like 'what's your career' but it's like there's this like huge like community tightness like within the whole Latino community (Patito, 20, Latino, undergraduate, queer, man).

In this category, participants are exemplifying the types of connections forged with other Latinxs despite being in a very non-Latinx, homogenous environment. They emphasized an immediate sense of closeness and understanding with other Latinxs as well as a connection that was more quickly developed compared to non-Latinx connections at the PWI. Participants noted that these stronger connections helped them feel more at home in a PWI environment than they would have felt without access to other Latinxs.

More Authentic Self with Other Latinxs

Participants reported that they can show up as more authentic versions of themselves when they are interacting with other Latinxs at a PWI compared to when they

are interacting with non-Latinxs. Some participants indicated it was easier to be more authentic with other Latinxs because they understand their culture and won't judge you. Angelina said:

> I feel like I can say a lot more, I can be really like I said, what I am. With White people yeah, it's like you have to be careful, you have to beat around the bush . . . you can be friends with anybody, you can have friends of all races, every type, but who is going to understand you, and not judge you . . . I don't have the time right now to be teaching nobody about my culture like if you're going to be my friend you need to understand me right here right now . . . I don't have the time to teach you about my culture and make sure you're okay with my culture because I would rather just be surrounded with people that understand it (Angelina, 21, Mexican American, undergraduate student, heterosexual, woman).

Another participant said:

> There's people in this room that know my experience and they know me and, like, I feel like more of myself as a person around them. And sure, I'll have, like, White friends, Black friends, but none of them, like, get the experience of, like, your mom smacking you with *la chancla*, like, for us, that's like nothing (Yenni, 20, Hispanic, undergraduate student, pansexual, woman).

Participants additionally indicated that a sense of comfort is associated with being themselves and surrounding themselves with other Latinxs in an environment where there is not a lot of diversity witnessed. One participant said:

From when I was small it . . . the community I became a part of, identifying with anyone who was Hispanic or Latino and feeling comfortable because it was the only space where I felt comfortable. Where as if I'm in a mostly, predominantly White [space] I feel at times very uncomfortable or I feel out of place (Danny, 19, Hispanic/Latino, undergraduate student, heterosexual, man).

This cluster captured the quality of connections with other Latinxs as participants describe them as more authentic, having less judgment, and feeling more themselves around other Latinxs. Participants highlighted that at a PWI they sometimes feel uncomfortable or unsafe and feel the need to censor themselves for various reasons. These factors were not at play during connections with other Latinxs.

Overall this category functioned to capture the process of connecting with other Latinxs at a PWI as well as the level of connection that is created between Latinxs in the PWI environment. Participants were quicker to develop stronger ties with other Latinxs in this environment and preferred friendships with other Latinxs compared to non-Latinxs. Additionally, participants reported they felt more like themselves with other Latinxs present and this felt needed due to the discomfort of being in a PWI environment.

Other Latinxs as a Source of Belonging & Support at PWI

Participants reported initial difficulties locating a sense of belonging and sources of support when first entering the PWI environment. After locating a Latinx community, participants reported feeling a sense of belonging amongst other Latinxs even though they were still existing in a PWI environment. In addition to receiving a sense of belonging from other Latinxs, participants also reported feeling supported by other

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Latinxs in the PWI context. The two categories in this cluster are: 1) sense of belonging in PWI environment, and 2) sources of support at PWI.

Sense of Belonging in PWI Environment

Participants discussed first arriving to a PWI university and having to adjust to the lack of diversity present in their immediate environment. One participant said, "Growing up where I did it was-there was a lot of Mexican people. Like it was predominantly Mexican . . . coming here [to] a predominantly White institute it's like it's not overwhelming it just feels weird" (Jacob, 19, Mexican, undergraduate student, heterosexual, man). They reported that as a result of this contextual shift, they had to make attempts to locate a sense of belonging by finding a community and engaging in cultural practices and traditions that make them feel more connected to their ethnic identity (e.g., eating authentic food, speaking Spanish). Heather said:

> I feel like you have to like find a way here, it's not like you can if you're in New York or other places that have a lot of people from like different places it's a lot easier you can continue like without any effort but here you have to find the people to find a community and make time to . . . I don't know like to talk to people that speak your language, to celebrate festivities and things like that so I think it's a little bit harder than if you were somewhere else in the United States (Heather, 22, Chilean, undergraduate, heterosexual, woman).

Participants described experiences at the PWI that kept them from establishing a sense of belonging after initially arriving in this environment. One participant said, "Moving from California was a big shift. Like obviously I was Mexican over there but

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people were fine with it. Here, it's very much a my gosh-a predominantly White school, so you always get these glares and it's just a completely different environment" (Castielle, 24, Mexican, graduate, heterosexual, woman).

Finally, participants reported that by connecting with other Latinxs, they developed a sense of belonging by having other Latinx university students as roommates. Mateo stated:

> I've been blessed that I have Latin roommates. And I don't know how it happened, but our group of friends became, like, I don't know 15 of us, so sometimes like every month or so we get together and we cook, or we just dance or whatever. So, for me it's pretty interesting because I feel like I have like two lives. So, like morning when I go to the university, my lab, that's me stud[ying] in the United States. Whenever I go home, it's just disconnect, I don't have to speak English at all, I don't have to even think in English, and my friends, my roommates, they all speak Spanish, so it's like two lives (Mateo, 25, Nicaraguan, graduate student, heterosexual, man).

Participants were forthcoming about their struggles locating a sense of belonging when initially arriving to a PWI in this category. They noted that sense of belonging came from locating other Latinxs on-campus versus locating connections based on other social identities. Participants highlighted a lack of sense of belonging stemmed from a visual representation at a PWI of the lack of diversity in the campus spaces.

Sources of Support at PWI

Participants reported a variety of methods of receiving support while navigating a PWI environment. Specifically, some students indicated receiving unique types of support from Latinx friends they couldn't receive from non-Latinxs. For example, "for me as first gen, it's like 15 times harder, I have to figure everything out by myself. [My White friends are] sympathetic but they really can't help, but when I share with my Latin friends they're like 'well I found this useful' "(Danielle, 19, Latina, undergraduate student, heterosexual, woman).

Participants also noted receiving unique types of support from Latinx faculty members on campus, even once they are no longer in their classes. One participant said:

I've actually had a couple classes where my professors were Latinx and I find myself really close to those professors. Even though I had them for freshman or sophomore year I find myself meeting with them, having lunch with them, connecting with them because I can talk a lot about other stuff and they're really well with checking up on me like 'how are you doing' especially with the political climate . . . they'll ask me 'is your family okay' and stuff like that. [It's a] good thing that the professors that I've talk to, they are Latinx, so it's nice to have that support (Angelina, 21, Mexican American, undergraduate student, heterosexual, woman).

In addition to support navigating the university, participants also reported Latinx friends as supports for emotional well-being indicating the importance of locating Latinxs as a source of support on a PWI campus. For example, Mateo said, "at the end of the day,

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like, if I have a rough day, who I going to ask, like, for an advice or just to hear me out it will be my La-my *Latino* friends" (Mateo, 25, Nicaraguan, graduate student, heterosexual, man). However, some graduate students indicated it was more difficult to receive avenues of social support. For example, Castielle stated "I think the undergraduates have a little more support than the graduate students. At least for me, I think I know another Latina maybe, but other than that grad students aren't really exposed to the resources there are for undergraduates" (Castielle, 24, Mexican, graduate, heterosexual, woman).

Participants were clear that the quality of support from other Latinxs in a PWI environment differed from the sources of support offered from non-Latinxs in this category. The support was easier to ask for from other Latinxs, continued longer than typical professional relationships, and provided support that was unique and un-paralleled from non-Latinxs at a PWI. Finally, participants expressed that graduate students struggle to locate social supports more than undergraduate students.

Overall this cluster functioned to capture how Latinx students navigate a PWI to locate sense of belonging and sources of support. Participants emphasized that locating other Latinxs was crucial for both the development of a sense of belonging as well as new and continued sources of support. The core category creating a sense of belonging and connection with other Latinxs demonstrates that sense of belonging, sources of support, and connection are all separate experiences that Latinx students are attempting to navigate in a PWI environment. Additionally, this core category lends support that even

in a PWI environment, Latinx students are motivated to connect with other Latinxs in a unique way.

Preliminary Conceptual Model: Connection with Ethnic Identity through Connection with Other Latinxs

Participant narratives centered a connection between the two core categories of navigating ethnic identity with intersecting identities, and creating a sense of belonging and connection with other Latinxs as participants navigated a PWI environment. Specifically, participants reported a reciprocal interaction whereby they sought community and belonging amongst other Latinxs and this connection with other Latinxs functioned to affirm and strengthen their ethnic identity while attending the PWI. The strengthening of their ethnic identity functioned to allow participants to continue seeking support from other Latinxs.

In this quote, we can see that the use of Spanish language, identified by this participant as an indication that someone is a potential member of the Latinx community, helps the participant attempt to form quick social connections with other Latinxs. This participant said:

> First of all, it's like the language itself Spanish, it's like whenever I find someone who speaks Spanish 100% I'm already on them, like 'oh so you speak fluent Spanish?' and I'm like then from that point on, I'm just trying to communicate with them and tryna see if they want to speak Spanish with me too, you know, because it's my connection to that person, it's like I can communicate with you in a way that only people who are Hispanic or Latino can communicate, or you

know someone who took a course, but like symbolically you know what I mean, you know (Rafael, 21, Mexican, undergraduate student, heterosexual, man).

Participants noted that after a community of Latinxs is established, they can begin to affirm their identity with this group by engaging in cultural activities with them. For example, this participant noted they located a group from their country of origin at a local Latinx festival. This group included community members that the participant can attend religious services with. Juan said:

At [festival], there was different stations for different countries to go try their foods. That's why I went . . . I saw the Venezuelan one, and immediately it clicked. Immediately. It's like we were family . . . I have all their phone numbers. They literally gave me free food at the festival. I'm a part of Venezuelans in Knoxville now, like I'm a part of all these like clubs that they're in . . . it's cool to have that connection with my culture, with people here. Like yesterday I went to church with like a bunch of Venezuelans to like celebrate *La Virgen de Chiquinquirá* and it was really cool because, it was all them so it was like wow, I feel at home, I feel at peace (Juan, 18, Latino, undergraduate student, heterosexual, man).

In summary, this conceptual model indicates the method in which the two core categories influence one another. Specifically, Latinx students in a PWI environment are affirming their ethnic identity, versus attempting to conceal it. They are motivated and successful in locating other Latinx individuals as sources of belonging, support, and connection in the PWI environment. Finally, the connections formed with other Latinxs

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function to reinforce ethnic identity, and allow Latinxs to embrace this identity more

easily in this homogenous environment.

CHAPTER FOUR

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to capture the layered, nuanced experiences of Latinx students enrolled in a PWI campus environment to determine the variances in navigating social connections, sense of belonging, and ethnic identity. Focus groups were utilized to complete semi-structured interviews with self-identified Latinx undergraduate and graduate students. Focus groups allowed us to gather individual participant answers as well as record conversations amongst participants in collective answering of questions and/or discussions of experiences. Using a semi-structured interview format allowed us to receive direct answers to specific research questions, but also allotted space for participants to spontaneously provide information on their (sometimes shared) experiences in the PWI environment.

Research Implications

Our findings contributed to the growing body of literature (e.g., e.g., Beard, 2021; Gonzalez, 2017; Gonzalez et al., 2018) that highlights that Latinx student experiences within an PWI is not a singular shared narrative, but rather a nuanced experience influenced by the variations in overlapping social identities held by our Latinx participants. In other words, our findings demonstrate that though the panethnic label of Latinx is beneficial in establishing social connections and locating a sense of belonging on a largely homogenous, White campus, it is not exemplary of the unique and expansive variations in experiences students are reporting as a result of having multiple salient identities (e.g., racial identity, sexuality, citizenship status). Future research could continue to explore the variations that occur under the Latinx panethnic umbrella labeling

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and would benefit from centering the narrative that Latinxs are a very heterogeneous group with extreme variations in identification and experiences versus a conglomerate of a singular story.

Additionally, this research proposes a preliminary conceptual model that is cyclical in nature. First being in a PWI environment emphasizes the salience of the Latinx ethnic identity contributing to feelings of otherness or isolation. Second Latinxs seek out a sense of belonging and social connection by locating other Latinxs on- and off-campus. Finally, as a result of their newfound sense of belonging and social connectedness, their ethnic identity is affirmed and supported. Future research could replicate these findings to determine if this preliminary conceptual model holds in other PWIs throughout the United States.

Institutional & Clinical Implications

Our research findings lend insight into practical implications that could provide more positive, helpful experiences for Latinx students enrolling in PWIs. The following sections will provide specific experiences of our participants comparing undergraduate to graduate experiences and comparing domestic to international student experiences. Institutional and practical implications are included that can be drawn from these narratives.

Undergraduate versus Graduate Experiences

Though all focus group participants described difficulties locating social connections, sense of belonging, and affirmations of ethnic identity at a PWI, there were noticeable similarities and differences between the processes described from

undergraduate versus graduate perspectives. Both undergraduates and graduate students noted a lack of other Latinxs present in their courses and majors of study. Students noted this made them feel lonely and gave indications that the university was not as diverse as it could be to prevent the feelings of loneliness. Students reported beginning a process of searching for social connection and affirmative spaces as a result of the loneliness and lack of sense of belonging experienced.

Undergraduate students were able to locate the local community organization dedicated to serving Latinxs in the surrounding area and were able to access the undergraduate Latinx group on campus easier and faster than graduate students. Graduate students noted not having the free time available to search for communities outside their graduate programs and reported feeling siloed and separated from others on campus outside of the graduate department. The graduate students reported becoming familiar with the undergraduate Latinx association on campus but did not feel it was a place for them to interact (e.g., multiple roles and not wanting to run into their students). Graduate students reported that having a Latinx organization for graduate students across the university would help foster a sense of belonging and social connection currently lacking in the PWI environment.

Both undergraduate and graduate students additionally highlighted a lack of incentive for the university to host and announce Latinx-specific events. Students noted that an open event for undergraduate and graduate students at least once a year that was well advertised would be all that is needed for quick connections to be made and a sense

of belonging to be fostered. Additionally, students stated an event like this would demonstrate the university valued the experiences of Latinx students.

Domestic versus International Students Experiences

Our focus groups included domestic and international students. During data collection, several differences were noticed in the discussion of ethnic identity and navigating a PWI for students who were international versus students who were domestic. For example, students discussed how ethnic identity was not as strongly centered in Latin America, but rather racial identity (e.g., White, mestizo) or country of origin was the identifier utilized. International students additionally noted that they see the benefits of identifying with a panethnic label (e.g., Latinx) while in the United States because it's an easier identity than having to elaborate on the location of their country or origin, though the label of Latinx/o/a doesn't feel as strong. Prior research has witnessed similar struggles in regard to the utilization of panethnic labels versus country of origin labels (Gonzalez, 2017).

International students additionally discussed that their ethnic identity felt present in their day-to-day lives because they had overlapping experiences as "foreigners" within the United States and were easily identified as foreigners (usually after speaking). Whereas domestic students were able to selectively disclose their specific ethnic identity labeling in circumstances they could control, international students did not have that luxury. International students also reported discrimination as a result of their foreigner status and noted it was difficult to identify if it was because they were Latinx, because they were a "foreigner", or because they were a Latinx foreigner. Indeed, recent research

has highlighted that international Latinxs face disproportionate instances of discrimination, especially recently given the political climate, when compared to domestic-born Latinxs (Garcini et al., 2020). Garcini and colleagues (2020) expand further to highlight how the ethnic discrimination faced can contribute to more depressive symptomology; but the negative impact of ethnic discrimination on mental health (e.g., higher depressive symptomology) can be reduced by having access to, and receiving, various types of social supports (e.g., positive social interactions and support). Therefore, it may be even more important for international Latinx students to quickly connect with Latinx communities upon their arrival to PWIs.

Finally, research has compared Black international students and Black Americans at HBCUs to investigate differences in developing a sense of belonging (George Mwangi, 2016). Findings from George Mwangi's (2016) study indicated that international students had varying perceptions of race and as a result had different experiences with locating a sense of belonging compared to Black American students. These findings marginally support the observation that Latinx international students think about their ethnic identity differently than Latinx American students. George Mwangi (2016) also observed these findings within a context of a predominantly Black institution indicating the possibility that a similar variation in sense of belonging may be observed for domestic versus international Latinx students regardless of university environment. Additional research is needed to examine if these results can be replicated within the Latinx population at PWI institutions.

Clinical Implications

When participants were reporting there sources of support within the PWI, not a single participant reported utilizing the university counseling center. Granted, this does not mean no one utilized this as a source of personal support and chose not to disclose, but it does highlight the potential for our findings to contribute to PWI counseling centers to utilize our findings to support the Latinx student communities. Counseling centers within PWIs could use our findings as justification for implementing Latinx-specific resources and services. Ideally, counseling centers should be accessible counterspaces (safe, affirming spaces) that offer validation and support to students during their enrollment in a university. Advertising Latinx-specific resources and services could mark that space as safe for students, even if the students are unfamiliar with counseling or mental health in general or are hesitant to engage in services due to cultural barriers (e.g., Aguilar-Gaxiola et al., 2002; Mendez et al., 2020). One potential way to engage with Latinx students enrolled in a PWI is a well-advertised Latinx support group (e.g., Malott et al., 2010). Specifically, Malott and colleagues (2010) designed a group counseling intervention experience for Mexican descendants to help facilitate ethnic identity development in a positive manner. Outcomes from the group revealed members found the group meaningful, positively increased their ethnic identity, and even reported that relational skills increased. This study also noted that perceptions of outgroup members changed after participation in the group in that perceptions of non-Latinxs became more positive. Therefore, implementing Latinx group counseling services that acknowledge their experiences, strengths, and struggles could potentially provide students with a sense

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of belonging on campus, social connections with other group members (who share their ethnic identity), and positively influence their ethnic identity development in an affirmative manner.

Advocacy Implications

Each focus group indicated a time-consuming and difficult process of locating ethnic community members on- and off-campus. They reported a lack of support from the institution to provide conscious efforts to introduce Latinx students to each other, leaving it their responsibility to locate these social connections. Once Latinx communities were found, participants noted an immediate increase in sense of belonging and emotional wellbeing on the PWI campus. These findings support work by Von Robertson and colleagues (2016) noting counterspaces increase wellbeing and sense of belonging. Participants expanded on previous findings by describing their process of introducing other Latinxs they meet to the communities they found, so newcomers to the university would not have to struggle to locate a sense of belonging. Participants noted a variety of counterspaces (e.g., undergraduate group on-campus, community organization off-campus, local food vendors) that they would share with others. Advocacy efforts could be implemented to assist Latinx students within PWIs to locate counterspaces more quickly by implementing some suggestions that participants shared (e.g., hosting a singular event so they could meet other Latinx students). Research supports that Latinx students rely on their social networks to navigate PWIs, locate resources/services, and find other social connections (e.g., Beard, 2021). Therefore, facilitating these connections through

advocacy efforts would be beneficial to Latinx students allowing them to meet others that will transmit knowledge to newcomers.

Additionally, efforts could be implemented in institutional settings to facilitate workshops or resource materials to incoming Latinx undergraduate and graduate students providing psychoeducation on the positive effects a sense of belonging and social connection can have on well-being, and host events that demonstrate the understood heterogeneity within the Latinx labeling umbrella. Gonzalez and colleagues (2018) found that a Latinx student organization functioned to increase sense of belonging and social connections within a PWI environment, but that the university could have implemented additional efforts to support them as well as acknowledge the diversity within the Latinx community. These findings suggest that simply providing a counterspace at a PWI is beneficial, but there are additional steps institutions can take to create more support for this population in PWI settings. Specifically, Gonzalez and colleagues (2018) reported students enrolled in the Midwestern PWI requested more programming that centered and embraced intersectional experiences for Latinx students, incorporated Latinx experiences and narratives into plans for diversity initiatives and policies on campus, and supported the creation and maintenance of ethnic-specific support groups/organizations (e.g., counterspaces) on campus.

While participants described social networks with non-Latinxs at this PWI, they indicated that friendships and connections with other Latinxs felt more authentic and facilitated stronger bonds. Additionally, these social network connections facilitate a means of successfully navigating a PWI, an institution that by definition was founded on

not having BIPOC, and specifically Latinx, students in mind in its structures and practices (e.g., Sánchez-Connally, 2018). Specifically, Sánchez-Connally (2018) noted developing cultural wealth through social networks of other Latinx students aids in the navigation and success of Latinxs in PWI environments. Indeed, our participants reported knowing other Latinxs and sharing information/resources helped them to succeed at this PWI. Institutional efforts could implement a resource directory allowing Latinx students to locate faculty mentors that could share with students methods of successfully navigating PWI environments and help students locate wider social networks across campus, thereby facilitating an easier and faster way to disseminate information across majors, programs, departments, and colleges within the PWI.

Limitations & Strengths

Due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, in-person research was halted and therefore data collection ceased prior to reaching saturation. Though we were beginning to witness repeated responses between the focus groups, it is possible that additional data collection would have provided increased details in the nuanced experiences not captured for this sample. For example, we were only about to obtain two different perspectives for Afro-Latinx experiences within the PWI setting. While these experiences need to be centered and documented, being able to include additional narratives from Afro-Latinx students at a southeastern PWI could have provided more specific information that we were not able to collect at this time. Similarly, we were only able to collect experiences from four focus group participants that identified as queer or gay and only one of those students explicitly discussed their experiences navigating their intersectional identity on a

PWI campus. Future research can build off our findings by specifically selecting to recruit participants with multiple salient identities and examine their experience through an intersectional lens highlighting the interlocking systems of oppression and privilege these students navigate simultaneously in and out of PWI environments.

A limitation in the recruitment of this study could be the potential for self-selection of participants (e.g., Morling, 2021). Self-selection is referred to as a type of bias in which participants decide to volunteer as a result of self-identified inclusion criteria (Morling, 2021). As this study recruited self-identified Latinx individuals, it is possible that only Latinxs who are in the latter two stages of ethnic identity development (e.g., exploration of ethnic identity or achieved ethnic identity; Phinney, 1996) would consider participation in our study. Individuals who are Latinx but within the first stage of ethnic identity development (i.e., unexamined ethnic identity) would be less likely to self-select to participate. Without having individuals in all stages of ethnic identity development participate, it is possible our narratives are not capturing experiences for all levels of Latinx ethnic identity within the PWI environment.

Additional limitations include limited Spanish fluency of the co-facilitators and primary coders for this research. Limited Spanish-fluency, combined with 2nd/3rd generation Latinx identity, could serve as barriers in interpretations and identification of themes or interpretations of participant meanings. Specifically, the coders and co-facilitators did not have personal experience speaking Spanish fluently or as a primary language, nor experiences with immigration or as international students. Therefore, it is

possible the themes could be expanded to include additional nuanced narratives of these experiences in future work.

Finally, it is crucial to acknowledge that all participants were recruited from a single PWI within the southeastern United States. The ability to generalize our findings to any Latinx individual attending a PWI within the United States is limited. Generalizability could be bolstered if future work at other PWIs replicate our themes and findings (e.g., Ferguson, 2004).

There are several strengths in this study. One strength in the research design includes the co-facilitators witnessing after *each* focus group session participants sharing their contact information with others in the group. During the focus groups, participants were sharing information with each other (e.g., good local vendors to eat traditional Latin American cuisine, authentic *tiendas* around the city, Latinx shows on accessible platforms like Netflix and Hulu, and the annual Latinx festival in the city during Hispanic/Latinx Heritage Month, how to navigate testing out of the Spanish language requirement). These interactions allowed the co-facilitators to witness real-time community building amongst participants as a result of the focus group format that would have been eliminated had we completed individual interviews.

An additional strength is the two co-facilitators sharing the Latinx ethnic identity with the participants and having experiences attending PWI environments as undergraduate and graduate students. By having shared identities, the co-facilitators were able to build quick rapport and trust with the participants. The shared Latinx identity also allowed the narratives within the data to be viewed in a manner different than how a non-

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Latinx person may have interpreted the results and experiences. Finally as members of this ethnic group, co-facilitators were able to respond to participant commentary and responses during the focus groups with cultural humility (participating in self-evaluation and critique as a lifelong commitment to addressing power imbalances association with social identities; e.g., Greene-Moton & Minkler, 2020).

Conclusion

In conclusion, our work adds to the current body of literature examining Latinxs' experiences with social connections, sense of belonging, and the navigation of ethnic identity (with other salient identities) while enrolled at a PWI (e.g., Beard, 2021; Gonzalez, 2017; Gonzalez et al., 2018). Specifically, we witnessed a cyclical process by which students seek social connection and sense of belonging from others that share their ethnic identity group and that this social connection and sense of belonging function to support and affirm their ethnic identity in a space where they feel unseen and not supported. Our work also functions to further center the need for intersectional research to capture: a) the nuanced experiences of Latinxs with multiple identities that determine their experiences with interlocking systems of privilege and oppression, b) their overall navigation of these systems within PWI environments, and c) the development and affirmation of ethnic identity.

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APPENDICES

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Residence	Year in School	Sexual Orientation	Gender Identity
Heather	22	International	Junior	Heterosexual	Woman
Danielle	19	TN	Sophomore	Heterosexual	Woman
Angelina	21	TN	Senior	Heterosexual	Woman
Paola	21	TN	Junior	Heterosexual	Woman
Millie	21	TN	Senior	Heterosexual	Woman
Jacob	19	CA	Sophomore	Heterosexual	Man
Selena	20	TN	Junior	Queer	Gender Queer
Patito	20	TN	Junior	Queer	Man
Tona	22	International	Junior	Heterosexual	Woman
Jan-Marcos	22	TN/PR	Senior	Gay	Man
Castielle	25	CA	Graduate Student	Heterosexual	Woman
Rafael	21	TN	Senior	Heterosexual	Man
Juan	18	TN	Freshman	Heterosexual	Man
Danny	19	TN	Sophomore	Heterosexual	Man
David	33	International	Graduate Student	Heterosexual	Man
J	20	TN	Junior	Heterosexual	Woman
Eduardo	21	TN	Senior	Heterosexual	Man
Isaac	30	International	Graduate Student	Heterosexual	Man
Yenni	20	TN	Junior	Pansexual	Woman
Mateo	25	International	Graduate Student	Heterosexual	Man

Context: PWI Environment

| Navigating Ethnic Identity with Intersecting Identities | | Creating a Sense of Belonging and Connection with Other Latinxs | |

Centering of Ethnic Identity within PWI Context

Intersectionality Experiences

Social Connection with other Latinxs

Other Latinxs as Sources of Belonging & Support at a PWI

Affirmation of Ethnic Identity & Identity Marking

Afro-Latinx Experiences

Latinx + Queer Experiences

Stronger Ties with Other Latinxs

Sense of Belonging in PWI Context

Latinx + Foreigner Experiences

More Authentic Self with Other Latinxs

Sources of Support at PWI

Connection with Ethnic Identity Through Connection with Other Latinxs
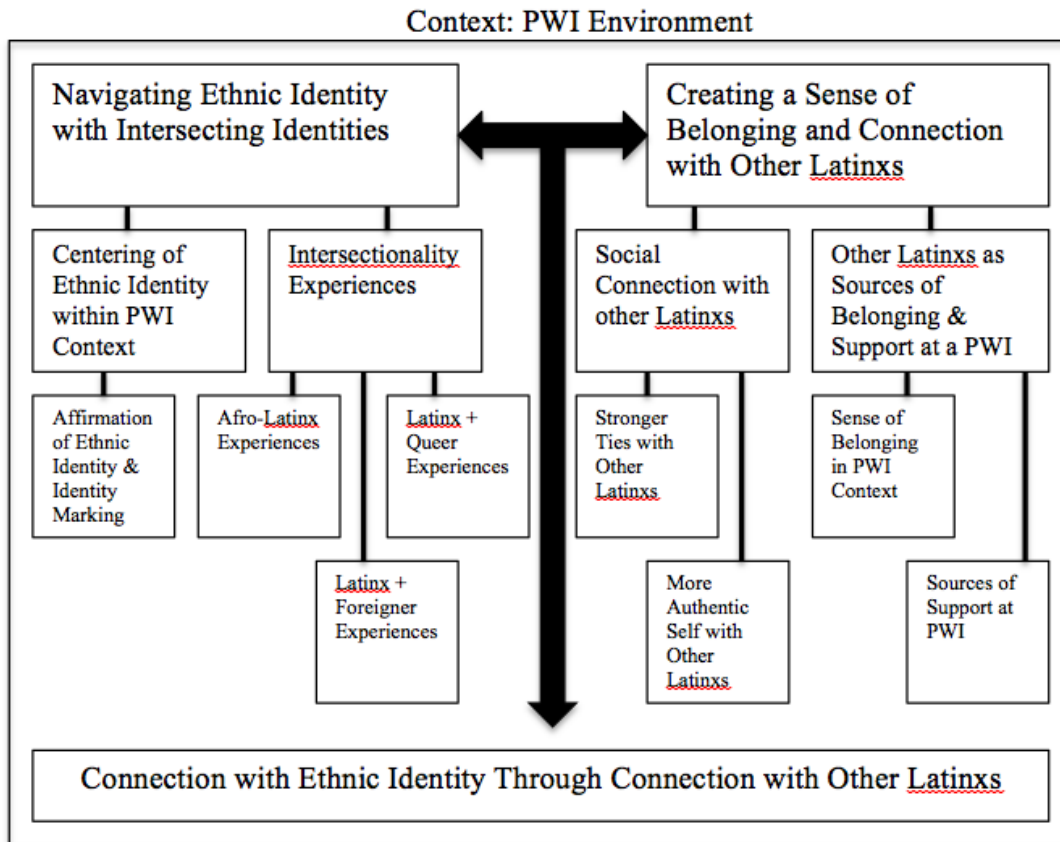
Figure 1. Hierarchy of data analysis demonstrating the two core categories of

Navigating Ethnic Identity with Intersecting Identities, and Creating a Sense of

Belonging and Connection with Other Latinxs. Each core catgory has two clusters and

each cluster has categories below for a total of 8 categories. The two core categories

interact to create the final cluster of Connection with Ethnic Identity Through Connection

with Other Latinxs.

Appendix A. Focus Group Questions

1. How do you describe your racial identity?
2. How do you describe your ethnic identity?
   a. What does being Latinx/Latino/a/Chicano/a/Hispanic mean to you?
   b. Is there a particular definition you use?
   c. Why is Latinx/Latino/a/Chicano/aHispanic the best label for your identity?
   d. What does a positive Latinx/Latino/a/Chicano/Hispanic identity mean to you?
3. How do you make your racial or ethnic identity known to others (if at all)?
4. What are other aspects of your identity that are important to you?
5. Are there times when you feel that your identity/ies protect you from stressful or negative interactions? Could you give us some examples?
6. Are there times when you feel that your identity/ies put you at risk of stressful or negative interactions? Could you give us some examples?
7. How do you connect with your Latinx heritage? What are the ways you affirm your Latinx identity (for example language, music, food, dance, history, etc.)?
8. When someone asks you where are you from, how do you typically respond to such a question?
   a. How do you feel in these moments when asked where you are from?
9. How do others interact with you when they find out or know your ethnic background? Have you ever felt like you are not a part of the community? Why or why not?
10. Where do you find support as a Latinx person?
11. How does the campus environment support your identities (if at all)?
    a. How does the university support your identities (if at all)?
    b. How do your professors support your identities (if at all)?
    c. How do your peers support your identities (if at all)?
12. How are Latinx students who look or pass as White treated on campus?
    a. Have other students/faculty/staff at UT ever assumed that you were of a different racial or ethnic background other than Latinx? How do you feel when this happens to you?
    b. Are these students treated differently when compared to Latinx students who do not look or pass as White? Why or why not?
13. How do you think other students at UT know you are Latinx?
14. Do you think other students perceive you to be White? Why or why not?
    a. How do others treat you differently than fellow Latinx people who look or pass as White?
15. What is your perception of how peers speak to you differently after learning of your ethnic background compared to before they knew it?
16. How do you change your behavior depending on who you are talking to?
17. Do you feel connected to Latinx peers and White peers the same? Why or why not? How so?
    a. Are you more comfortable with Latinx peers or White peers? Why or why not? How so?

18. Have you ever had a conversation with a peer who said something racist or racially insensitive because they assumed you were White?
    a. How did you react or respond?
19. Have you visited your or your parents country of origin?
    a. If yes, what was your experience like? How did you feel?
20. how do family members interact with you?
    a. How do you feel accepted (if at all)?
    b. How do you feel different from them (if at all)?
21. Have you been impacted by the current political climate? If so, what are the ways you have been impacted? Please provide specific examples.
22. How would you define the Latinx community?
    a. Is it a visible community in your area?
    b. Is it something people access in person? Online? By other means?
    c. Does the Latinx community differ depending upon other social identities, such as sexual orientation, class, gender, or ability? Why or why not?
23. How do you define belonging as a Latinx/Latino/a/Chicano/Hispanic person?
    a. Is belonging as a Latinx/Latino/a/Chicano/Hispanic person mean the same thing as belonging for other groups? Why or why not?
24. What does belonging and connection to the Latinx/Latino/a/Chicano/Hispanic community mean to you as a Latinx/Latino/a/Chicano/Hispanic person?
    a. Is belonging and connection to Latinx/Latino/a/Chicano/Hispanic community important? Why or why not?
    b. Is Latinx/Latino/a/Chicano/Hispanic belonging affected by other social identities?
25. How do you define a sense of community as a Latinx/Latino/a/Chicano/Hispanic person?
    a. Does it pertain specifically to other Latinx/Latino/a/Chicano/Hispanic people?
26. How and where do you find a sense of belonging or community as a Latinx/Latino/a/Chicano/Hispanic person?
    a. Is it something that is easy for you to find? Difficulty to find? Why do you think that is the case?
    b. Do you know of other people who have found a sense of belonging? How did they do so?
    c. Are there any groups or activities that you think would make it easier to find belonging or community?
27. How might belonging be experienced differently with members of the Latinx/Latino/a/Chicano/Hispanic community?
    a. Do you notice differences based on Age? Gender? Sexual Orientation? Ability? Class?
    b. Why do you think these differences (do not) exist?
    c. What impact does the (non)existence of these differences have on people and community, if any?

28. How is a sense of belonging or community as a Latinx/Latino/a/Chicano/Hispanic person linked to your well-being (if at all)?
    a. Do you think it is related to your mental or emotional health? Is it related to your physical health?
    b. Imagine you (did/did not) experience belonging and community as a Latinx/Latino/a/Chicano/Hispanic person. Do you imagine that would change your well-being at all? Why or why not?
29. How is a sense of belonging or community as a Latinx/Latino/a/Chicano/Hispanic person linked to a positive Latinx/Latino/a/Chicano/Hispanic identity (if at all)?
30. How does your sense of belonging or community connection change in different situations or contexts (if at all)?
    a. Does it change depending upon where you live or are visiting?
31. What contributes to or takes away from a strong sense of belonging or community as a Latinx/Latino/a/Chicano/Hispanic person?
    a. Can you think of a time that has made you feel more strongly that you belonged? What happened?
    b. What about a time in which you have felt excluded, or felt less connected to community?
32. What are barriers to finding connection with the Latinx/Latino/a/Chicano/Hispanic community?
    a. Are there barriers based on other social identities or social realities? (both identities like sexual orientation or class, and social situations like geographic location)
33. What are barriers to finding connection with the Latinx/Latino/a/Chicano/Hispanic community?
34. What would your ideal connection to community and sense of belonging look like as a Latinx/Latino/a/Chicano/a/Hispanic person?

VITA

Jasmine was raised in the eastern panhandle of West Virginia. She completed her Associates of Arts degree in Psychology at Potomac State College of West Virginia University. Jasmine went on to West Virginia University where she became a McNair Scholar and received a Bachelor of Arts degree as a double-major in Psychology (with Honors) and Latin American Studies, and a Certificate of Global Engagement. She continued her education at the College of William and Mary where she received a Masters of Arts degree in Experimental Psychology. Jasmine began attending the University of Tennessee Knoxville in pursuit of her Doctor of Philosophy degree in Counseling Psychology. She is currently completing one of the milestones in obtaining her PhD by completing requirements for the Masters of Arts degree in Counseling Psychology. Her research interests include ethnic identity affirmation, access and barriers to mental health care for Latinxs, and racial and ethnic trauma, healing, and liberation. Jasmine extends her research findings to advocacy efforts at the University of Tennessee, within the greater Knoxville area, and to Latinxs throughout the United States. She is incredibly grateful for her ancestors, family, and friends who have supported her along this journey, especially her faithful and adorable dogter (dog + daughter), Gabriela "Gabby" Maria.