Scholarly Articles (Research, Conceptual & Literature Reviews)

From Lived Experiences to Social Activism: Latino Fraternity Brothers Critical Service to the Latinx Community

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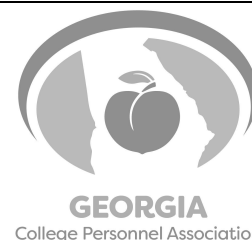**James Martinez** (Valdosta State University)

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Colleges and universities are seeing growth in the number of Latinx students actively engaged in fraternity and sorority life. In this study, six Latino participants share their testimonios as members of different Chapters of a Latinx Greek Letter Organization (LGLO) nestled within Predominantly White Institutions in Georgia, USA. Informed by LatCrit theory, this qualitative study uses members' testimonios to shed light on their varied and sometimes politically charged and racist lived experiences. The researchers draw on these experiences to show how the LGLO supported these members' leadership development and their desire and commitment to critical service and socially just causes.

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Student organizations, such as fraternities and sororities, provide students with opportunities to engage in civic service on college campuses and within the community (Garcia, 2020a; 2020b). In addition, student engagement in fraternity and sorority life supports students' persistence in college completion and their overall development (Bello Escobar et al., 2023; Garcia, 2020a; 2020b; Hamilton & Cheng, 2018). Latinx Greek Letter organizations have emerged in the United States since the 1970s (Miranda et al., 2020). Since then, the number of Latinx Greek Letter organizations has increased due to increased Latinx college enrollment (Excelencia in Education, 2019). In this study, the term Latinx encompasses all individuals within the gender spectrum and may be interchangeable with Hispanic and Latina/o/@ to identify the same population type (Bello Escobar et al., 2023; Salinas & Lozano, 2019). Moreover, the researchers use Latino and Latina when specifically addressing a cisgender, self-identified man (Latino) or woman (Latina) (Martinez, 2020; Cantú & Fránquiz, 2010; Milian, 2019).

Latinx Greek Letter Organizations (LGLO) have played a part in fulfilling the needs of Latinx students at institutions where these organizations are present. According to Reyes (2012), a growing number of Latinx students are joining LGLO because such groups (a) help integrate students into the campus community at large, as many of these students have often grown up in all-Latinx communities and attend all-minority schools, and (b) provide academic, familial and social support, and civic engagement (Del Real, 2017; Guardia & Evans, 2008; Miranda, 2020; Moreno & Banuelos, 2013; Orta et al., 2019; Pérez, 2014; Pérez et al., 2020).

Moreover, LGLO can provide Latinx students with opportunities to carry out critical social services. This service involves actively engaging them within the Latinx community or other communities to enact social change. For example, critical service within LGLO may include members advocating for more equitable "safe colored" spaces (Suriel et al., 2017; Diggs et al., 2009) and opportunities on/off campus or engaging in social/political actions for immigrant rights. However, the literature on the experiences of LGLO members and critical service is limited (Smith & McCoy, 2019). Thus, the researchers sought to better understand the lived experiences of Latino college students attending predominantly White institutions (PWI) in Georgia and how these experiences may influence their critical service engagement in LGLO. In this effort, we also sought to learn about their earlier schooling experiences and upbringing that may have sparked critical service later in college. The findings of this qualitative intrinsic case study can be

helpful to college and university educators, particularly those who work at PWIs, as they broaden LGLO and create safe colored spaces for Latinx students (Suriel et al., 2017; Bello Escobar et al., 2023). The following sections contextualize the study within the theoretical framework of LatCrit, safe colored spaces, and critical service learning.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Critical Race Theory (CRT) counterstories – examining stories that challenge dominant narratives – are common among educational and equity studies in higher education, particularly by and for Latinx studies (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Solórzano, 1997; Yosso, 2005). For this study, CRT counterstorytelling takes the form of testimonios, the personal experiences of the participants. This theoretical inquiry brings a race-centered focus on Latino Fraternities and the fraternity brothers' knowledge(s) and understandings about their education and lives. This study is grounded in the CRT tenets (a) committed to social justice; (b) that challenge racial objectivity, meritocracy, color blindness   , and equal opportunity; (c) of race and racism; (d) of experiential knowledge of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) people, and (e) an amalgamation of transdisciplinary perspectives (Alexander, 2012; Solórzano, 1997; Solórzano et al., 2000). Due to our specific interests in addressing Latino fraternities

within the United States of America (USA), we leaned on the evolved concepts of LatCrit, the application of CRT to Latinx history, and present experiences (Urrieta & Villenas, 2013).

LatCrit theory helps to challenge the majoritarian stories that omit and distort the histories and realities of the oppressed (Urrieta & Villenas, 2013; Villenas, 1996; Yosso, 2005), particularly those who identify as Latino (Bello Escobar et al., 2023; Suriel & Martinez, 2016; Flores, 2016; Rios, 2008). As part of the LatCrit framework, testimonios not only reveal the untold feelings of racism, inequity, and injustice experienced by Latinxs but, more importantly, documents and gives voice to the perseverance, resilience, and stamina, a "cultural armor" (Grande, 2004; Muñoz, 1995; West, 1993) that may help Latinxs navigate spaces where they may not feel welcomed. In search of spaces where they are not subjected to racial prejudice and given the safety to *be* of color (Suriel et al., 2017; Diggs et al., 2009), some Latinxs at PWIs have looked towards fraternity and sorority life as a strategy. Such safe colored spaces support democratic participation and the inclusion of voices traditionally omitted from the dominant rhetoric (Suriel et al., 2017; Diggs et al., 2009); hence, in safe colored spaces, testimonios allow Latinx individuals and groups to express experiences related

to power, privilege, and positionality of relationships within the dominant culture (Zamudio et al., 2011). While it is understood that not all Latino fraternity members share the same experiences, this study illuminates the testimonios and gives voice to six Latino Fraternity brothers at PWIs (Moll, 2014; Moll et al., 1992) in the US. The authors use testimonios to recount the experiences and perspectives of the participants being racially and socially marginalized (Martinez, 2018).

Latinx Greek Letter Organizations

Greek letter organizations (GLO) began in the late 1770s to create academic spaces supporting common ideals and later included career goals and civic engagement (Phi Beta Kappa, n.d.). The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the emergence of cultural Greek letter organizations, including Latinx GLO or LGLO (Peña, 2020), which continue to provide opportunities for unity and empowerment through positive relationships (NALFO, n.d.). To date, more than 26 Latinx Greek-letter organizations are recognized in the United States (Miranda et al., 2020). Like other Greek letter organizations, LGLOs provide students with service-learning opportunities to perform civic engagement with diverse on/off campus communities (Harkins et al., 2020). Social actions enacted by Greek life members are value-laden toward the greater

good and help bolster a sense of social and personal responsibility. These opportunities increase communicative and leadership skills and stronger critical thinking skills compared to peers who do not engage in service learning (Mitchell, 2008).

Critical Service Learning (CSL) extends traditional service learning by aligning service with tenets of CRT toward social justice (Mitchell, 2008). As such, well-designed CSL opportunities promote conscientization and foster critical consciousness (Freire, 1997). CSL turns students into activists, first by gaining knowledge and understanding and then by reflecting on sociohistorical injustices often experienced by oppressed communities while seeking solutions to dissolve them (Freire, 1997; Mitchell, 2008). An example of CSL is providing academic support to non-English speaking Latinx immigrant students while also understanding factors affecting bilingual education and interacting with legislative bodies to change policies and effect change. Learning by revealing existing problems and exigencies becomes vital in the process of conscientization (Freire, 1997).

Moving beyond LGLO opportunities for CSL to enact social change, members must also be sufficiently motivated and hopeful to pursue social action that may lead to collective action and systemic transformation (D'Lima et al., 2014; Greenaway et

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al., 2016; Shin et al., 2018). Motivation is the "impetus that gives purpose or direction to behavior" (APA Dictionary of Psychology, n.d.). In academic contexts, self-determination theory (SDT) helps explain people's deeply rooted motivations for learning (Ryan & Deci, 2020). As postulated by SDT, intrinsic motivation is vital to learning because learners will do activities that are based on interests and/or enjoyment to satisfy oneself or one's curiosities, regardless of external rewards or pressures, and that may extend across a lifetime (D'Lima et al., 2014; Shin et al., 2018). In contrast, extrinsic motivation is driven by external rewards. An example is completing a course assignment for a class grade or completing social service to meet service hours (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Thus, CSL in LGLO contexts that target social action has the potential to be more intrinsically motivated in nature, as they are not bound to service-learning courses with performance requirements, and members can choose their social learning activities (D'Lima et al., 2014; Shin et al., 2018). The study design, data collection, and analysis are presented in the following sections.

Methodology

This study is a qualitative, intrinsic single case study. As such, the researchers studied a single case, consisting of six Latino LGLO members attending PWIs in Georgia, to better understand their experiences as non-White cultural others. Particular focus was placed on how they may have transcended social challenges to attend PWIs. To enrich the case study and to better understand their impetus for LGLO membership and active engagement, we also sought to understand their experiences growing up and their early schooling. The single case study was chosen to be explanatory because researchers sought causal links too complex to capture through quantitative methods (Yin, 2013). Rather, through interviews, the researchers allowed study participants to share their testimonios, which were unique to each individual and that best captured their free forms of expression (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Also, the researchers had a personal interest in the testimonios of individuals who shared a similar context as students at a PWI (Stake, 1995). Three of the four researchers are Latinx scholars who share similar experiences with the participants. Three researchers came from low SES backgrounds and attended public schools and colleges that are predominantly White. Two researchers also came to the USA as immigrant children and learned to speak English. Finally, the researcher interviewer was also a member of an LGLO. One researcher is a White female who attended a PWI and is a member

of a Greek Letter organization. Collectively, the researchers sought to gain a deeper understanding of LGLO members' experiences while attending a PWI and gain insights about these experiences that may better inform decisions in research, pedagogy, and service learning. Given the inherent nature of examining individualized human experiences, qualitative methods are subjective. Thus, generalization to other contexts is limited.

Validity and Trustworthiness

All research should be rigorous, and the academic community should have confidence in how a study was conducted to produce credible, trustworthy results (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Creswell (2014) defines validity as how researchers ensure the accuracy of research findings. As Maxwell (2013) noted, researcher bias can threaten validity in a qualitative study. The researchers employed various strategies to reduce bias to increase data triangulation (Patton, 2015). These strategies included (a) keeping detailed records and memos of thoughts, reactions, and hunches, (b) comparing interview data collected at the different sites, and (c) member-checking by asking participants to review transcribed interviews and asking for accuracy and clarification (Maxwell, 2013). Moreover, the research team, consisting of

diverse members, examined the findings for accuracy and biases, bouncing interpretations and potential biases with one another to keep them at bay (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021). These activities targeted the noted validity threats, thereby increasing reliability and trustworthiness.

Data Collection

Interviews were used to collect testimonios from participants. After gaining IRB approval to conduct this study, the researchers shared a recruitment advertisement with fraternity and sorority life offices in Georgia to find participants. The ad requested that participants meet the following two requirements to participate in this study: (1) be a member of a Latino fraternity; and (2) currently attend or have graduated within one year from one of the five PWI institutions. Six participants who met the requirements were recruited and interviewed on a first-come, first-served basis until data saturation was reached (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). While the goal of the researchers was recruiting fraternity members from diverse LGLO, only members of the same LGLO responded to the ad. Coincidently, the researcher interviewer is an ex-member of the same LGLO as the six members, though the participants came from different LGLO chapters. To minimize validity threats in data analysis, the researcher interviewer kept a

reflective notebook to jot down areas of potential biases (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021).

Due to the pandemic and social distance protocols, the researcher-interviewer conducted interviews virtually (Archibald et al., 2019). One 90-minute virtual interview with each participant was conducted (Seidman, 2013). The interview process included a 28 open-ended question protocol (Seidman, 2013). To understand early schooling experiences that may have led to their college enrollment and memberships in LGLO, questions 1-11 asked participants to describe their communities and early schooling experiences. Questions 12-28 asked about their experiences and involvement in their LGLO, focusing on the reconstruction and meaning of experiences (Patton, 2015). The interviews were recorded and transcribed automatically on the Kaltura video cloud platform. The researcher audio-recorded the interview using an Apple iPhone to prevent data loss. After each interview, the researcher-interviewer video recorded himself reflecting on interviews, sharing gained insights and analytical thoughts, and initial coding categories and relationships (Maxwell, 2013; Saldaña, 2016).

Data Analysis

To ensure data accuracy, each interview transcription and corresponding iPhone recordings were compared and edited to reflect identical information. The researchers used Microsoft software on all transcripts to create codes. Also, at the end of each interview, memos, pre-coding, and jotting were noted (Saldaña, 2016). To enable thematic analysis, the researchers used a codebook to record initial codes from each interview emerging from transcripts and memos. Also noted were categories emerging from these codes and any reoccurring patterns emerging from these categories (Saldaña, 2016). In subsequent interviews, the codebook was tested with the remaining interviews. By the sixth interview, no new code modifications occurred, indicating data saturation was reached.

Data from the codebook and the researcher's reflections were triangulated and displayed in a matrix for visual representation. The primary researcher compartmentalized the matrix into columns and rows, indicating relevant statements, descriptions, corresponding categories, and researchers' hunches (Maxwell, 2013). As such, the matrix helped the researchers connect data patterns from which themes emerged. These emergent themes reveal

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participants' testimonios about their experiences and are shared in the Findings section. To protect participants' identities, the researcher interviewer assigned pseudonyms after collecting data to conceal participants' names, the institutions they attended, and the cities where they grew up. Participant ethnicities and perceptions of their living/learning environment were self-identified.

Findings

In this section, findings from interview data and memo analysis gathered from six participants are shared in the form of emergent themes. Participant demographic data and cultural background are presented first, then salient emergent themes are presented next.

Demographics/Cultural Background

Six cisgender Latino college students agreed to participate in this study. Two participants had completed an undergraduate program, and four were enrolled in one. All participants attended PWI universities located in the state of Georgia and were members of the same LGLO. All participants were raised in rural towns or small cities and shared testimonios of their experiences growing up in their communities and in their P-12 schools. For the first study (Bello Escobar et al., 2023), the researchers reported on the importance of ethnic identity awareness for successful collegiate engagement. For the current study, we report on the effects of their experiences in LGLO in PWIs in Georgia. Table 1 presents demographic information gathered from the interviews.

Table 1

Participant Demographics and Perceptions of Social Environment Where They Grew Up

Participant	Institution	University Enrollment Status	Active Years in LGLO	Self-selected Ethnicity/ Legal Status	Perception of Social Environment Growing Up and/or High School Demographic Composition
Antonio	St. Elizabeth University	Alumni Major: History DACA*	4	Mexican American / Mexican Immigrant	Predominately White
Felipe	Maximus University	Currently Enrolled Major: Cybersecurity	3	Mexican American/US Native	Mixed: Predominantly Latinx/Black

Javi	St. Elizabeth University	Currently Enrolled Major: Marketing	3	Mixed Mexican/White American/US Native	Mixed-Black & Latinx
Jose	Reiki University	Currently Enrolled Major: Engineering	2	White/Guatemalan Descent/ US Native	Rural/Predominately White
Leo	LaKit University	Currently Enrolled Major: Graphic Design/DACA	2	Mexican/Mexican Immigrant	Predominately Black
Nelson	Maximus University	Alumni Major: Business Administration	3	Guatemalan / Guatemalan Immigrant	Mixed Mexican American & White

Note. Active years in LGLO are rounded to the nearest whole number.
* Deferred Action of Childhood Arrivals (DACA)

Emergent Themes

This section presents two emergent themes from analyzed interviews and memo data. The first emergent theme indicates that LGLOs provide *safe colored spaces* (Suriel et al., 2017; Diggs et al., 2009) for leadership development. The second emergent theme focuses on participants' early schooling experiences and social action.

Theme 1: LGLOs provide safe colored spaces for leadership development

Leo, LGLO Chapter President: "And I feel like I've helped a lot of people." Leo is a senior at LaKit University and is majoring in graphic design. He self-identified as a Deferred Action of Childhood Arrivals (DACA) student. He was born in Mexico City and brought to the United States when he was five. Leo and his family lived in his county for 15 years. He was the first in his family to graduate high school and attend college. When asked to describe his residential and high school community growing up, Leo shared:

> …honestly [there] weren't any Hispanic people. There wasn't a big

sense of Latino community unless we drove to certain parts of the county itself...we used to live in City Park, which was a predominantly Hispanic community, but we moved away from there to a predominantly Black community. And so, I've always grown up with Black individuals and People of Color...you didn't see any type of Caucasians or any Asians. So, it was mainly Black people and Hispanics.

Today, Leo identifies as a Mexican immigrant because "unfortunately, I don't have legal status [not a legal US resident]. And so, I consider myself a hardworking Mexican immigrant." Furthermore, because he was undocumented, he thought he would not attend college; however, through President Obama's DACA program, he pursued college enrollment. The Dreamer's Act enabled him to pay out-of-state tuition fees to attend college. Leo enrolled at LaKit University because it had the most affordable out-of-state tuition of all state colleges, and worked full-time for most of his college enrollment to pay for school.

Leo was not used to feeling like a cultural minority among a predominantly White crowd. At LaKit University, he felt othered while on campus. To be othered is to feel as though one is not part of a group. However, as a culturally minoritized group in the US,

Latinx may have perceptions of rejection due to a sociocultural history of oppression based on racism and discrimination by the hegemony (Chavez-Dueñas et al. , 2019). Leo shared,

Well, honestly, ...you do get eyeballed a lot. So, I used to walk in my class, and I would be like, is it just me? For some reason, it didn't, it didn't feel like that when I was at my other school. You know, I went to predominantly Black schools, you know, I felt like we were all the same.... we were all people of color, like just talking to the homies and stuff. And it didn't feel out of the ordinary. But for some reason, when I walked in my school here, I felt like I had to watch what I said, I felt like I had to act a certain way. Not necessarily to fit in, but just like not creating any tension or any trouble. Also...I felt like a little bit of intimidation in a way because, you know, I'm Hispanic at a predominantly white school.

Leo credits the Latino fraternity he joined for getting him out of the house and meeting a variety of people on campus through different activities. He recognizes his fraternity afforded him leadership opportunities and chose to focus on developing cultural

awareness among his peers while reflecting on his cultural roots. Leo shared,

> So, I'm currently the chapter president for my Latino fraternity and president of another [on-campus Latino student organization]. [These memberships] have very big [impact] in my college career because I've gotten in touch with my cultural roots. I've helped other people learn a little bit more about themselves, where they came from, you know, the type of foods that they typically eat, the type of music that they hear, you know, things like that. And I feel like I've helped a lot of people.

Though Leo felt othered while in college, he held a 3.55 grade point average while fully employed and served in leadership positions to support fellow LGLO members. These acts evidence his commitment to leadership and critical service learning by creating opportunities for Latinos to learn more and explore their cultural identity, a characteristic of safe colored spaces (Patrón et al., 2021).

Jose, LGLO Member, Role Model to High School Peers: "If we could just help the world." Jose identified himself as White, with parents of Guatemalan descent. He is a sophomore in college majoring in engineering. He describes his community while growing up as "mostly White and rural" and his family as poor. He attended a high school with a student composition of mostly Latinx (50%), White (30%) and Black (20%). In the following excerpt, Jose described classism in his high school experiences.

> ... I felt like I was never the main character… I will just be looking out the side, stepping aside from this big crowd, like I wasn't the main character. I just felt like a third person.... Some rich kids, they were famous because they were rich.... I try to be friends with them, but like they pushed me. They saw me [lesser] for the clothes [I wore]….So, I just stayed reserved and stayed to myself.

However, Jose was a high-achieving student, so he found peers who wanted to learn from him. He disregarded his peers' outer appearances and valued their academic commitment. Jose shared,

> Like people would see me and notice that I was getting good grades. And I guess people who wanted good grades would stick with me and study with me to achieve a better grade.... So, but yeah, it was poor kids that came with me. I saw them. They would have ripped up clothes or [clothes] like nasty color. It was like they didn't care about their look,

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they cared about education and knowledge....

Jose then describes another group of students, which he learned was considered and called the "lower class." When he also realized that he was not "White" and that his skin color made him a member of the lower or "bad class." Jose explained,

> And then there's like the lower class, the bad class, who would just do good stuff but get pushed or picked on because of the color [of their skin] or what they were saying. Or stuff like that.... All these people who are supportive of Trump were very discriminative against us because of [skin] color. And so, I felt ashamed. I felt like bad because of our [skin] color; I was like I am not White…

At another point, Jose defined himself as "I'm brown, or like skin color, I'm brown." After completing high school, Jose was first employed as a store manager for some time. He later enrolled at Reiki University. He became president of a student organization and then decided to join a LGLO.

> For Jose, joining a LGLO meant "Fitting in, it felt like home, a place where I belong...", which, contrasted with his previous experiences facing discrimination, expresses that his LGLO was a safe colored space. But membership meant more to him than just belonging to an accepting group.

For Jose, giving back to the community was especially important. Jose recalls a meaningful experience shared in the following excerpt:

> [It] was the food drive that's an experience I'll never forget…We were giving out food, and it was great giving, but at the same time sad seeing all these people. I need to know. If we could just help the world. I would try to help everybody. But we just limited it to a certain extent. You can only do so much because, but yeah, it was a great experience given away, helping them eat something for Thanksgiving was an excellent job. So that's what we did, give food to those who didn't have food on Thanksgiving; it was great.

For Jose, his early schooling experiences taught him that peers of the same ethnicity valued learning, though in a community that appeared to be racist and discriminatory against Latinx of low SES. However, he showed leadership and created a safe colored space when tutoring them to help them succeed academically. This is an example of critical service because his actions were informed by reacting against the dominant oppressive structure. Jose gave back to students who he knew were ostracized despite their academic potential in his eyes. Jose took this social consciousness to his LGLO,

and it likely contributed to his further maturation in critical service.

Antonio, LGLO Chapter President: Advocating for DACA Students. Antonio is a Mexican immigrant who identifies as Indigenous or Native-American/Mexican American. He identifies as a DACA student who graduated from St. Elizabeth University with a Bachelor of Arts in History degree. His community and K-12 education experience were predominately White, but overall, he felt welcomed by his community. His high school student population was diverse but primarily White, Black, and some Latinx. He described persecutory experiences about being an undocumented Latino and how his Latinx community reacted to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Antonio shared,

> Like if your parents don't have [US resident] documents, you know, you're always in fear. You know. Just a few days ago, there was an ICE Patrol unit in my hometown... So... right away, I saw someone post it on social media, and right away, I called my parents to let them know, you know.

In the next excerpt, Antonio explained his fear of being an undocumented Latino within the conservative community he grew up in.

> So, there's always that fear... [of] what you are [undocumented], even if you are involved in all of this American stuff, such as I'm in a university, jobs, whatever it may be.... it's interesting because the people around you don't act any way differently towards you. People might not overtly be racist or prejudiced toward me, but I know they may vote conservative [at the voting polls]. Therefore, it is very likely that their views are against me; me as an undocumented person. So, it can be weird when folks find out my [legal] status, because they might see me differently. It may be good at the beginning, then bad after they find out my status because of how they vote [or because] of their values. You know what they think, it's like the government, they're hard to change minds. It's very narrow-minded how they think in [this state] and in the South.

Antonio joined an LGLO during the last two years of his undergraduate program. He was a member of on-campus Latinx clubs such as the Hispanic Organization for Leadership and Advancement (HOLA) and City Undocumented Youth Alliance (CUYA), which advocates for DACA students, and served as chapter president of his LGLO. Antonio shared,

Yeah... I joined [the LGLO] because some of the brothers were on the DACA and were Mexican American... It was good to be in a Latino fraternity....it did feel good knowing that there were other Latino students in various organizations.... They were very welcoming, friendly, helping, and hardworking... I think it feels nice knowing that there's a group of other men who are trying to, you know, to make the best out of their college experience. You know that certain pillars or like academic excellence, brotherhood, stuff like that. So, I think it's important that, you know, and that we're all in the struggle working hard to know that there's other people out there. Not just in your school, but you know, throughout Georgia....Other students that are also working hard as them, that for the most part, might also be first-time college students.

Antonio showed empathy toward fellow college Latinos and the Latinx community. As an active member of HOLA, CUYA, and leadership in an LGLO, Antonio engaged in civic duties and critical service, such as protecting the rights of undocumented DACA Latinx through advocacy efforts.

Felipe, Vice President of Diversity and Inclusion: "Becoming a better man, a male role model." Felipe self-identifies as a Mexican American and describes his experiences growing up in a "typical Mexican" household. Felipe explained, "Like growing up, my parents were just content. Like oh, we have a house now... Just work. Just work and provide, work, and provide, work and provide." Felipe believed his family "wasn't much...for higher education...." Felipe described his high school demographics in Hunter County as having a large Latinx and Black student population with a small White population. In describing his high school experience, Felipe shed light on the lack of academic counseling offered to Latinx. He shared,

My high school experience was, I would say, mediocre, to be honest... I still see it happening... there's not a lot of push, especially for [cultural] minorities to go to higher education. One must be like, Hey, I want to do this? Hey, can I do this? Where can I get information on this?

In the following excerpt, Felipe shared a racially discriminatory high school experience when he tried out for the baseball team. He shared that,

One year, I made the baseball team, but I just didn't feel the vibe because

the majority were White people playing baseball. And it was very uncomfortable. I guess the way they spoke to me. To me, more than anything, I just didn't feel a part of that team. On one occasion, I guess one of the guys that played on my team said something like this [about me], 'we came down to a play, a little wetback playing in the team now. They can't even get players to play.'

Despite limited expectations to enroll in higher education, Felipe went to college to major in Cybersecurity at Maximus University. He gained membership in an LGLO and remained actively involved for the past three years. He shared that in his membership, he felt comfortable with his brothers and the desire to become a role model for other LGLO members. Felipe shared, "I decided to join because of their core value and education. Academic excellence was at the heart of it. You strive to become a better man, a male role model..." In this light, Felipe volunteered to serve as the vice president of diversity and inclusion within the Interfraternity Council. This position was the first of its kind. In this leadership role, Felipe sought to unify Greek life on campus and considered new ways to unite fraternity brothers and sorority sisters.

Like Jose, Felipe's early schooling experiences show ostracization that sheds light on discriminatory practices based on race. After joining an LGLO, these experiences may have led him to his activism in the form of leadership that challenged power structures and may have given him a critical voice that extended beyond his LGLO. Furthermore, he supported a safe colored space as a role model to others.

Nelson, LGLO Member: "Being a role model...I knew I couldn't disappoint them." Nelson graduated from Maximus University with a bachelor's degree in business administration and a 3.79 final GPA. He was born in Guatemala and moved to the United States at eight. He has three other siblings that were born in the USA. He was raised mainly by his grandmother in Guatemala and can speak with a Guatemalan dialect. His family settled in Darius County. Darrius County was "predominately Hispanic."

Upon entering US public school, Nelson was placed in English as a Second Language (ESOL) class and was pulled out of regular classes to attend ESOL class. He repeated the third grade because he did not sufficiently understand nor had mastered the English language to successfully perform academically in classes taught only in English-speaking. Nelson expressed that he did not understand this system of instruction

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and felt ostracized, feeling that he "didn't fit in…." He shared,

> I would also see how students would be selected for the honors programs, while most of the time, I would not, or my peers would not. And it came down to understanding the [English] language. So, at those times, I [felt] like if that was because I was not born in the US, [though I] already understand the language enough.

Nelson went on to describe the school demographics and his high school experiences. He explained, "So, it's [a] public [high school], predominantly Hispanic…Mexican ethnicities rather than other Latin American countries or other countries in general. So… it was either Mexican American or White. There wasn't a lot of diversity per se."

> Nelson's high school had 1,600 students and he graduated in the top 5% of his class with a final GPA of 3.85. He completed several Advanced Placement classes but did not pass the credit-bearing tests. He was also involved in the school's Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps (JROTC) program. He shared,

> So, academics, [I] think I did well. And I like that about high school, that I could do all the academics in the world. I was also involved with the JROTC program... And yeah, I was

also involved in the engineering program... I didn't do any sports outside of JROTC.

Nelson was in the JROTC because he thought joining the US military would lead to permanent residency, as he was initially undocumented when he arrived in the USA. Nelson realized he could not enlist in the military because of his undocumented status. He was eventually able to adjust his immigration status and earned permanent residency through a family petition. This legal status allowed him to attend college and pay in-state tuition, which led to him forgoing his military enrollment plans instead of enrolling in college.

> Nelson earned an academic scholarship to attend college. He expressed that during his collegiate years, he felt "Proud. Proud because of the people that surrounded me. So, that I found pride, a lot of pride, being Latino. More pride than I ever felt. Never felt this being Latino than my prior years in K-12." Nelson joined an LGLO and felt that his fraternity encouraged his college persistence and that of other brothers. He became a mentor to the younger brother in his chapter. According to Nelson,

> I knew a couple of brothers were looking for guidance. So, to some extent, I was being a role model to a couple. So, as a brother, I knew I

couldn't let them down. And the connection that we had; I knew I couldn't disappoint them.

For Nelson, membership in an LGLO provided a safe colored space to feel included (Flores, 2016). Most importantly, Nelson showed leadership by mentoring fellow members and helping them feel included.

The theme of safe colored spaces emerged as the participants indicated that in their LGLO, they were able to feel safe and create spaces where their Latino brothers could also feel safe. Their testimonios give voice to their feelings of being able to lift each other up in their organization. Many of the participants naturally took on the responsibility of advocating for each other and their organization, and this was their means of reinforcing the organization's welcoming nature. Some participants mentioned that at previous points in their schooling experience, they did not feel safe and valued and so felt committed to making their LGLO a different kind of space.

Theme 2: Participants' early schooling experiences and social action.

The second emergent theme indicates that participants' early schooling and lived experiences may have helped spur social actions for LGLO members, constituting critical service learning. Participant testimonios, as

shared in the first theme, demonstrate solidarity and activism toward fellow Latinx. For example, at an early age, Nelson acknowledged discrimination based on language and native origin for himself and his peers, which later translated to mentorships within his LGLO. Likewise, in his early lived experiences, Antonio's awareness of persecution based on legal status called for actions and behaviors protective of the Latinx community. Similarly, Jose's experiences with discrimination based on low SES may have incentivized him to tutor his peers. Javi's testimonio, shared below, also highlights a commitment to social action.

Javi, LGLO Member: "Standing up for the Latino community, the immigrant community." Javi is a first-generation college student and graduating senior at St. Elizabeth University, majoring in marketing and business with a 3.2 GPA. He stated that his home background was "untraditional." He was adopted with his younger sister at seven. His biological father is half Mexican and half White American, and his biological mother is White American. He also knew that his biological father was undocumented in the USA. However, in his multi-race home, Javi was raised to learn about his ancestral Mexican roots.

Javi empathized with his biological father's legal status and its associated repercussions. When asked about his early experiences while in elementary school, he recalled,

> ...deportation...I knew about that whenever I was younger in elementary school, but I guess I didn't piece it together ... I [was] just like, oh, [people], they're being deported in my neighborhood and like ICE would come through and deport like half of the neighborhood.

Javi's county had a student population of mainly Black and of Latinx descent. He described his experiences in high school as a "pretty good time" as he was highly involved in many different activities and organizations. While high school experiences were enriching to him, his engagement in his college LGLO spurred social activism in advocating for the Latinx community.

Javi joined an LGLO early in college. He noted that the fraternity significantly influenced his life, mainly because the LGLO provides community service to the Latinx population, which he feels passionate about. Javi shared,

> [My LGLO] is like my life. Like it's been my baby since I've joined, barely when I first came to college… We just had a conversation about the 'I stand with immigrants' campaign.

And I could just relate because, as I said, my dad's undocumented, and he's an immigrant himself. And it's just like, 'oh, I want to do more for the Latino community through that way.' And so, like when I joined, like the fraternity as part of it was about being part of that platform - standing up for the Latino community, the immigrant community. It really is; it's just a thing within the organization.... It's an inviting environment where we embrace each other's Latino-ness.

Furthermore, membership in the LGLO consolidated his academic persistence and social activism. He shared, "The fraternity kept me in college, keeping me going, so I guess the fraternity has definitely been like that catalyst on me wanting to be part of a platform that is helping the Latino community."

Javi experienced academic success in high school while also being conscious of the immigrant plight of persecution and deportation. Close encounters with the harsh reality of lacking appropriate legal documentation in the USA may have spurred in him a deep-rooted empathy and advocacy for the Latinx undocumented immigrant community. His membership in LGLO allowed him to direct his efforts toward the Latinx undocumented immigrant condition (Roxas et al., 2017), displaying a commitment to social action and CSL. In the following sections, we

present a discussion of the findings, how these extend our understanding of Latinos in LGLO at PWIs, recommendations for interested stakeholders overseeing and/or participating in CSL, limitations of the study, and concluding thoughts.

Discussion

In this qualitative study, the researchers set out to learn about Latino college experiences in PWIs and their involvement within Latino Greek letter organizations (LGLO) as Fraternity brothers. Six participants constituted the case, by which an intrinsic case study approach was used to understand their experiences, recounted here in the form of testimonios (Yin, 2013). Participants Leo, Jose, Antonio, Felipe, Nelson, and Javi's testimonios about their upbringing and early schooling experiences as Latinos in Georgia highlighted the ongoing structures of racial oppression, noting racist acts against Latinxs and discriminatory practices against DACA students.

The testimonios help explain how such experiences are anchored structurally, both politically and academically, to oppress and marginalize (Aguirre, 2005; Moll, 2014; Moll et al., 1992). However, Muñoz (1995) would argue that their resiliency to continue their academic careers is not to be glamourized as "minorities overcoming," but rather that Latinxs profit from the lessons passed on from their families to ward off "othering" (Villenas, 1996). Grande (2004) and Muñoz (1995) assert that Indigenous and Brown cultural wisdom equip Latinxs with a "cultural armor" to beat back the demons of insignificance, impossibility, and lovelessness (Martinez, 2016; 2020; Padilla, 2001; West, 1993; 2023). LatCrit theorists refer to this armor as an "oppositional mentality" (Bourgois, 1995; Romano, 1968; 1970) that is forged in the face of long-term domination (Valencia, 2010; Zamudio et al., 2011). The testimonios of the participants show signs that this cultural armor has taken shape for them within their LGLO. In particular, these Latino Fraternity brothers express how they learned to value each other's unique emotional, intellectual, and social needs by providing mentorship and leadership within critical service conducive to life-long learning, in which all played active roles (Guardia & Evans 2008; Moreno & Banuelos, 2013). Markedly, the first emergent theme from participant testimonios demonstrated that LGLO helped provide them with safe colored spaces to grow emotionally, socially, and academically, especially in strengthening their moral character and leadership skills.

Furthermore, a second emergent theme in this study indicated that LGLO provided opportunities for implementing critical service learning. It is possible that the participants' lived experiences, including early

schooling, motivated them to embrace social actions, enacting them through empathy and compassion towards others to help them be successful. Participant testimonios, particularly those of Jose and Javi, pointedly show empathy and advocacy for the Latinx community, intrinsically motivated behaviors that may have stemmed from a critical awareness of social injustices practiced against Latinx immigrants in the USA (Roxas et al., 2017). This theme can be seen as highly linked and interdependent with the first theme of safe colored spaces. The fraternity brothers' critical service actions helped create and strengthen safe colored spaces within LGLO. The authors then argue that these spaces further fostered the motivation and practice of critical service.

As growing Latinos, Zamudio et al. (2011) would argue that the participants have found a path of emancipation out of their childhood and college experiences of otherness. Now, through education and critical discourse, Martinez (2020), Nieto, (1996), Suriel et al. (2017), Valencia (2010), and Zamudio et al. (2011) also argue that the participants can caution others against those forms of power that promote oppression. They have become a voice for the present and have a passion for critical service (Mitchell, 2008) that situates itself in the intersection of culture and history, making the voices of the oppressed Latinxs visible to

collaborate with all groups to change and shape history (Aguirre, 2005; Rios, 2008; Urrieta, 2009) on their campuses and beyond (Flores & Patrón, 2021; (Patron et al., 2021) 2021; Stockton, 2022).

Of course, because social transformation takes time and is often a long-term commitment, students in CSL may not be able to enact higher levels of social action beyond foundational support   nor to witness social change in their short college years (Mitchell, 2008). While this study does not address social justice-based approaches to CSL, Santiago-Ortiz (2019) provides insights into their possibilities. Her literature review presents studies that incorporate social justice-based approaches to CSL, such as providing coursework that unpacks power and privilege and includes the voices of the community (Mitchell, 2007), "acknowledging the counterstories of students in the context of service learning" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002,   47) and working in solidarity with others from diverse backgrounds to transform social conditions   .

Recommendations for CSL Directors/ Leaders, Faculty, and Researchers

Historically, P-12 schools are highly structured systems espousing hegemonic views (Gabriel et al., 2015; Grice, 2022; Yosso, 2005). Participants' testimonios evidence

this reality as they were discriminated against for being Latino. Freire (1997) proposed that the dominant culture's system cannot resolve oppression that is spread by current approaches to education. Still and particularly in today's political establishment, university and campus reforms based on this system remain ultimately futile because they do not attack the causes of oppression (Freire, 1997; Santiago-Ortiz, 2019). Through this critical lens, often deemed biased and self-interested by the dominant culture, critical theorists have challenged traditional social ideology (Freire, 1997; Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 1994) for change in public and higher education (Santiago-Ortiz, 2019).

Thus, the researchers recommend that institutes of higher education, PWIs in particular, expand LGLO opportunities as safe colored spaces for Latinx students (Suriel et al., 2017; Bello Escobar et al., 2023). We also recommend that critical service /critical service-learning (CSL) opportunities in LGLO servicing minoritized communities be centralized, continuous, and extended over time to maximize social actions (Mitchell, 2008). LGLO may engage local and state institutions with social justice agendas to increase resources and maximize benefits for LGLO members. Moreover, the opportunity exists for LGLO to synchro-

nize social action efforts across P-26 settings and the Latinx community. Lastly, it is recommended that faculty and CSL leaders who overlook service learning receive specific training on how to best service minority communities through social justice-based approaches (Stockton, 2022). As such, fraternity and sorority life can also be part of social transformation with a democratic purpose toward a just society for Latinxs and all.

Limitations

Various limitations were inherent to this study design. Participants came from one LGLO and were only recruited from Georgia PWIs, leaving out other LGLOs from GA Minority Serving Institutions and other institutions outside the state. Furthermore, the data collected were a snapshot of their reconstructed experiences at that particular time. Interviews were only conducted with students who self-selected into the study by responding to an advertisement. As such, these participants may have different characteristics and college experiences than other Latino GA students and those who qualify but chose not to participate in the study. Their experiences and engagements were limited to students' available experiences at their respective institutions and LGLO. Another limitation was that there was only one interview per participant, limiting

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the depth of questions that could be applied to any participant. To better evaluate the efficacy of LGLO, a comparison to other Latino organizations where safe spaces can exist would have been helpful, but this could not be done in this study. Thus, further investigation is warranted to address these limitations.

Conclusion

Overall, counterstorytelling allowed six Latino Fraternity brothers from different Chapters of an LGLO at PWIs located in the state of Georgia (USA) to share their testimonios and the researchers to gain an understanding of how their Fraternity experiences were shaped by the larger discourses of power and privilege, the impact of systemic racism on US laws and institutions, including some university programs. The participants showed how the LGLO supported their members' leadership development and their desire and commitment to critical service and socially just causes. Hence, they can then turn around and have the opportunity to counter oppressive spaces with safe colored spaces and further expose, counter, and even resist majoritarian discourses through critical consciousness (Freire, 1997).

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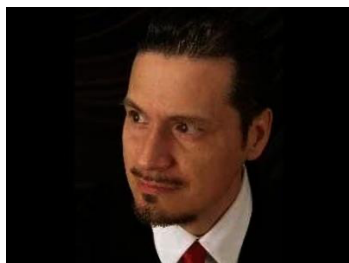
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