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LATINAS ABRIENDO CAMINOS: STORIES OF LATINA WOMEN
TO THE DOCTORAL DEGREE

by

JESSICA BALLESTEROS

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of the University of the Incarnate Word
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

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I want to thank all my family, friends, and faculty who supported me through my education, career, and life goals. First, to my parents: I would not be here if it weren't for both of them supporting me and never saying no to my dreams. To my chair, for never giving up on me and mentoring me to complete my degree successfully. To my grandmother, Ata: I wish grandparents lived forever so you could see what has become of me. Lastly, to the women in my life: It takes a village to raise a child; it took the many strong-minded women I encountered in the last 37 years to make me. I focused my research on the success of Latina women completing a doctorate, but success for some of these women was not education. I see their success in supporting their families and children. I looked up to all the women who consistently juggled the roles of daughter, sister, mother, wife, student, caregiver, and career women. As women, we should never shy away from our dreams; we should never be told we cannot do it. Many women in history have opened the doors to make it easier for future generations to continue the work they started. The doors have been open for women of color; now, we need to continue to build on it. I focused on education because some people still believe women do not belong on the grounds of a university. All these socially constructed ideologies around women need to stop becoming the norm. I hope my research helps someone out there to read and understand that *Si, se puede*. Gender, class, sex, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation do not hinder your ability of the mind. It is important to collect stories to see the success and mistakes in the past and adjust for the future. Lastly, I want to acknowledge my committee members for supporting me during

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Jessica Ballesteros

DEDICATION

I dedicate my dissertation to the two little men looking up to me, Adrian and Aiden. I want them to know there is no limit to anything they aspire to become in life. To my grandparents, Elena Cervantes Torres, Antonio Avalos Martinez, Vicenta Flores Rangel, and Severiano Rangel Nuno, whose *testimonios* kept our culture alive with their grandchildren.

LATINAS ABRIENDO CAMINOS: STORIES OF LATINA WOMEN TO THE DOCTORAL DEGREE

Jessica Ballesteros

University of the Incarnate Word, 2022

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the experiences of Latinas in their doctoral programs and what led them to complete their doctorates. Thus, the goal was to identify factors contributing to these Latinas' academic success. Latinas have low doctoral degree completion rates compared to all other ethnicities in the United States. The majority of current research focusing on Latinas succeeding academically has occurred at the undergraduate and master's levels. Nine Latina participants provided their *testimonios* to share their lived experiences completing their doctoral degrees in the last years 5 years. I explored the participants' testimonios to identify common themes suggesting how these experiences influenced the Latinas.

The theoretical framework of critical race theory and Latino critical race theory provided a foundation to address the issues of race, gender, and racism in the educational setting. Obtaining participants' lived experiences facilitated exploring the phenomenon for insight and perspectives, indicating the reasons for the different attainment rates. Analyzing the testimonios elicited factors, variable, and emerging themes experienced by the Latinas during their journeys to complete a doctoral degree. The four emerging themes were experiencing support system, motivating factors, barriers, and lack of understanding from other people.

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Latinx in Education

The goal of this research was to understand the experiences of Latinas who have completed and managed the experience of their doctoral programs by exploring their stories of how they negotiated requirements, overcame barriers, and achieved success. Latinx is a gender-neutral term for Latinos (male) or Latinas (female) from South and Central America (Lopez, Krogstad & Passel, 2021; Rodriguez, 2019). A long history of segregation has caused many Latinx to experience marginalization and barriers to higher education in the United States (Urbina & Wright, 2016). Of the 184,074 doctoral degrees conferred in the United States for 2017–2018, Latinx received only 13,253 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019), 7,397 female and 5,856 male. Despite being the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. population, the Latinx population received only 8.2% of all doctoral degrees granted in the United States in 2017–2018. Carnevale and Fasules (2017) stressed the need to help the Latinx community attain higher levels of education, stating, “In America, the Latino story reflects the intergenerational striving of families and cultures to achieve full inclusion. Latinos have a long way to go in achieving educational and economic equality” (p. 1). Because Latinas attained more doctoral degrees than Latinos, it is essential to discover how their experiences have influenced them (Ramirez, 2017).

Within the Latino culture, Latinas’ historic gender roles are caregivers, wives, and mothers (Cooper, 2014). Many Latinas struggle to fulfill traditional gender roles and achieve educational aspirations (Castillo & Hill, 2004). Espino (2016) asked:

The primary research questions that guided this study was: How do Mexican American women PhDs make meaning of conflicting messages about the purpose of higher education and shifting familial expectations on their journey to the doctorate? A secondary question was: In what ways do the lessons learned from these conflicting messages inform how they experience raced gendered normativities along the academic life course? (p. 188)

Espino interviewed 25 Latinas pursuing doctoral degrees who reported attempts to balance their traditional gender roles with their desire to pursue an education. The Latinas reported facing significant pressure to manage the expectations of their careers, families, children, and husbands while completing their doctoral degrees.

Ramirez (2017) suggested examining successful Latina doctoral students and their experiences attaining such degrees to explore/consider/evaluate what? The author researched doctoral students in the process of completing or who had already completed their doctoral degrees and asked:

(1) How do Chicano/Latino(a) students feel about the quality of their doctoral training? In particular, how do Chicanos/Latinos(as) feel about the way their doctoral programs are training them for scholarly roles? (2) How do race, class, and gender inequalities shape Chicano/Latino(a) doctoral student's experience with scholarly socialization? How do Chicanos/Latinos(as) navigate and contest these inequalities? (3) How does disciplinary context mediate Chicano/Latino(a) doctoral students' scholarly socialization experience? (p. 26)

Ramirez defined success as a Latina completing a doctoral degree to focus on the barriers the participating Latinas encountered. The author found that most Latina women faced a lack of opportunities for adequate scholarly experience (e.g., research experience through publications or conferences), faculty prejudice against students of color, inadequate preparation, racism, sexism, and classism. Therefore, it is necessary to understand what motivates and enables Latinas to stay motivated by focusing on their educational experiences. For example, a need exists to focus on the motivating factors that enable Latinas to persist in completing their doctoral degrees.

Latinas who complete their doctoral degrees help historically oppressed populations in the United States progress socially and economically. Because Latinas will comprise one-third of the female U.S. population by 2060, Gandara (2015) noted that “the future of the nation is very

much tied to the future of these women and girls” (p. 5). Gonzalez (2006) also mentioned the underrepresentation of Latinas with doctoral degrees and the importance of understanding the reasons for their success and barriers.

Researching, analyzing, and understanding Latinas’ experiences could provide strategies for improving the tools, techniques, and environments in higher education to increase the number of Latinas attaining doctoral degrees. This research provided information that university leaders, university program leaders, and faculty could use to give Latinas the support they need to complete their degrees. Additionally, university leaders and faculty could draw upon the results of this research to check and adjust their programs and methods for offering guidance to Latina students. This research might also provide Latinas with doctoral degree aspirations could find role models as they seek to imitate the effort and success of accomplished Latinas. Latinas who see people who look like them in positions of power and decision-making could aspire to accomplish more than they have been told they could achieve because of their race or skin color.

Glossary of Terms

The following definitions provide a conceptual meaning for the terms used in this study. Most research presents Latinx as a heterogeneous group; however, Latina/o is a term applied to people from Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. Despite this disparity, many researchers have also assumed Latinx as coming from the same cultural background, which is not accurate.

Ethnicity: Cultural identification for a particular ethnic affiliation or group (Blakemore, 2019).

Mexican: A person of Mexican descent, born and living in Mexico.

Mexican-American: A person who lives in the United States and has family or a cultural link to Mexico.

People of color: A term for people of non-White races.

Race (biological): A family, tribe, people, or nation belonging to the same stock; a class or kind of people unified by shared interests, habits, or characteristics (Blakemore, 2019).

Terminal degree: Highest degree attained in one's field of study.

The following are terms used interchangeably throughout this study for a population of people living in the United States who have cultural roots or identify as originating from Mexico, Latin America, or Spain (Lopez et al., 2020; Noe-Bustamante, Mora, & Lopez, 2020).

Chicano/a: A Latino/a with cultural roots or who identifies with Mexico, with Chicano representing males and Chicana indicating females.

Hispanic: A person of Latin-American descent, particularly of Cuban, Mexican, or Puerto Rican origin, living in the United States or related to the people, speech, or culture of Spain.

Latina/o: A person of Latin American origin living in the United States, with Chicano representing males and Chicana indicating females.

Latinx: Gender-neutral term and an alternative to Latino/Latina.

Context of the Study

In accordance with the Office of Management and Budget standards, the United States Census presents race and ethnicity as separate concepts. The racial categories in the Census questionnaire generally reflect a social definition of race recognized in the country and not an attempt to define race biologically, anthropologically, or genetically. In addition, the race categories include racial and national origin or sociocultural groups. People may choose to report more than one race to indicate their racial mixtures, such as American Indian and White. People

who identify with an origin of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish could be of any race, as race and ethnicity are distinct constructs. Office of Management and Budget standards require five minimum categories: White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020a). The 2020 United States Census questionnaire collects population data via Questions 8 and 9 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

U.S. Census 2020: Official Questionnaire, Questions 8 and 9

8. Is Person 1 of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?

☐ No, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin

☐ Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano

☐ Yes, Puerto Rican

☐ Yes, Cuban

☐ Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin – Print, for example, Salvadoran, Dominican, Colombian, Guatemalan, Spaniard, Ecuadorian, etc.

9. What is Person 1's race?
Mark ☒ one or more boxes AND print origins.

☐ White – Print, for example, German, Irish, English, Italian, Lebanese, Egyptian, etc.

☐ Black or African Am. – Print, for example, African American, Jamaican, Haitian, Nigerian, Ethiopian, Somali, etc.

☐ American Indian or Alaska Native – Print name of enrolled or principal tribe(s), for example, Navajo Nation, Blackfoot Tribe, Mayan, Aztec, Native Village of Eastern Inupiat Traditional Government, Nome Eskimo Community, etc.

☐ Chinese ☐ Vietnamese ☐ Native Hawaiian

☐ Filipino ☐ Korean ☐ Samoan

☐ Asian Indian ☐ Japanese ☐ Chamorro

☐ Other Asian – Print, for example, Pakistani, Cambodian, Hmong, etc.

☐ Other Pacific Islander – Print, for example, Tongan, Fijian, Marshallese, etc.

☐ Some other race – Print race or origin

Note. From *Decennial Census of Population and Housing Questionnaire, 2020*, United States Census Bureau (<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/technical-documentation/questionnaires/2020.html>).

The U.S. Census first addresses race via questions about an individual's origin (Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish) and race (see Figure 1). The U.S. population includes approximately 60.6 million Latinx, or about 18.5% of the nation's people (Noe-Bustamante, Lopez, & Krogstad, 2020). Predictions are for the U.S. Latinx population to reach 119 million by 2060, with a

projected growth of 86% between 2015 and 2050 (Krogstad, 2014). Latinx is a gender-neutral term used in lieu of Latino or Latina for people of Latin-American descent (Rodriguez, 2019). According to The U.S. Census, a Latino/a Latino is a person with Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or any other Spanish heritage or culture, regardless of race (Lopez, Krogstad & Passel, 2021). The U.S. Census includes data on how individuals self-identify and self-report their race. Table 1 shows the different countries of origin and approximate representation in the term “Latinx.”

Table 1

Latinos Origins, 2017

U.S. Latino population	Percentage
Mexicans	62.3%
Puerto Ricans	9.5%
Salvadorans	3.9%
Cubans	3.9%
Dominicans	3.5%
Guatemalans	2.5%
Colombians	2.1%
Hondurans	1.6%
Spaniards	1.4%
Ecuadorians	1.3%
Peruvians	1.2%
Nicaraguans	0.8%
Venezuelans	0.7%
Argentines	0.5%
Panamanians	0.4%

Note. $N = 58,838,000$. From *Key Facts About U.S. Hispanics and Their Diverse Heritage*, by L. Noe-Bustamante, September 16, 2019, Pew Research Center (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/09/16/key-facts-about-u-s-hispanics/>).

Table 2 shows the percentage of Americans with Hispanic/Latino ancestry who identify as Hispanic/Latino.

Table 2

The Percentage of U.S. American Adults Who Identify With Hispanic/Latino

	Identify as Hispanic/Latino	Do not identify as Hispanic
Foreign born	97%	3%
Second generation	92%	8%
Third generation	77%	23%
Fourth or higher generation	50%	50%

Note. From *Who Is Hispanic?* M. H. Lopez, J. M. Krogstad, and J. S. Passel, September 15, 2020, Pew Research Center (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/15/who-is-hispanic/>).

Over the past several years, there have been multiple concerns and allegations regarding the disproportionality and lack of equitable access and opportunity for Latinx in the K–12 U.S. educational system. Legal challenges have long shown the lack of equal educational opportunities for the Latinx population. Historical and ongoing legal challenges provided documentation of these concerns, with court cases dating to the 1940s and as recently as 2016. Urbina and Wright (2015) stated,

in essence, while the racial (black and white) experience has been delineated over the years, the ethnic realities of Latinos have received minimal attention, and, as a segment of the Latino community and a small segment of the educational system, minimal attention has been given to the most disadvantaged, those who have been neglected, marginalized, silenced and excluded from the pages of history and discourse—first-generation Latino students. (p. 4)

A history of disadvantages in the K–12 and higher education systems presents barriers to Latinx students advancing socially and economically. Davila and Michaels (2016) noted,

growing and developing in a society where income is correlated with access to education and opportunities, Latino students in the United States are showing far different educational outcomes than their white peers and are facing inequitable opportunities that lead to inequitable lifelong outcomes. (p. 2)

Understanding the educational system and the limits placed on Latinx requires addressing opportunity and achievement gaps. Davila and Michaels (2016) defined achievement gaps as a

focus on student outcomes, as measured at school through scores on state and national achievement tests. Opportunity gaps consist of disparities in the experiences of and access to education of different populations. Ecological factors, which are external factors that affect Latinx children's education, also significantly impact Latinx.

Achievement Gaps and Opportunity Gaps

Achievement gaps are the gaps in the achievement test-based proficiency rates (scores) of minority children in the subjects of math, science, and reading in comparison to the scores of White children. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is the only assessment to measure what U.S. students know and can do in various subjects across the nation, state, and in some urban districts. NAEP “has provided meaningful result to improve educational policy and practice since 1969” (<https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/about/>).

The NAEP is a means of evaluating students' data to examine the differences between the scores of minority and White students. The data have shown achievement gaps are “not a one-time event but an ongoing trend [that] shows poor performance of a specific group of students” (Davila & Michaels, 2016, p. 3). Additionally, minority students have underperformed in all subjects for many years, a finding also reached by other scholars.

Anderson et al. (2007) addressed achievement gaps, finding that test scores do not account for the differences in academic standards in each state. Each state has different measurement scales, content, achievement objectives, and data collection and analysis processes. Despite an apparent achievement gap among Latinx students, there are no plans to close the achievement gaps.

Opportunity gaps indicate the accessibility and quality of the education received by a child and can be challenging to measure. Davila and Michaels (2016) explained educational

disparities in terms of a historical pattern of inequalities based on race, class, and ethnicity. One example was the law prohibiting enslaved Blacks from attaining a formal education; a second example was forced boarding school and assimilation for Native Americans (“Indians”) into the American-European culture in the 19th and 20th centuries. Texas educators placed Mexican-American students in different classrooms or schools to separate them from students of European-American descent (Davila & Michaels, 2016). According to San Miguel and Donato (2010), the reason for having separate educational settings was to ensure Mexican Americans remained subordinate via limited educational access.

Another opportunity gap is the disparities in the funds allocated to schools, as fundings affect a school’s access to adequate instructional resources and ability to recruit and retain quality teachers (San Miguel & Donato, 2010). Additionally, Davila and Michaels (2016) identified the lack of access to preschool as another opportunity gap for Latinx families. Latinx parents are less likely to have access to and afford preschool. As a consequence, Latinx students start kindergarten with educational gaps. Finally, some opportunity gaps are the effect of ecological factors, an idea presented by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) to explain the dynamics of personal and environmental factors in life.

The Effects of Ecological Factors

The ecological model of human development indicates that

each individual, as well as the family as a unit, affects and is significantly affected by interactions among a number of overlapping contexts, systems or environments.

Although nearly all children possess the potential to learn, external environmental factors have the capacity to enhance or detract from that potential. (Davila & Michaels, 2016, p. 5)

Economic constraints, language barriers, and acculturation are factors commonly examined in the research on Latinx children and opportunity gaps. Lopez and Velasco (2011) studied

economic constraints and found that many Latinx children lived in poverty, with single mothers having the highest poverty levels. Economic constraints have adverse effects on Latinx children's ability to succeed academically (Davila & Michaels, 2016). Zhang and Han (2017) explained the relationship between living in poverty and academic trajectory. A lack of resources (e.g., books and extracurricular activities) in early childhood can have an impact on cognitive and language development.

Longitudinal studies indicate that children who grow up poor generally start schooling well behind their non-poor peers in terms of academic achievement. It is a challenge for them to catch up with their financially advantaged peers during the subsequent school year. Table 3 shows comparative and current poverty levels.

Table 3

Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage in the U.S. 2018

Race	Poverty rate
Non-Hispanic White	8.1%
Blacks	20.8%
Asians	10.1%
Latino	17.6%

Note. From *Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2018*, United States Census Bureau, September 10, 2019 (<https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2019/income-poverty.html>).

Hakuta et al. (2000) and Soltero (2008) examined the language barrier and indicated that language enables children to develop their ability to acquire social and thinking skills. However, some Latinx students speak little to no English and lack the opportunity to learn and practice English because they are not fully bilingual. The language barrier later obstructs Latinx students' ability to succeed academically over the years because they may lag behind their peers

academically (Davila & Michaels, 2016). Language barriers can also affect a child's "linguistic, cognitive and social development" (p. 6).

Hakuta et al. (2000) focused on efficacy and the duration of service/instruction, particularly when minority students need to engage in English as a second language (ESL) and bilingual education to develop English educational proficiency. Soltero (2008) focused on Latino students from non-English-speaking homes and their need for bilingual programs, ESL, and other English language learners (ELLs). According to Soltero, legally, the United States must provide equal educational opportunities to all students; however, no legal mandate exists for bilingual education. Bilingual programs, ESL, and ELLs have not received the attention needed to produce programs successful in helping Latinx students. Hakuta et al. and Soltero concluded that students develop verbal proficiency over 3 to 5 years, educational proficiency over 4 to 7 years, and conversational proficiency over 1 to 2 years. However, Latinx students might learn English more slowly due to social and academic struggles in K–12, causing them to fall behind or qualify for special education classes.

Vega (1990), Bacallao and Smokowski (2007), Skuza (2007), Falicov (2007), and Hernandez and Napierala (2013) studied acculturation constraints. Davila and Michaels (2016) defined acculturation as "another ecological factor that can either enhance or detract from a child's potential to learn" (p. 7). Latinx students struggle with acculturation because they have to learn and understand the U.S. culture while maintaining the cultural values taught by their Latinx families at home. *Familismo* and *marianismo* are the characteristics of the family-first and self-sacrifice orientation of Latinas in Latinx culture (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2007; Rodriguez et al., 2012; Vega, 1990). For example, marianismo consists of Latinas being family caregivers who fulfill family obligations before thinking about succeeding in school (Bacallao & Smokowski,

2007; Davila & Michaels, 2016). Presently, marianismo still exists in many Latinx families and is a current research topic. The “cultural press” causes stress for Latinx students trying to adjust to U.S. culture while keeping their Latinx culture (Skuza, 2007). Collectively, economic constraints, as well as the language barrier and acculturation, contribute to the opportunity gaps facing Latinx children.

Court Cases

Legally and by rule, inequality in the U.S. educational system should not exist. However, the U.S. culture has enabled the perpetuation of this inequality. In the 1940s U.S. Census, Mexican Americans received classification as “other white.” As a result, school districts reported that segregation did not affect Mexican American students due to their identification as White students attending White schools (Urbina & Wright, 2015). An early case related to Latinx students in schools was *Mendez v. Westminster School District* (1947). The Mendez parents had attempted to enroll their children (Gonzalo and Felicitas) at the Main Street Elementary school but were directed to Hoover School because it was the “Mexican” school. With the help of the League of United Latin American Citizens, the Mendez family filed a class-action lawsuit, with their lawyer arguing that the children experienced discrimination based not on race but national origin. In contrast, the defendants’ lawyer said there had been no discrimination based on race or nationality; instead, the children were assigned to Hoover because they required individualized instruction for students not fluent in English. The case lasted a year, and the judge decided in favor of the plaintiffs, identifying the segregation as a violation of the law. The judge ruled that Westminster School District had segregated the children by forcing them to register at Hoover School.

Delgado v. Bastrop Independent School District (1948) addressed segregation at the state level. Superintendent P.J. Dodson denied Minerva Delgado's request to attend a school closer to home, stating that until she could speak English, she would attend the Manor Ward School designated for Mexican American children. An attorney for the League of United Latin American Citizens indicated the illegal nature of segregating children based on national origin. Judge Ben H. Rice ordered the district educators to stop separating Mexican and White students by September 1949, arguing that all pupils should have access to the same facilities. However, Judge Rice stated that campus educators could separate children within the same grade (e.g., two first-grade groups) and use testing to ensure their familiarity with English. This court case had three outcomes:

1. Segregation of Mexican American pupils was not allowable under state law, so segregation brought by custom and practice was also illegal.
2. Segregation of Mexican American students was allowable only under narrow circumstances, that is, children who had limited English skills could be segregated only in the first grade; and
3. School officials throughout the states could be legally held responsible for approving and maintaining the segregation of Mexican American students. (p. 34)

However, school district leaders and educators continued to discriminate against Latinx students through the loophole of requiring English language proficiency. Judge Rice's ruling still enabled school districts to separate the children; therefore, the struggle to desegregate Latino students in the K–12 school system continued.

Joe Cisneros and the parents of Mexican American and Black students filed a lawsuit, *Cisneros v. Corpus Christi Independent School District* against the Corpus Christi Independent School district for “maintaining a dual and segregated school system” (Urbina & Wright, 2015, p. 37). The Cisneros' attorney argued

That *Brown* did apply to Mexican Americans and condemned the segregation of Mexican Americans, marshaling evidence from history, sociology, and demographics to

demonstrate that despite being “white,” Mexican Americans continued to suffer widespread discrimination in 1970, almost two decades after *Brown*. (Urbina & Wright, 2015, p. 37)

The attorney defined integration as occurring when “the percentage of each ethnic and racial group in each school would approximate each group’s percentage of the total population” (p. 37). This case showed that no matter the issues addressed in the courts, the educational system would continue to segregate and discriminate against Mexican American students. Although classified as White, the students continued to experience intentional separation from White students.

Despite these rulings, school districts failed to make appropriate changes for an equitable educational system. Ethnic prejudice and racism remained widespread in the U.S. educational system, even 36 years after *Cisneros v. Corpus Christi Independent School District*. In 2006, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) filed a lawsuit against the Dallas, Texas, school district on behalf of Luresia Mayorga Santamaria and her three children. In *Santamaria v. Dallas Independent School District* (2006), the plaintiffs stated,

Mexican American pupils who attended Preston Hollow Elementary School and who were classified as not limited-English-proficient (non-LEP) were nevertheless enrolled in English as a Second Language (ESL) class, and thus they were intentionally segregated on the basis of race, color, or national origin in violation of the Equal Protection Clause under the Fourteenth Amendment. The plaintiffs also explained that Preston Hollow did not integrate Mexican American and Anglo students for noncore curricular programs despite the requirements by the State of Texas that LEP students shall participate with their English-speaking peers in regular classes provided in the subjects and shall have a meaningful opportunity to participate with other students in all extracurricular activities. (p. 39)

A judge ordered the school principal to eliminate racial/ethnic segregation and described reserving specific classrooms for Anglo students as wrong.

Latinx students worried not only about segregation in schools but disproportionate funding. The allocation of school funding in Texas occurs based on the two main sources of state revenue and local property taxes, with a large portion of funding allocated from property taxes.

Blacks and Latinx have the highest poverty levels (see Table 3), with 17.5% of Latinx living in poverty and thus the areas with the lowest property values and tax revenue. Therefore, the districts with high numbers of Latinx students receive less funding, which results in poorer districts.

San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez (1973) focused on disparities in funding. During the 1960s, Texas was ranked 49th in disparities in per-pupil expenditures. In the case, Demetrio Rodriguez and seven other parents alleged the school district denied children equal educational opportunities and violated their 14th Amendment rights, with seven San Antonio districts accused of unequal funding. The parents of students who attended San Antonio Independent School District considered the financial funding for students compared to other districts a violation of the Equal Protection Clause. The per-pupil expenditure was \$585 in affluent areas and \$60 in poor districts. However, the court found it was not an unconstitutional violation of the 14th Amendment for the school district to have a financial system based on local property taxes.

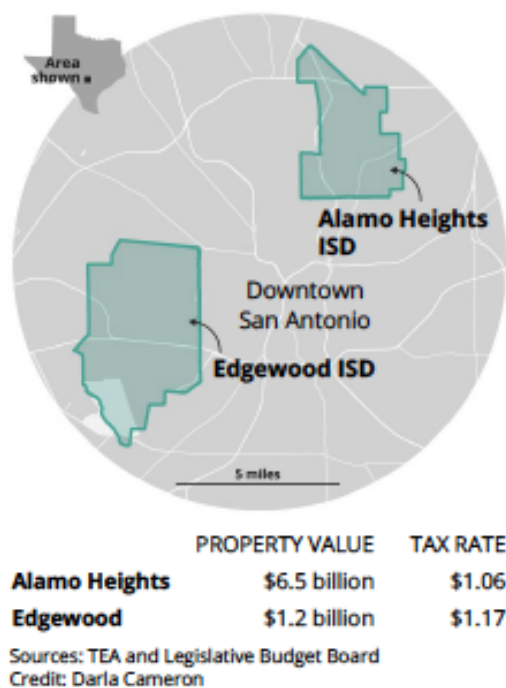
After *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*, *Edgewood Independent School District v. Kirby* (1989) addressed school financing methods. The court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, arguing that “education is a fundamental right” (Urbana & Wright, 2016, p. 42). However, the initial ruling was overturned on appeal, which indicated, “Education was not a fundamental right under the Texas Constitution” (p. 43). These cases showed the historic unfairness of the public educational system regarding student background, ethnicity, or socioeconomic level.

In 1993, Texas created the Robin Hood program to increase financial funding to poorer school districts. The program’s goal was to redistribute excess funds from wealthier school

districts to poorer districts. Poorer districts continue to have lower property values than wealthier districts, as well as more students with greater educational needs (Swaby, 2019). For example, property values in Edgewood ISD versus Alamo Heights ISD have the same per-student funding from state revenue; however, property values funding varies significantly. The tax rate in the Alamo Heights ISD is \$1.04 per \$100 of the property's value, which provides a \$6.5 billion allocation of funds. The tax rate in the Edgewood ISD is \$1.17 (the maximum based on state regulations) per \$100 of the property's value, which provides a \$1.2 billion allocation of funds (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Edgewood ISD Versus Alamo Heights Property Values 2019



Note. From “Texas’ School Finance System Is Unpopular and Complex. Here’s How It Works,” by A. Swaby, February 15, 2019, *The Texas Tribune* (<https://www.texastribune.org/2019/02/15/texas-school-funding-how-it-works>).

Despite the history of litigation, little progress has occurred regarding equitable access to education for Latinx students. The requirements of law or court rulings may not result in the

required changes. Equal opportunity in education indicates everyone should have access to education; however, historical evidence suggests this is not the case. Although individuals have sued and won cases for equal educational access, these victories have not resulted in the change needed. Carter and Welner (2013) stated, “Educational disparities are intergenerational economic inequality correlated with skin color, ethnicity, linguistic and social class status” (p. 1). One possible conclusion is that disproportionate and inequitable access to education is not a regulatory but a cultural problem.

Statement of the Problem

Latinx remain underrepresented in doctoral programs and doctoral degree confirmations, with only 8.2% of doctorates conferred to Latinx. Additionally, of the 13,253 degrees conferred to Latinx, Latinos received 5,856 and Latinas received 7,397 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017–2018). In the past decade, Latinas have outnumbered Latinos in enrollment rates and degree attainment in higher education, and these gaps continue to increase (Cooper, 2014).

Table 4

Doctor’s Degrees Conferred by Postsecondary Institutions by Race/Ethnicity and Sex of Students, 2017–2018

2017–2018	Number of degrees conferred	Percentage
White	107,415	66.8%
Black	14,241	8.9%
Hispanic (Latinx)	13,253	8.2%
Asian/Pacific Islander	20,762	12.9%
American Indian/Alaska Native	707	0.4%
Two or more races	4,497	2.8%
Non-resident alien	23,199	N/A
Total	184,074	100%

Note. Includes PhD, EdD, MD, and DDS. From National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017–2018.

Limited literature has focused on the experiences and successes of Latinas in higher education, particularly doctoral programs (Arocho, 2017; Ramirez, 2014). Table 6 presents the eight dissertations addressing Latinx participation in doctoral programs, only two of which had included participants with completed doctoral degrees. Therefore, Latinas' doctoral process and success remain understudied and poorly understood.

Gandara (2015) stated the importance of focusing on Latinas as, by 2060, they will account for one-third of the female population of the United States. According to Espino (2016) and Gonzalez (2006), although Latinas sometimes receive support for nontraditional things, such as educational attainment, they must continue to fulfill their traditional cultural roles in their homes. Latinx families have become familiar with the requirement for two incomes as a matter of need and acculturation into the U.S. lifestyle. However, this need and acculturation could challenge more traditional Latinx families who expect women to remain at home if married or serve as caregivers if unmarried. Once married, traditional Latinx families expect the Latinas to take on the duties of wives and mothers. However, college attendance has become a more common phenomenon among Latinas pursuing well-paying jobs while handling their other responsibilities and caring for family (Cooper, 2014). Research has not addressed how Latinas can acquire terminal degrees and overcome both cultural and societal barriers.

The goal of this study was to gather the testimonies of Latinas who had successfully completed their terminal degrees to better understand their problems, processes, perspectives, and approaches related to success. In this study, gaining accurate accounts of Latinas' experiences completing their terminal degrees consisted of interviewing only Latinas who had completed their degree in the past 5 years. A need exists to identify how Latinas successfully complete terminal degrees because Latinx will become the "majority minority" in the United

States, and Latinas will comprise the majority of women in the nation (Noe-Bustamante, Lopez, & Krogstad, 2020). Latinas face barriers to higher education because of cultural struggles (Granillo-Crawford, 2008; Piedad Sánchez, 2015). Some Latinas have opted to challenge the status quo of traditional Latinx cultural expectations of marriage, children, and life at home because of their educational goals (Aguilar, 2016; Espinoza, 2010, 2016; Sy & Romero, 2008). In aggregate, the extant studies have suggested that Latinas pursuing terminal degrees strive to balance both their cultural demands and their desires to acquire terminal degrees. Many Latinas have overcome issues of injustice by focusing on their goal to complete terminal degrees as a sustaining factor. Despite many Latinas' strong belief in themselves, they sometimes struggle with self-doubt about completing their degrees (Granillo-Crawford, 2008; Piedad Sánchez, 2015).

Latinas face significant barriers to completing their terminal degrees. The women interviewed in this study shared their lived experiences of persevering and succeeding despite the barriers. The stories of the Latinas in this study suggest that cultural and gender expectations might no longer affect some Latinas, whereas others strive to balance being students, wives, and mothers. Although inequalities in the educational system are barriers to success in all levels of education, the Latinas in this research became resilient against highly socially embedded inequalities.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand U.S. Latinas' experiences of their doctoral program and what enabled them to complete their doctoral degrees. The goal of this study was to identify the contributing factors to Latinas' academic success. The study was a means of exploring the process the Latinas followed to seek and complete their doctoral programs and the

influence of the “family system, cultural system, organizational system, political system, economic systems, and community systems” (Patton, 2015, p. 13) on their journeys. Discovering and identifying the influence of the various systems on Latinas’ degree completion could be a way to identify and mitigate barriers so Latinas can complete their doctoral degrees. Therefore, this study could provide useful information to Latinas pursuing terminal degrees, as well as university leaders, university program directors, university program faculty, and anyone involved in the educational trajectory of Latina students. Policymakers could use the study’s results to support Latinas’ educational trajectories and facilitate Latina students’ success. Finally, anyone involved with Latinas could use this research to understand and support their educational aspirations.

The Latinas who participated in the research met the criteria of being women who identified with the Latina/Hispanic race and had completed their doctoral degrees in the last 5 years. In this study, the testimonio research design was the methodology used to explore and document Latinas’ experiences of embarking on the challenge of attaining their doctorate degrees. Using testimonios was a means to elicit and document these women’s stories and bring attention to the injustices experienced by oppressed people in higher education (Huber, 2012).

Research Questions

This qualitative study had the following research questions:

1. What is the experience of successful Latinas in achieving doctoral degrees? What keeps them motivated to finish?
2. What factors facilitate these Latinas’ success? What are some of the barriers?
3. What support systems do Latinas encounter?

Significance of the Study

The extant research lacks the representation of Latinas acquiring terminal degrees. Therefore, the study's goal was to gain an understanding, through participant testimonios, of how the Latina participants negotiated, overcame barriers, and achieved their terminal degrees. The study was a means of hypothesizing and providing a voice to Latinas to share their experiences of completing their terminal degrees. The study focused on the participants' thought processes and inspiration for starting, enrolling in, and completing their doctoral programs. Additionally, the research presented how the participants managed the different demands of their lives, such as fulfilling the expected cultural roles. This study addressed the phenomenon from the perspectives and lived experiences of Latinas who had completed their terminal degrees to contribute to the body of knowledge on Latinas' educational achievement. The analysis of the participant interviews commenced to discover concepts and operations previously unrecognized in the literature for impacting universities program leaders, professors, and Latinas of how to address barriers to academic success.

Overview of the Methodology

In this study, the testimonio approach, CRT, and LatCrit provided a foundation to collect Latinas' stories about their experiences of pursuing their doctoral degrees. CRT and LatCrit were the theoretical lenses used to address the issues of race, gender, and racism in educational structures, practices, and discourses (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Villalpando, 2004; Yosso, 2005). Elenes and Bernal (2010) suggested viewing CRT and LatCrit not as separate but as complementary and supplementary, as both frameworks include the strategy of counterstorytelling for conveying messages of lived experiences. Together, the frameworks provided the opportunity to identify and examine the forms of oppression experienced by

Latinas. Additionally, the testimonio method provided information for theorizing about the realities Latinas faced to achieve success (Huber, 2012).

Review of the Literature

Latinx

This chapter presents a review of the literature on the history of Latinx and different civilizations, as well as Latinx culture, identity, race, ethnicity, and nationality. No universally accepted definition exists for culture; however, there are definitions for the components of culture. Such components include how individuals identify and culturally express themselves based on certain cultures, races, biology and physical characteristics, ethnicities (Blakemore, 2019), and nationalities (Jaksić, 2015). This literature review also presents Latinx acculturation and assimilation, followed by the current literature on Latinas in higher education, including those in pursuit of doctoral degrees. The topics of culture, race, ethnicity, and previous research provided an understanding of the effects of these factors on the participants' experiences. Patton (2015) indicated understanding the effects of outcomes in people's lives requires looking at "family systems, cultural systems, organizational systems, political systems, economic systems, and community systems" (p. 13) individually and in relation to each other and the outcomes of action in people's lives. This chapter also presents the study's theoretical framework.

History of the Socio-Political Experiences: Latinx

Latinx is a term for individuals from over 23 countries south of the North American continent. The majority of Latinx come from Mexico (61.9%; Noe-Bustamante, Mora, & Lopez, 2020). In 1976, U.S. Congress passed a law to create the term "Hispanic" in the U.S. Census to indicate people living in the United States from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Central America, and South America, the majority of whom spoke Spanish. By the 1990s, Latino was a more frequently used label than Hispanic, which ultimately led to the gender-neutral term Latinx (Noe-Bustamante, Mora, & Lopez, 2020).

There is a need to look at the cultural roots and understand the complexity of the different civilizations that comprise the Latinx identity. In the pre-Columbian time of the Spanish invasion, the Aztec, Maya, and Inca peoples lived across the areas now identified as Mexico, Central America, and South America. The Mayan people lived in Southern Mexico and Central America, the Incas lived in the area now known as Peru, and the Aztecs lived in Southern Mexico and Central America. The Arawak occupied the islands of Cuba, Jamaica, Haiti, the Bahamas, and Puerto Rico. Therefore, it is complicated to use the term Latinx to describe the cultures of all these civilizations that once existed. McFarlane (2004) described the effects of grouping all these civilizations together:

The independent Latin American states created in the early 1820s took political control of societies which, during three hindered years of Spanish and Portuguese rules, had been formed by interaction between peoples descended from the Amerindians who were the original peoples of the Americas, the Europeans who came to settle and the Africans who were forcibly carried across the Atlantic into slavery. None of these states was the same: they differed in geographical scale, ethnic composition and economic resources and potential. (p. 1)

After invading and settling the aforementioned areas, the Spaniards began having interracial marriages and children with Indians and Black Africans, resulting in a new “hybrid population” (Carrera, 2003, p. 36). The Spaniards sought to document the different marriages and offspring with a taxonomy for classifying offspring with the *casta* system. Table 5 shows the *casta* taxonomy.

Table 5*Spaniards Taxonomy for New Hybrid Population*

Man and women	Offspring classification
Español and India	Mestizo
Mestizo and Espanola	Castizo
Castizo and Espanola	Espanol
Espanola and Negro	Mulato
Espanola and Mulato	Morisco
Morisca and Espanol	Albino
Espanol and Albina	Torna-atras
Indio and Torna-atras	Lobo
Lobo and India	Zambaigo
Zambaigo and India	Cambujo
Cambujo and Mulata	Albarasado
Albarasado and Mulata	Barcino
Baracino and Mulata	Coyote
Coyote women and Indio	Chamiso
Chamisa and Mestizo	Coyote Mestizo
Coyote Mestizo and Mulata	Ahi te estas

Note. From *Imagining Identity in New Spain*, by M. M. Carrera, 2003, pp. 36–37. Copyright 2003 University of Texas Press.

“The Casta Paintings” are historical documentation of the cultural roots of the Latinx culture. The previous subsection provided a summary of the complex Latinx culture and how many cultures have comprised the term from 1492 to the present.

Latinx Culture, Identity, Race, and Ethnicity

Culture

Over the centuries, scholars have sought to define culture in many ways. Jahoda (2012) described culture as the history of humans consisting of their collections of knowledge, belief, traditions, symbols, and ideas (Arnold, 1873; Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952; Tylor, 1958). Jahoda

believed no universally accepted definition for culture exists and defined culture with the following categories: “(1) culture as external; (2) as internal, or internal and external; and (3) groups of several definitions” (p. 292). Jahoda conceptualized these categories from the following four texts to define culture: *Understanding Culture* (Wyer et al., 2009), *Cross-Cultural Psychology* (Keith, 2011), *Cross-Cultural Psychology* (Berry et al., 2011), and *Cross-Cultural Research Methods in Psychology* (Matsumoto & Van De Vijver, 2011).

In the first category, culture as external, Jahoda (2012) indicated that the manifestation of culture occurs based on individuals’ experiences of what they face in their everyday lives (Schwartz, 2009). Culture is a complex phenomenon, and the members of prior generations create the building blocks of what their cultures mean. Culture is also ever-changing, often modified over the years due to external factors with the goal of “preserving and transmitting the kinds of social inheritance referred to as recipes, beliefs, norms, conventions and the like” (Cole & Parker, 2011, p. 135).

In the second category, as internal, or internal and external, Jahoda described culture as constructed based on the environment in which one lives. Wyer et al. (2009) asserted, “Culture [i]s [a] network of knowledge consisting of learned routines of thinking, feeling, and interacting with other people” (p. 4). Oyserman and Sorensen (2009) added to Hong’s idea that culture originates from an individual’s country of origin. Researchers have described culture as constructed based on what individuals consider relevant at the moment and value as important (Oyserman & Sorensen, 2009; Wyer et al., 2009).

In the last category, groups of several definitions, Jahoda (2012) examined a range of terms for culture from the four books, concluding that culture does not have a single definition. Still, different aspects are means of defining culture. Jahoda said, “It must be stressed that

‘culture’ is not a thing, but a social construct vaguely referring to a vast complex of phenomena” (p. 300). Thus, due to the multiple views about culture, researchers presenting the term should explain and provide insight into how they will apply the concept of culture to their individual writings.

Latinx Culture

According to Jahoda (2012), there is no single definition of culture; however, individuals can present the different aspects that comprise the term. Jahoda suggested writers give their definitions of culture. Therefore, as the researcher of this study, I saw and defined culture as the traditions and values left behind by prior generation and what individuals have constructed based on what they have been exposed to and consider important to continue in their cultures. I perceive culture as consisting of what the members of prior generations have left behind; not all people have the privilege of listening to the testimonios of the cultural traditions and values of grandparents and great-grandparents. Additionally, not all Latinx get exposed to the same cultural traditions and values; therefore, there is no way to define these traditions and values. Individuals also choose the traditions and values important in their cultures. My explanation of culture originated from Jahoda. Additionally, Jaksic (2015) explained that although groups may share the same traditions, values, and beliefs, variances inevitably exist within and among the groups.

The Latinx culture includes many countries grouped under one classification. Gracia (2014) pointed out how “various nationalities are frequently identified as Hispanic/Latino, such as Mexican or Chilean” (p. 12). Currently, Latinx cultural values include *familismo*, *marianismo*, and *machismo*, in which men traditionally hold power. Familismo consists of prioritizing family over individual needs through loyalty, reciprocity, solidarity, and a strong attachment to family

needs. Typically, family obligations fall more on girls than boys (Vega, 1990). Marianismo, reflective of the Virgin Madonna of the Catholic Church, is the concept of a good Latina. In this concept, Latinas show devotion to their families by handling domestic chores and putting their needs aside (Camarota, 2004; Espinoza, 2010; Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002; Gandara, 1995, 1999). Machismo is “Latino men perceived or branded to embody hypermasculine style, traits, and personas are positioned as rightfully masculine and potentiate legendary status among both peers and family” (Walters & Valenzuela, 2020, p. 970). Traditionally, men in the Latinx culture hold power over and provide for their families. As a cultural value, the expectation is for Latinas to show respect, dedication, and support for Latinos (Carteret, 2011).

Latinx Identity, Race, and Ethnicity

Gracia (2007) discussed the identity of both race and ethnicity, saying, “Many of the considerations that motivate racial identity also motivate ethnic identity, and many of the same difficulties that afflict racial identity also afflict ethnic identity” (p. 48). According to Appiah (1994), each individual’s identity has two dimensions: the collective and the personal. The collective dimension is an individual’s broader perspective of identity toward race and ethnicity. The collective dimension, “in short, provide[s] what we might call scripts: narratives that people can use in shaping their life plans and in telling their life stories” (Appiah, 1994, p. 97). The personal dimension comprises how individuals shape their identities as individuals. Appiah described the personal dimension as “consisting of other socially or morally important features of the person—intelligence, charm, wit, cupidity—that are not themselves the basis of forms of collective identity” (p. 93). Like culture, collective and personal identities are phenomena socially constructed by an individual. For Latinx individuals, these identities can vary depending

on where they live in the United States. This also relates to Appiah's and Gracia's ideas of how individuals identify with race and ethnicity.

A focus on the race and ethnicity of the Latinx culture did not occur until 2000 with Gracia (2000, 2005, 2008, 2015), with only Alcoff (1995) referring to the race and ethnicity of Hispanic/Latino. Jaksic (2015) explained race and ethnicity with the familial-historical view of Gracia:

Ethne function as extended families that result from historical contingent events. Members of ethnic groups do not share a fixed set of properties throughout the groups' histories, although each member of each group shares some properties with some other members, or members, of the group. Because of the historical and contingent conditions that cause the formation of ethnic groups, the conditions of the identity of each group may, and usually do, vary from group to group. (p. 7)

At times, an individual's physical characteristics does not relate to race or ethnicity. Appiah (1994) believed this a concept of race defined by the biology of an individual, while Alcoff (2015) explained Gracia's views on race and how "[Appiah] did not take into account permutations that the concept has undergone, various meanings it has in different communities of discourse, or the very real possibility that is referent might change" (p. 45). As for ethnicity, Alcoff indicated that Gracia defined ethnicity as the history of a group, with common ties to language, culture, and religion that changes over the years and is an "objective phenomenon" (p. 43). According to Alcoff, the solution to defining race and ethnicity consists of adopting the concept of ethnorace. Ethnorace, which contains the elements of race and ethnicity, is a way to capture individuals' understanding of their identities.

Enculturation, Acculturation, and Assimilation

Enculturation, acculturation, and assimilation are terms for an individual's process of learning from and adopting one's own or other cultures. Enculturation is the culture an individual is born into and first experiences (Chapa et al., 2017). Acculturation consists of how individuals

deal with two cultures and find their identities between the host culture and their own cultures.

Berry (2017) said,

Acculturation represents the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members. At the cultural group level, it involves change in social structures and institutions and in cultural norms. At the individual psychological level, it involves changes in people's behavioral repertoires (including their food, dress, language, values and identities) and their eventual adaptation to these intercultural encounters. (p. 15)

Finally, assimilation occurs when individuals no longer identify with the cultures they were born in and first experienced; instead, they adopt and integrate into their host culture (Chapa et al., 2017). Garcia and Schmalzbauer (2017) said,

Assimilation takes place within social contexts brimming with racial, ethnic, economic, cultural, and class-based differences. This diversity, they argue, implies there is no set mainstream to which immigrants uniformly orientate. Rather, the mainstream is subject to change: it is a composite of cultural practices and beliefs that forms a common national existence, and assimilation into it is achieved through shifts among both immigrants and natives. The conceptualization of the mainstream knowledge of America's deepening diversity and the two-way street of assimilation, but it is so broad that it becomes difficult to clearly define. A place-based view of the mainstream, on the other hand, serves to anchor the concept. (p. 67)

All three terms apply to Latinx and show how the Latinx culture has produced individuals' identities via their original cultural and ethnic ideology.

Latinx Enculturation, Acculturation, and Assimilation

Enculturation, acculturation, and assimilation indicate how the Latinx culture fits with the U.S. culture to produce an individual's identity. Chapa et al. (2017) called the process a mutual cultural change:

Latinos in the U.S. represent a large-scale case study of mutual cultural change. Immigration to the U.S. is the first step of change. The immigrant must adapt to the new cultural environment and the receiving society adapts to the immigrants as well, in different ways. As the adaptation experience of immigrants continues, they become part of the new society through cognitive and behavioral modifications. Their children claim unique identities, while the receiving society learns to like some aspect the immigrants contributes and to reject others. (p. 187)

For example, many Latinx born in Latin America and immigrated to the United States identify strongly with their countries of birth and only experience U.S. culture after moving to the United States. Such individuals living in the United States could experience enculturation, or the process of adjusting to the second culture. Even after living in the United States for years, such individuals often continue to identify with and feel loyal to their countries of origin. The enculturation process evolves when these immigrants have children. Children born of immigrants become first-generation-born citizens raised in the United States. A heuristic paradigm then occurs with individuals at this level; they may gradually integrate cultures, abandon their original culture (assimilate), or not identify with either (marginalized; Berry et al., 2002). Individuals of Latinx backgrounds tend to identify with and want to preserve their cultures or origins, so they usually decide to integrate the cultures (Berry et al., 2006). However, some Latinx individuals choose the “third culture” (marginalization).

Chicana/Latinas Feminism Education

An example of assimilation is the Chicano movement that occurred in the 1960s when Mexicans living in the United States identified with the same beliefs and created a new culture. Individuals from the Hispanic/Latino community who identified as Chicanos emerged during the 1960s when farmworkers demanded reforms for job conditions, segregation, oppression, political representation, and education (Rodriguez, 1996). After a focus on the struggle for gender equality, the Chicana feminist movement emerged as the voice of Latinas coming together. Although they understood the heterogeneity of the Latina community and the Chicana movement’s concerns, the Chicana feminists sought gender equality and the eradication of machismo within their communities (Ortega, 2015).

A larger audience became aware of Chicanas/Latinas' concerns due to several "newspaper articles, poems, scholarly articles, and monographs, fictional accounts, testimonials, and autobiographical accounts" (Ortega, 2015, p. 245) on the racism and oppression of Latinas. Chicanas/Latinas believed in gender equality within their culture, but as Anzaldua (2012) explained, the Chicana culture was created in the eyes of men: "Those in power—men—make culture. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them" (p. 28). Anzaldua described the culture as having three traditional life choices for women; however, the scholar also presented a fourth option:

If a woman doesn't renounce herself in favor of the male, she is selfish. If a woman remains a virgin until she marries, she is a good woman. For a woman of my culture, there used to be only three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or the home as a mother. Today some of us have a fourth choice: entering the world by way of education and career and becoming [a] self-autonomous person. (p. 39)

Barlow and Shapiro (1971) saw the demands for access to higher education from Chicanas/Latinas as the "passport across race and class lines" (p. 20). After World War II, the U.S. government provided financial assistance to attend college through the GI Bill, National Defense Education Act of 1958, and Higher Education Act of 1965, giving everyone an equal opportunity to pursue postsecondary education, including Latinas. Therefore, the legislation was a path to increasing the number of Chicanas and Latinas attending higher education and acquiring degrees.

Latinas in Higher Education

Gandara (2015) identified several reasons for focusing on Latinas' educational success. By 2060, Latinas will comprise an estimated one-third of the female population. Latinas in the United States have made progress by increasing their high school and college degree achievement. Additionally, there has been a rise in Latina business ownership. Gandara stated,

“Thus, the future of the nation is very much tied to the future of these women and girls” (p. 5).

However, despite their progress, Latinas continue to face sociocultural and policy barriers that result in educational disparities. Gandara stated,

Many of the barriers that hold Latinas back are related to poverty. One-fourth of Latinas live below the poverty line and more than half are living in near-poverty. This sometimes makes high school graduation challenging due to competing work and family demands, makes higher education difficult to access, and student debt impossible to sustain. Low levels of education lead to [a] lack of opportunity in the job market, where Latinas make only 56 cents for every dollar earned by white males. (p. 5)

Gandara suggested increasing the number of Latinas graduating by conducting additional research on how they complete college degrees. Espino (2016) indicated the need to focus on Latinas’ success in higher education how Latinas can complete their educational goals:

The success of Latinas [is] predicted to create equitable and supportive environments that foster academic achievement as well as attend to the multiple worlds of family, community, and academe that they must continuously negotiate. In order to advance Mexican American women and Latinas along their journey to the doctorate and to break the cycle of poverty within the Latina/o community, colleges and universities must recognize the cultural and familial dynamics and static notions of womanhood that may affect Mexican American and Latina women’s lived experiences as well as the challenges they face and the resilience they exhibit in negotiating raced-gendered constructions. It is essential to provide mentoring opportunities for Latina women during their academic life course, and especially as they enroll in doctoral study and move into academe. The mentoring support can help them make sense of sexist and racist structures, which can create significant challenges for their educational and professional advancement. (p. 202)

Most of the current educational literature on Latinas has focused on their undergraduate experiences. Therefore, a need exists to study Latinas instead of Latinos because Latinas outnumber Latinos in educational attainment at all levels in higher education (Gandara, 2015). Some scholars have addressed the educational disparities and experiences of Latinx attaining terminal or doctoral degrees (Gonzalez, 2006; Gonzalez et al., 2001, 2002). Gonzalez et al. (2001) explored Latina/o doctoral students’ experiences with autoethnographic data collection of six Latina/o doctoral students and the authors for a total of 11 participants. Gonzalez et al. (2001)

described Latina/o doctoral students' experiences as fragile, vulnerable, and unbearable, as the Latinax participants questioned whether this doctoral degree was "worth" how the journey made them feel. The findings showed that

The elements that emerged from the data included: (a) the lack of family understanding, (b) entering a new and unfamiliar world, (c) the lack of an adequate Latina/o presence in their programs, (s) experiencing an "outsider-within" status, (e) enduring identity changes, (f) yearning for validation and (g) enduring conflicts between two different worlds. (p. 568)

Gonzalez et al. (2002) focused on the participants' experiences of pursuing doctoral degrees with two phases of inquiry. The goal of Phase 1 was to capture the six participants' experiences of pursuing doctoral degrees, with Phase 2 a means to capture the researchers' shared experiences. Phase 1 consisted of exploring the Latina/o doctoral experience with autoethnographic narratives. Phase 2 included the creation of a dialogue with the authors on the experience of doctoral education based on the autoethnographic narratives from Phase 1. The researchers found three topics: "(a) the nature of the academy, (b) the forces perpetuating the academy's nature, and (c) an alternative framework for doctoral education" (p. 545).

In the first topic, the nature of the academy, Gonzalez et al. (2002) described the environment of the academy as "conservative, restrictive, and racist" (p. 545). The second topic, the forces perpetuating the academy's nature, pertained to the forces supporting Topic 1, including "the market culture, elitism and faculty rewards and the tenure system" (p. 547). Gonzalez et al. defined the market culture as the influence of U.S. research universities on the topics Latinas/os want to investigate. The researchers found that participating doctoral students lacked the freedom to choose topics related to studies of Latinas/os. The elitism force was the faculty's focus on their self-interest rather than the interests of the students they taught and advised. The faculty rewards and the tenure system force showed how the faculty consistently

reminded their students that faculty with tenure could do as they pleased. Finally, specific to an alternative framework for doctoral education, Gonzalez et al. presented a new support system for doctoral students.

Gonzalez (2006) focused on Latina doctoral students and their experiences of academic socialization to explore the effects of academic socialization on the students' success or failure. The phenomenological study included 13 Latinas who engaged in semi-structured interviews to answer the research question, "What are the educational experiences of Latina doctoral students in predominately white institutions, and how have they responded to academic socialization?" (p. 349). Gonzalez found that the Latinas who received positive reinforcement and support for educational attainment during their K–12 education had the confidence to attain college degrees. However, the participants with negative experiences faced challenges as they continued their education. Gonzalez noted, "Latina doctoral students stated that poor K-12 academic preparation, understanding cultural assimilation, and overt and covert racism set the tone for educational challenges as undergraduate and through graduate school" (p. 357). The researcher continued,

When Latinas resisted academic socialization, they found or lost their academic voice. When they found their voice, the intellectual rejuvenation made them want to remain in academic past their doctorates to make change and serve their people...Latinas who lost their voice mentioned not having avenues to express their concerns, and this led to their marginalization and isolation. Some mentioned not having professorial support or validation. Others, as they lost confidence in their academic abilities and potential for success, talked about rethinking and downgrading their academic career desires. (pp. 360–361)

The aforementioned research focused on the experiences of doctoral students and included interviews with both Latinas and Latinos. This literature review also included several dissertations related to doctoral students' experiences rather than their perspectives of their programs after completion. To more fully examine the literature on this topic, a search commenced on ProQuest for relevant doctoral dissertations published between 2000 and 2020

using the following key phrases: *Latinas' experiences in doctoral programs*, *Latinas' experiences with PhDs*, and *attainment of doctoral degrees for Latinas*. An analysis of each dissertation commenced to discern whether the participants were student or completer Latinas. See Table 6 for the findings.

Table 6

Previous Dissertation

Dissertation title	Author/year	Interviewed students or graduates/number of participants
<i>Experience of First-Generation Latinas in Educational Doctoral Programs in South Texas</i>	Pazton, 2020	Doctoral students (8)
<i>The Experiences of Latina Graduate Students in Psychology Programs</i>	Celaya, 2012	Doctoral students (11)
<i>Navegando La Torre De Marfil: Testimonios of Latina Doctoral Student Experience of Belonging</i>	Luz Ramos, 2020	Doctoral students (5)
<i>Chicana PhD Students Living Nepantla: Educacion and Aspirations Beyond the Doctorate</i>	Burciaga, 2007	Doctoral students (15)
<i>Understanding Latina Doctoral Student experience: Negotiating Ethnic Identity and Academic Success</i>	Arocho, 2017	Doctoral students (16)
<i>Hearing Their Voices: The Educational Experiences and Journey of Latina Doctoral Graduates</i>	Guillen, 2020	Doctoral students (15)
<i>Latinas and Resilience: The Attainment of a Doctoral Degree</i>	Sanchez, 2015	Graduated (12)
<i>The Journey of Latinas Successfully Earning Their Doctoral Degree</i>	Granillo-Crawford, 2008	Graduated (6)

Latinas Experiences to the Doctoral Degree

The goal of this research was to understand the experiences of Latina doctoral students who had completed their degrees. Therefore, this study focused on women who identified as

Latinas who had completed their doctoral degrees. Table 7 shows some relevant past research on Latinx students' attainment of 4-year to doctoral degrees.

Table 7

Latinx Past Research

Title of research	Focus of study	Citation
<i>The Good Daughter Dilemma: Latinas Managing Family and School Demands</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obligation of Latinas toward family while in a doctoral graduate student • Nine Latina participants 	Espinoza, 2010
<i>Family Responsibilities Among Latinas College Students From Immigrant Families</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family responsibilities of Latinas in college (attending a 4-year college program) • Latina first- or second-generation participants 	Sy & Romero, 2008
<i>Latina Millennials' Testimonios While Pursuing Advanced Degrees and Parental/Familial Support</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental and familial support while completing an advanced degree (master's or EdD) • Latina Millennial participants 	Aguilar, 2016
<i>Unequal Socialization: Interrogating the Chicano/Latino(a) Doctoral Education Experience</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gaps in the university educational system (doctoral) • 24 Chicano/Latinos/as 	Ramirez, 2017
<i>Get an Education in Case He Leaves You: Consejos for Mexican American Women</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How women are seen in the Latino culture while pursuing a doctorate • 25 Mexican Americans, first-generation participants 	Espino, 2016

The Good Daughter

Espinoza (2010) documented the strategies Latina doctoral graduate students used to balance the demands of family and school and maintain the status of the “good daughter.” According to Espinoza, the “good daughter dilemma” is the challenge of attending to familial obligations before thinking of oneself, or, in this case, the pursuit of education. *Familismo* and *marianismo* terms for the cultural expectations for Latinas. Espinoza interviewed 15 Latina

doctoral students, of which 12 self-identified as Mexican American or Chicana. None of the participants were married or had children, and most had grown up with the familismo and marianismo cultural expectations in Northern California. Snowball sampling was the approach used to recruit participants.

Espinoza (2010) used biculturalism theory and Chicana feminism (multiple identities) as the theoretical frameworks for a study. Biculturalism theory focuses on the management of two cultural contexts. A bicultural person is “competent in two cultures” (p. 320), practices, and lifestyles and identifies as belonging in both cultures. Biculturalism requires Latinas to manage the conflict, tension, and competition between native and new cultures. Chicana feminism theory focuses on gender equality within the Chicano community. Using both theories of Chicana feminism and biculturalism, Espinoza examined

What is absent from the research literature are empirical details of exactly how Chicana/Latina women negotiate these borders, and the diverse strategies they employ, specifically those pursuing higher education. Informed by the bicultural theory and mestiza identity frameworks, this study examines the integrator and separator strategies Latina doctoral students develop to manage and balance family relationships with school demands. (p. 321)

Anzaldua (1987) provided an example of the biculturalism of managing two cultures by using the term “mestiza identity” to define a third identity developed due to constantly juggling two cultures. Espinoza (2010) said, “The mestiza identity, which can take on many unique forms, is developed to manage two cultures that are always in direct conflict with one another” (p. 321). Espinoza focused on Latinas’ family responsibilities, care, and parental relationships using the following questions, among others:

- When you were growing up, what messages did you receive from your family about how you should care for them?
- What was expected of you when you were young?

- What was your role in the family growing up?

Nine of the participating Latinas described themselves as integrators who managed to reconcile their responsibilities for school and family (Espinoza, 2010). The Latinas who successfully convinced their families they could manage all their responsibilities (i.e., familial obligations and education) received support. The results suggest that Latinos (men) would have found it easier to receive family support immediately without proving they could manage their responsibilities. The other six Latina participants, who identified as separators, preferred to separate school and family to avoid tension and conflict at home. The separators never mentioned when they needed to work on school to avoid tension at home and dealt with family emergencies by putting schoolwork on hold to attend to family needs. Espinoza recommended university leaders educate faculty about the cultural expectations facing Latinas (e.g., familismo) and provide appropriate and informed student support services.

Family Responsibilities

Sy and Romero (2008) examined the family responsibilities of Latinas in college and the effect on their college experiences. The authors used the ecological system theory to examine the challenges faced by the students whose families lacked experience in higher education and the associated demands of transiting to college. Additionally, Sy and Romero sought to understand the effect of the family philosophy of familismo (i.e., prioritizing family obligations and loyalty above all other duties) on the Latinas attending a 4-year college program. Sy and Romero examined

The family responsibilities of Latinas as they make the transition into college. Because little research has investigated these concepts with college-aged participants, we aimed to learn as much as possible from the young women by using a semi-structured qualitative interview. (p. 216)

The participants were either Latinas pursuing or who had completed their 4-year college degrees. After using snowball sampling to recruit participants, Sy and Romero (2008) conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 Latinas who were the first or second generations in their families to attend college. The interview questions pertained to participants' family obligations in the areas of sibling caretaking, financial contributions, and language/cultural brokering.

Examples of these questions included:

- Do you have any financial obligation to your family?
- In your family, did you regularly take care of your younger siblings or cousins?
- What kind of things did you do?

Three themes emerged from the data (Sy & Romero, 2008). First, the Latinas found ways to support their families while still gaining self-sufficiency. Second, the participants described voluntary financial contribution as a volunteer/requirement to contributing money, creating the additional stress of holding jobs while completing school. Third, the participants talked about the role of being surrogate parents to younger members of the family. Sy and Romero (2008) suggested that scholars and researchers could improve Latina enrollment and retention in college by understanding the positive and negative factors affecting Latinas' ability to balance their home and school roles.

Latina Millennials' Testimonios

Aguilar (2016) examined millennial Latinas' experiences while completing advanced degrees. The researcher identified the parental and familial supports that enable Latinas to persist and succeed. Aguilar used the testimonio methodology and framework based on Chicana feminist epistemology (CFE), which is

Grounded in the life experiences of Chicanas and involves Chicana research participants in analyzing how their lives are being interpreted, documented and reported, while

acknowledging that many Chicanas lead lives with significantly different opportunity structures than men or white women. (Bernal, 1998, p. 1)

The use of testimonios allowed Aguilar to capture the participants' lived experiences in first-person narrative form, giving voice to the participants as they told their stories. Beverley (2008) discussed the importance of obtaining participants' voices:

This presence of the voice, which the reader is meant to experience as the voice of a real rather than a fictional person, is the mark of a desire not to be silenced or defeated, to impose oneself on an institution of power and privilege from the position of the excluded, the marginal, the subaltern. (p. 572)

Aguilar's (2016) research questions were:

1. What are the factors that positively influence Latinas to successfully complete college and pursue an advanced degree?
2. How are parents and/or family supporting Latinas as they pursue an advanced degree?
3. What support system do Latinas pursuing advanced degrees develop?
4. What is the first-generation college experience for Latinas pursuing an advanced degree?
5. What determines and/or influences Latinas' pursuit of advanced degrees?

Aguilar used purposeful sampling to recruit five Latinas pursuing advanced degrees at City University. The participants were millennials living in Los Angeles County who self-identified as Latina, Chicana, or Hispanic first-generation students in pursuit of advanced degrees (e.g., master's or doctoral). The six themes were academia, support systems, employment, spirituality, familial support, and interrogating systemic oppression.

For the theme of academia, Aguilar (2016) found that City University provided a graduate program tailored to the needs of working professionals. For example, the Latinas could attend night classes to keep their full-time jobs. However, the participants described having

negative experiences with City University due to a lack of communication, a safe space for minority women, and mentorship.

For the second theme, support systems, Aguilar (2016) found the support of friends, family, mentors, and colleagues essential to Latinas completing their degrees. For example, the participants described how cohort members supported, helped, and motivated each other to finish. For employment, the third theme, the Latina participants reported that their coworkers encouraged them to pursue and finish their degrees. The participants also shared how they prepared for long days working, commuting to school, and getting home.

Specific to the fourth theme, spirituality, Aguilar (2016) found the participants prayed for the strength to get through each day of completing their degrees. In the fifth theme, family support, the participants described how their fathers, mothers, husbands, and boyfriends supported them to finish their degrees. The participants also discussed contacting far-away family members for advice and support. Most of the participants were first-generation college students; therefore, they often reached out for advice and comfort. In the last theme of interrogating systemic oppression, Aguilar stated, “Based on the lived experiences recorded in the participants’ testimonio, their resilience helped them overcome individual, familial, and institutional factors that were encountered in their educational trajectory” (p. 108).

Unequal Socialization of the Latina Doctoral Student

Ramirez (2017) focused on the Latina students face in the university system with a sample of new, current, or graduated students. Ramirez framed the study with the intersectionality and social capital theories to find inequalities in the doctoral socialization process. Crenshaw et al. (1991) introduced the concept of intersectionality to describe how race, class, or gender overlap in individual identity. A lawyer and professor, Crenshaw et al. studied

civil rights, race, and racism for over 30 years and was the attorney in three cases on racial and sex discrimination: *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors*, *Moore v. Hughes Helicopter, Inc.*, and *Payne v. Travenol*. The courts had a narrow view of discrimination; for example, race discrimination occurred only to Black people, and sex discrimination occurred only for women. Intersectionality addressed the categorical conceptualization of discrimination (legal), presenting the separate consideration of discrimination as artificial and injurious and contributing to discriminatory practices. Coaston (2019) wrote about Crenshaw et al. and intersectionality 30 years later, stating, “The law seemed to forget that black women are both black and female and thus subject to discrimination on the basis of both race, gender, and often a combination of the two” (para. 20).

Ramirez (2017) described the social capital theory as “membership and participation in social networks provides individuals with potential access to vital resources, support systems, and opportunities” (p. 28). According to the theory, certain people are gatekeepers (dominant group members) who allow others to have the support system needed to succeed. Ramirez used the theory to focus on what the Chicano(a)/Latino(a) doctoral experience would look like if doctorate programs provided the right quality of education students needed to succeed in the real world. The study had the following research questions:

1. How do Chicano/Latino(a) students feel about the quality of their doctoral training? In particular, how do Chicanas/Latinos(as) feel about the way their doctoral programs are training them for scholarly roles?
2. How do race, class, and gender inequalities shape Chicano/Latino(a) doctoral students’ experience with scholarly socialization? How do Chicanos/Latinos(as) navigate and contest these inequalities?
3. How does disciplinary context mediate Chicano/Latino(a) doctoral students’ scholarly socialization experience?

Ramirez (2017) used snowball sampling to recruit participants and conducted in-depth, semistructured interviews with 24 Chicano(a)/Latino(a) doctoral students in the Western United

States across the social sciences, humanities, education, and science disciplines. Sixteen participants self-reported as Chicano(a)/Mexican Americans, six identified as biracial Chicanos(as)/Mexican Americans (one parent Mexican and the other Anglo), and two identified as Latino(a) of non-Mexican, Latin American descent. Ramirez's findings were (a) not providing adequate scholarly socialization experience, (b) faculty not taking the job seriously and harboring prejudice toward students of color, (c) inadequate preparation (students), and (d) a system of racism, sexism, and classism. The researcher recommended better preparing minority students for doctoral programs to provide more equitable access to historically underrepresented minorities in higher education to alter the "unequal socialization processes and practices entrenched in academia, thus helping expand the pathway to academic careers for Chicano/Latino(a) doctoral students" (p. 36).

Consejos (Nurturing Advice) for Mexican American Women

Espino (2016) explored the cultural roles of Latinas (Mexican Americans) and their effect on Latinas' educational opportunities and pursuit of doctoral degrees using the following questions:

1. How do Mexican American women PhDs make meaning of conflicting messages about the purpose of higher education and shifting familial expectations on their journey to the doctorate?
2. In what ways do the lessons learned from these conflicting messages inform how they experience raced gendered normativities along the academic life course?

The sample consisted of 25 female Mexican American, first-generation college students raised in Arizona, California, Florida, Michigan, New York, and Texas. Using the framework of Chicano feminism, Espino presented the different advice Latinas received about seeking doctoral degrees. For example, the participants' parents gave their daughters inconsistent and often confusing

advice, causing the Latinas to continuously negotiate family expectations, gender norms, and educational goals.

Espino (2016) also reported the lack of support provided to Latinas to complete their doctoral degrees. For example, a participant who earned her doctorate and moved to another country with her husband to accept a faculty position said her father judged her negatively because she “made” her husband move for her job. Additionally, this participant’s family felt she had behaved selfishly and “emasculated” her husband. The participants also reported that their mothers had mixed ideas and opinions about Latina education. Although the mothers emphasized receiving an education as an appropriate start to adult life, they questioned their Latina daughters about starting families. One participant’s mother told her a bachelor’s degree was all she should seek; that was enough. Although her mother believed in getting an education, she regularly reminded her daughter about the need for “stability” by finding a husband, and she discouraged her daughter from pursuing an advanced degree since “being too educated means [being] too smart” (p. 195) and could hurt her potential to find a husband. The pressure to find a husband and start a family caused the participant to question her pursuit of a doctoral degree and wonder about her education’s effects on her future relationships.

According to Espino (2016), the participants’ stories suggest that their mothers’ *consejos* initially presented education as a way of liberation; however, the *consejos* also suggested that Latinas should get married and have children. The conflicting messages confused the participants about their actions and identities and how to navigate their careers, families, and child-bearing. This finding indicates that, for Latinas, culture and family dynamics present complications to pursuing an education. Espino stated,

The success of Latinas is predicated on creating equitable and supportive environments that foster academic achievement as well as attend to the multiple worlds of family,

community, and academe that they must constantly negotiate. In order to advance Mexican American women and Latinas along their journeys to the doctorate and to break the cycle of poverty within the Latina/o community, colleges and universities need to recognize the cultural and familial dynamics and static notions of womanhood that may affect Mexican American women's educational pursuits. (p. 202)

Additionally, Espino emphasized the need to facilitate Latinas' navigation of the educational system to pursue doctoral degrees.

Guiding Theoretical Frameworks

Critical Race Theory

This section presents CRT and LatCrit, the conceptual and analytical frameworks used for this research. CRT emerged from critical legal studies, a movement started by lawyers who sought justice in a system that enabled others to disregard or deliberately misapply or interpret the laws for protecting people of color. CRT "is the outcome of a racist legal system and was established as a means for challenging and disrupting racism and its associated social, legal, political, and educational consequences" (McCoy & Rodrick, 2015, p. 5). CRT researchers later focused on inequality, racism, and oppression in education (Ladson-Billings, 2013).

Additionally, CRT scholars began to consider the impact of racism on the people of other subgroups dealing with social injustices in the United States (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). For example, CRT expanded to focus on the oppression of the Latinx population, and Latinx-focused CRT addressed immigration, language, culture, gender, and sexuality (Elenes & Bernal, 2010).

De La Garza and Ono (2016) said LatCrit was "by far the most used version of CRT" (p. 6).

Table 8 presents some of the different subgroups and extensions of CRT (De La Garza & Ono, 2016; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Table 8*Some Extensions of CRT and Focus*

Subgroup: Crit	Focus
LatCrit	Latinx population
TribalCrit	Native American Indian population
AsianCrit	Asian American population
DisCrit	Disability Studies in Education
QueerCrit	Sexual orientation differences studies
Critical Race Feminism	Women population

The roots of CRT include W. E. B. Du Bois, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Cesar Chavez, and the Black Power and Chicano Power Movements (Elenes & Bernal, 2010). CRT is a movement focused on the relationship between race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993). CRT scholars view discrimination as usual and the standard way of conducting business in U.S. society (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 2013). Due to racism, individuals view discrimination as “normal” because it is a “social construction” (p. 15). Race is a social construct as a product of social rather than biological realities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Discrimination and racism are phenomena so entwined in U.S society that it generally remains invisible (Ladson-Billings, 1998; López, 2003; Taylor, 1998, 2009). However, CRT includes more than typical civil rights and focuses on the “foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, enlightenment rationalism and neutral principles of constitutional law” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 3).

The first account of the application of CRT was the Slaughter-house Cases of 1873, in which the 14th Amendment provided national citizens with limited protection from the actions of the state government (Brown & Jackson, 2013). Established in 1868, the Slaughter-House Cases

open the door for the newly made freeman through the 14th Amendment to provided rights and equal protection of the law to all U.S. citizens:

we mean the freedom of the slave race, the security and firm establishment of that freedom, and the protection of the newly made freeman and citizen from the oppressions of those who had formerly exercised unlimited dominion over him. (Slaughterhouse Cases, 1873, p. 73)

Two later court cases included the 14th Amendment: *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 and 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. With *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the Supreme Court enabled separate but equal schooling in the public school system. In 1954, in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the judge overturned school segregation as a violation of the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment (Brown & Jackson, 2013). Afterward, Congress passed several acts, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. The acts indicated the illegality of discriminating against individuals on the basis of race in hiring practices, voting, school funding, and housing. Additionally, in 1965, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (1992) was founded to provide equal opportunities to all individuals seeking employment.

In 1972, there was an amendment for Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to include higher education. In 1971, the Women's Equity Action League filed a complaint against 350 institutions due to the lack of women employed at colleges and universities (West, 1998). By 1972, the U.S. Department of Housing, Education, and Welfare Office of Civil Rights published Higher Education Guidelines:

adapting the affirmative action requirements of Executive Order 11246 and Revised Order No. 4 to university employment practices. With the inclusion of educational institutions in Title VII and the issuance of the Higher Education Guidelines, universities throughout the United States were busy adopting employment-related affirmative action plans by the mid-1970s. (West, 1998, pp. 618–619)

In 1973, the U.S. Department of Housing, Education, and Welfare published an additional amendment for affirmative action “to overcome the effects of conditions which resulted in limited participation by members of particular racial or ethnic groups” (West, 1998, p. 619). The amendment was a response to the low admission numbers of minority students into colleges and universities compared to White male students. Therefore, CRT is a collective response to the delayed provision of civil rights to people of different colors, genders, and ethnicities (McCoy & Rodrick, 2015).

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) described race as a significant aspect of U.S. society. U.S. society focuses on property rather than human rights and not the intersectionality of race and property concerns. Therefore, the authors examined racism and oppression in education because “the intellectual salience of this theorizing (had) not been systematically employed in the analysis of educational inequality” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 50). CRT focuses on equity in the educational system and educational disparities in higher education because the social oppression of people of color continues to be a problem:

As a theoretical construct, critical race explains how traditional aspects of education and the structures supporting the educational system perpetuate racism and maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions on college and university campuses. (McCoy & Rodrick, 2015, p. 16)

Carnevale and Fasules (2017) examined the postsecondary completion rates for Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, and Latinos between 1992 and 2016, finding that people of color faced educational disparities in the U.S. higher education system. In 1992, Whites had a 58% completion rate, with 45% and 35% completion rates among Blacks and Hispanics/Latinos, respectively. In 2016, the completion rate for Whites was 74%, 66% for Blacks, and 45% for Hispanics and Latinos. CRT applied to education is a framework for analyzing “educational

theory, policy, practice” (McCoy & Rodrick, 2015, p. 15), grounding the dialogue about educational issues in racism and other forms of oppression in the educational system.

Yosso (2005) defined CRT in education as “a theoretical and analytical framework that challenges the ways race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and discourses. [It] is conceived as a social justice project that works toward the liberatory potential of schooling” (p. 74). In the 21st century, CRT has focused on the unique experiences of people of color, including students and faculty, at predominantly White institutions; racial microaggressions, educational policies; and legal jurisprudence affecting people of color. Scholars have also used CRT to address and mitigate oppression and inequitable access to education for minority populations in the United States. CRT centers around seven areas key to educational opportunities (see Table 9).

CRT Intersectionality

Crenshaw et al. (1995) broke down intersectionality into a structural approach, political approach, and representational intersectionality. Museus and Saelua (2019) explained,

Representational intersectionality illuminates how the social production of images of individuals living at the intersections of systems of subordination can function to subordinate them while ignoring their interests. Structural intersectionality refers to ways in which the location of people at the intersection of systems of oppression makes their experiences qualitatively unique. And, political intersectionality illuminates how people can belong to multiple identity groups (e.g., women and communities of color) with different and sometimes conflicting political agendas, which can lead to the silencing of their voices. (p. 63)

Museus and Saelua (2019) used intersectionality to analyze the experiences of marginalized people in higher education. The authors analyzed the intersection of research on people experiencing marginalization in higher education and research contributing to the marginalization of people to obstruct their advancement in higher education. For example, a

Table 9*Synthesis of Key Tenets of Critical Race Theory*

Critical race tenets	Main point of tenets
The permanence of racism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Racism is a permanent experience influencing U.S. society. • Society has established a superior group over all other groups (groups defined as the different racial groups in the United States). • Racism is so ingrained in U.S. society, it is invisible to most people.
Experiential knowledge (and counterstorytelling)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collecting “experiential knowledge” is important to continue researching the experiences of people of color in education. • CRT validates that storytelling, narratives, chronicles, and testimonios are methods to collect stories about the experiences of people of color in education.
Interest convergence theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Racial equality will be achieved when those in power are interested (those in power = White people). • For example, admitting students of color to institutions of higher education to create a diverse campus to include all races.
Intersectionality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People of color are oppressed by not just the category of gender, class, religion, ability/disability, sexual orientation, etc., but by two or more of the categories mentioned. • For example, a woman of color is not just oppressed because of gender but also race.
Whiteness as property	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying as White was a privilege and having the right to property. • In higher education, Whites were the people who historically had access to education. • Whiteness also means dominance of the population. • Intersectionality of property and race is also analyzed.
Critique of liberalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CRT challenges the concepts of color blindness, equal opportunity, meritocracy, and incremental changes to racism. • For example, although integration of schools was ordered by the courts in 1954, this did not occur until 1971.
Commitment to social justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CRT focuses on racism’s roles in education and at work to diminish, and possibly one day eliminate, racism. • Social justice.

Note. From “Critical Race Theory in Higher Education: 20 Years of Theoretical and Research Innovations,” by D. L. McCoy and D. J. Rodrick, 2015, *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 41(3), pp. 1–117. Copyright 2015 by John Wiley & Sons.

Latina trying to acquire her terminal degree often needs to overcome and figure out how to deal with discrimination due to her gender, ethnicity, culture, income, religion, and age.

Intersectionality indicates how the intersection of gender, ethnicity, culture, income, religion, and age results in the marginalization of the Latina not only because of gender but because of gender and culture together.

Latino Critical Race Theory

The LatCrit theoretical lens addresses issues of immigration, language, culture, gender, and sexuality. LatCrit is not a replacement to CRT but a theory supplementary or complementary to CRT (Elenes & Bernal, 2010). Elenes and Bernal (2010) explained,

CRT/LatCrit theorists ground their research in these systems of knowledge and integrate their experiential knowledge, drawn from a shared history as others, with their ongoing struggles to transform. CRT/LatCrit in education attempts to connect with the collective experiences, ways of thinking, believing, and knowing in racial communities, especially about the struggle for equity in schools and self-determination. (p. 68)

According to Elenes and Bernal (2010), LatCrit is a useful tool for understanding Latinas' doctoral experience in higher education through intersectionality, raced-gendered epistemologies, and counterstorytelling. Intersectionality in LatCrit is a means of understanding how "race, class, gender, sexuality, immigration, language and/or other identities shape the education of Latinas" (p. 68). Race-gendered epistemologies consist of challenging dominant ideologies to better understand the culture under study. The goal of LatCrit is to focus on the systems of knowledge and experiences of Latinx students to understand their ongoing struggles and shared experience to draw conclusions or find solutions. Counter-storytelling is a tool used in CRT and LatCri to convey experiential knowledge and draw information from the lived experiences of people of color. The purpose of counterstorytelling is to tell the stories of people typically not allowed to speak to analyze and challenge those currently in power. Counter-

storytelling includes “family history[ies], biographies, parables, testimonios, cuentos, consejos, chronicles and narratives” (Elenes & Bernal, 2010, p. 70). In LatCrit, stories are useful tools for analyzing the experiences of Latina doctoral students.

Storytelling and counterstorytelling contribute to CRT/LatCrit in “legal analysis and educational scholarship” (Elenes & Bernal, 2010, p. 69). In many communities of color, storytelling is a method for passing on cultural traditions from generation to generation. CRT and LatCrit scholars analyze the “racialized, gendered, sexualized and classed experience of people of color” (p. 70) to gain first-hand accounts and experiential knowledge.

According to Elenes and Bernal (2010), counterstories are “a methodological tool that allows one to tell the story of those experiences that are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society) and to analyze and challenge the stories of those in power” (p. 70). A counterstory provides the opportunity to discover and challenge existing assumptions about “schooling” for people of color by “telling” the story behind the story (Elenes & Bernal, 2010, p. 70). Therefore, counterstorytelling is a useful strategy for in-depth analysis of the experiences of Latina students. CRT and LatCrit provide the opportunity to understand truth, the production of knowledge, and the power of one’s reality to challenge the dominant perceptions of truth and reality. The goal of researchers using the LatCrit framework is to look at historically constructed social realities related to Latinas/os, give a voice to Latinas/os feelings and thoughts about their abilities and opportunities, and illuminate the truth of what Latinas/os can achieve in education.

Methodology

Qualitative Research and Testimonio

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences and perspectives of Latina doctoral graduates who completed their studies while managing their personal and educational goals and home expectations. The research focused on what motivated Latinas to seek and complete their terminal degrees. In this study, the qualitative design was the approach used to document and explore Latinas' stories of successfully completing their doctoral degrees. Qualitative research was appropriate, as this method "seeks to discover and understand the meaning of experience, is reflective about own voice and perspective, acknowledges personal values, and brings own experience to bear on the study and small samples are selected purposefully" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016, pp. 39–40). Qualitative research is a useful approach for exploring and understanding how humans construct and attach meaning to their experiences.

The purpose of this study was to capture the participants' stories and the meaning of their experiences via in-depth story-telling and analysis to address the research questions. The exploratory nature of the study provided the opportunity to understand the phenomenon of Latinas who have achieved their terminal degrees. Qualitative research is appropriate for developing a deep understanding of the persons under study to describe, explain, and communicate the findings. Qualitative methods enable exploration of "family systems, cultural systems, organizational systems, political systems, economic systems, [and] community systems" and what occurs within and across each system" (Patton, 2015, p. 13).

In this study, the qualitative method was appropriate to understand the participants' thought processes, from when they first considered doctoral studies to enrolling and graduating with doctoral degrees. Qualitative research was the most suitable approach for achieving the

study's objective of exploring and understanding the factors associated with the success of Latina doctoral students (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Specifically, the testimonio design allows for eliciting and documenting the participants' stories and bring attention to the injustice experienced by oppressed people in higher education (Huber, 2012).

Throughout history, Latin Americans have used testimonios to address civil rights, drawing upon life experience as grounds and "leverage" to bring about change (Huber, 2012). The testimonio approach differs from other methods (e.g., narrative, oral history, and autobiography) because it includes critical reflections of personal experiences. Benmayor et al. (1997) described the testimonio method as a way to capture the participants' experiences to create knowledge useful for bringing about social change. Bernal et al. (2012) said the testimonio method gives a "voice to silences, representing the other, reclaiming authority to narrate and disentangling questions surrounding legitimate truth" (p. 365). Testimonios provide readers with an understanding of a particular situation through people's descriptions of their firsthand experiences.

The testimonio method incorporates liberationist pedagogy and the role of memory/reconstructive epistemology (Reyes & Rodríguez, 2012). Liberationist pedagogy is "writing as a means of liberation" (Reyes & Rodríguez, 2012, p. 527) via interviews with people who have experienced injustice to learn how they make meaning of their experiences and bring awareness to a particular issue. The role of memory/reconstructive in the testimonio approach is to provide an opportunity for participants to recollect their experiences and accurately articulate the events they have encountered. According to Reyes and Rodríguez (2012), an important goal of testimonios as a method is to enable scholars in the field of education to generate and include the perspective of historically marginalized people in the literature:

From these endeavors come documents, memories, and oral histories that can be used to recast and challenge pervasive theories, policies, and explanations about educational failure as a problem, not of individuals but of systemic institutionalized practices of oppression. (p. 528)

Therefore, the method enables education scholars to understand, through the testimonios of the oppressed, how they can better serve these individuals in the educational field.

As of 2012, scholars had used testimonios in more than 835 dissertations in the field of education to analyze, gain knowledge, and learn about the Chicana/o and Latina/o communities (Bernal et al., 2012). Because LatCrit is the guiding framework of the testimonio design, the design was meaningful and appropriate for a study focused on how to make a difference in the lives of other Latinas. The Latinx population has historically experienced oppression and limited access to equitable K–12 and higher education; thus, they are less likely to achieve success or advance to terminal degrees. The testimonios in this study provided a voice to the Latina participants and the opportunity to learn from the past to adjust and change the educational trajectory of the Latinx population.

Duran (2016) described the testimonio method as “the Latino version of conversion narrative,” continuing

Conversion narrative is very often testimonial acts. The definition of the Spanish word testimonio (testimony) that Smith and Watson propose is the kind of life writing whose narrator “intends to communicate the situation of the group’s oppression, struggle, or imprisonment, to claim some agency in the act of narrating, and to call upon readers to respond actively in judging the crisis. (p. 172)

Therefore, testimonios enabled a focus on how the participants overcame injustice and other barriers to their doctoral degrees. School and university leaders and policymakers could use the study’s findings to redress past wrongs and undo the conditions and circumstances of injustice.

Participants

Participant recruitment occurred via snowball sampling. The nature of the study required participants interested in the topic and willing to share their information-rich experiences and provide in-depth information to address the research questions. Patton (2015) defined snowball sampling as multiplying at each step—for example, an individual who has agreed to participate recommends the study to other persons who meet the study’s requirements. An advantage of snowball sampling is that it is a means of recruiting participants who have established relationships with the individuals whom they refer (Fry, 2018). Fry (2018) explained,

Researchers’ use of the snowball sampling method has several unique advantages. First, due to the established familiarity between participants and those they refer, valuable social and interactional knowledge may be generated. Participants are observed within the context of their naturally formed relationships and social networks. Consequently, it may be easier to build rapport with referred participants, as researchers have already spoken with a friend, relative or colleague at an earlier time. (p. 1531)

The participants in this study self-identified as Latinas living in the United States. Dr. Guerrero-Guajardo, a member of the dissertation committee, was the initial point of contact for finding the Latinas who could contribute to the study. Guerrero-Guajardo (2018) self-described as someone who “participated in leadership development programs whose purpose is to advance the skillsets of emerging Latino leaders and to increase the number and influence of Latinas in elected and appointed office” (p. 18). Specific to networking, the scholar related, “I am personally and professionally acquainted with Latinas who have been elected and appointed to public office” (p. 18). Therefore, Guerrero-Guajardo was an individual well-positioned to assist with identifying the initial participants.

As a starting point, contact via email occurred to recruit Latinas who met participation criteria; however, no email recipients replied. The next step was to recruit participants with

Guerrero-Guajardo via social media. On July 1, 2020, Guerrero-Guajardo posted and tagged me on social media platforms with the following call for participants:

As a dissertation committee member, I am sharing the following request to participate in a study on behalf of my student, Jessica Ballesteros, a PhD candidate at the University of the Incarnate Word:

The goal of the study is to understand the experiences of women who identify as Latina or Hispanic and who have successfully completed a doctoral degree since 2015. If you choose to participate in this study, Jessica will arrange a virtual interview lasting 1–2 hours.

Please feel free to share this with your networks. If you would like to participate or would like more information, please contact Jessica directly at jerangel@student.uiwtx.edu.

Guerrero-Guajardo and I sent additional invitations to other Latinas for more exposure and visibility. The Latinas who indicated interest received a description of the study via email. Once they agreed to participate, the Latinas received the consent form via email to sign and scheduled interviews via the Zoom videoconferencing platform. The participants digitally or physically signed and returned the consent forms via email. I stored the completed consent forms in a folder in a password-protected, personal computer accessed only by me. Data collection commenced in July 2020.

Sample Size

Saturation indicated the appropriate sample size for the study. Although a challenge to identify, saturation is the benchmark and guiding principle used in qualitative research to determine the appropriate number of participants (Mason, 2010; Morse, 2015). Saturation occurs when data collection no longer provides additional information. According to Saunders et al. (2018), there are four models of saturation used depending on the focus of the research (see Table 10).

Table 10

Table Models of Saturation and Their Principal Foci in the Research Process

Model	Description	Principal focus
Theoretical saturation	Relates to the development of theoretical categories; related to grounded theory methodology	Sampling
Inductive thematic saturation	Relates to the emergence of new codes or themes	Analysis
A priori thematic saturation	Relates to the degree to which identified codes of themes are exemplified in the data	Sampling
Data saturation	Relates to the degree to which new data repeat what was expressed in previous data	Data collection

Note. From “Saturation in Qualitative Research: Exploring Its Conceptualization and Operationalization,” by B. Saunders, J. Sim, T. Kingstone, S. Baker, J. Waterfield, B. Bartlam, H. Burroughs, and C. Jinks, 2018, *Quality and Quantity*, 52(4), 1893–1907 (<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-017-0574-8>).

In this research, the data saturation model indicated when to stop interviewing new participants to avoid gathering “nonproductive” information. Saturation occurred when the participants no longer offered new data on the motivating factors, barriers, and factors they encountered in their doctoral degree completion. The goal of the research was to capture the participants’ aggregate experiences and processes of finishing their doctoral degrees.

Estimating the number of participants consisted of looking at studies with similar methodological approaches. The smallest sample size used in a qualitative life history study was one, and the largest was 95 in a qualitative case study; the most common sample sizes were 30, 40, 10, and 25 (Mason, 2010). The testimonio method is an extension of narrative research; therefore, the desired sample size for this study was one to 15 participants. However, the goal was to continue collecting data until saturation occurred.

Fourteen Latinas indicated their interest in participating in the study, with 10 signing the consent forms and scheduling interviews. Further recruitment did not occur, as a consistent

pattern in responses emerged after five participants. However, the remaining scheduled interviews occurred to ensure no new information emerged. I stopped interviewing after nine interviews after determining that saturation had occurred. The interviews occurred between July 8 and 24, 2020, and each lasted 1 hour. Transcription occurred immediately after the interviews for accuracy.

Data Collection Procedures

Due to the COVID-19 virus, this study's interviews occurred via Zoom, Facetime, or other digital meeting platforms. On December 31, 2019, China reported COVID-19, an acute respiratory disease, to the World Health Organization, which declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020. States and cities created health and safety rules and guidelines for curbing the spread of the virus. The City of San Antonio (2020) issued a Stay Home, Work Safe order on March 23, 2020.

Each interview lasted no more than 1 hour, with follow-up interviews of 60 minutes or less conducted for clarification. I audio-recorded and transcribed the interviews and kept a bound journal of the interview and field notes. The journal notes remain in a locked cabinet at my house; I will store the interview data on a password-protected hard drive for 1 year after completing this dissertation and then destroy them.

The open-ended and unstructured interviews enabled the Latinas' perspectives to emerge organically. The goal of the testimonio method is to allow the participants to share firsthand accounts and stories of their experiences to "unwrap" the information and create knowledge. According to Patton (2015), open-ended interviews allow interviewees to take whatever direction they want and express themselves. This research required in-depth and rich information from the interviewees. Patton explained the purpose of qualitative research:

Illuminating meaning, studying how things work, capturing stories to understand people's perspective and experiences, elucidating how systems function and their consequences for people's lives, understanding context how and why it matters, identifying unanticipated consequences, and making case comparisons to discover important patterns and themes across cases. (p. 13)

The in-depth and rich information captured from the interviews in this study included all the elements Patton (2015) mentioned. Capturing the stories requires a starting point, a description of the events that occurred, and a conclusion or ending. In this study, interviewing the participants in an open-ended and unstructured fashion enabled them to freely share their stories and reveal important aspects and details about their experiences. The goal of the interviews was to collect information from participants' perspectives to understand how they completed their doctoral degrees. The study focused on the motivating factors that led the participants to start and persist in completing their degrees.

Interview Process

Before each interview, I thanked the participant for taking time out of her day to participate. I asked whether she had any questions about the research or me before the interview. The participants discussed their journeys of completing their doctoral degrees. I reassured each participant of my goal to listen to and tell her story of how she completed something accomplished by only a handful of Latinas. The participants discussed their educational journeys from the beginning, starting with their K–12 schooling. I did everything I could to help the participants feel comfortable during their interviews to elicit rich, in-depth stories of how they accomplished their doctoral degrees. Although planned, additional interviews were not necessary. Emails was the vehicle to clarify minor uncertainties with the audio recordings.

Data Preparation

Gubrium and Holstein (2001) noted the asymmetrical nature of interviews as a means of information collection in which the interviewer asks the participants questions to learn about them. However, an interviewer might not always interpret the information correctly. Therefore, follow-up interviews are necessary to ensure the interviewer (i.e., the researcher) has a correct understanding of each participant's story. In a follow-up interview, the researcher asks questions to clarify any points that were unclear during transcription (Flick, 2014; Gubrium & Holstein, 2001; Miles et al., 2014). Transcription quality affects how well the interviewer can present the participant's perspective without misrepresenting the information provided during the interview (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). The person transcribing the interview should also connect to the research topic and attend the interview to capture every aspect of the interview. For example, an audio-recording cannot always capture tone, body language, and other nonverbal cues.

Researchers want to control the stories they report and interpret to present the most accurate accounts of the participants' messages; as such, individuals unfamiliar with the research topic should not be involved with the transcription. Some researchers hire transcriptionists who did not attend the interviews, which results in an increased risk of misinterpretation. Therefore, in this study, the researcher was the sole transcriber for authentic perceived information.

Transcription Method

Capturing accurate perspectives from the participants consisted of transcribing all the interviews within 48 hours for quick follow-up, if necessary (Flick, 2014; Gubrium & Holstein, 2001; Miles et al., 2014). The primary data collected were from the unstructured interviews, observation, and notes (see Maxwell, 2013). The transcription process began with playing the video- and audio-recorded interviews and reading the interview notes to elicit important

information. Next, the transcription occurred while playing the video- and audio-recorded interviews, observing the video recordings for nonverbal cues, and using the field notes to record significant comments useful for coding. The transcription of the stories occurred in a Microsoft Word document.

I then listened to each recording a second time to review the interview transcript, verify the inclusion of all field notes, and identify gaps or errors in the transcript (see Saldaña, 2016). After completing transcription, I returned to each transcript and highlighted statements relating to the research questions. Saldaña (2016) suggested using three columns to code data: raw data, preliminary codes, and final codes. Accordingly, I placed the highlighted relevant statements in a Microsoft Excel worksheet and added columns to document the participants' names and interview timestamps for reference to the transcripts. The first row identified the participants, followed by columns: timestamps, statements, initial codes, and final codes (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Example of Columns for Each Participant

Joan married 3 kids Full time job the whole time 1st generation college graduate Public K-12 only one with terminal degree from a family		mexican american non-traditional student	1st generation	UTS UTS Ten
initial code	final code			
✓ My family, um also I've worked advising students over 3-47 10 years, so that was another thing that motivates me.	Students work with motivation to finish	Motivation		
✓ I wanted to be an example for my students that had the same experiences that I did.	Lahno example motivation to finish	Motivation		
✓ For students that were before, first generation college students.	Example 1st generation motivation to finish	Motivation		
✓ And then just power, especially to be part of that, and I am one that percentage Latino with a PhD is changing all the time. But to be part of the less than 2 percent 6-00 that have a PhD. Capital and power.	Lahno example motivation to finish	Motivation		

The coding occurred in two cycles to analyze the raw data and identify the final codes (see Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). The first cycle of the preliminary coding consisted of documenting the first impression of the raw data and assigning tentative codes. The second cycle began with looking at and questioning the suitability of the tentative codes, followed by populating the last column with the final code (see Emerson et al., 2011; Sunstien & Chiseri-Strater, 2012; see Table 11).

Table 11

Questions to Consider While Coding

Emerson et al. (2011) ^a	Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater (2012) ^b
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are people doing? What are they trying to accomplish? • How, exactly, do they do this? What specific means and/or strategies do they use? • How do members talk about, characterize, and understand what is going on? • What assumptions are they making? • What do I see going on here? • What did I learn from these notes? • Why did I include them? • How is that is going on here similar to, or different from, other incidents or events recorded elsewhere in the fieldnotes? • What is the broader import or significance of this incident or event? What is it a case of? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What surprised me? (to track your assumption) • What intrigued me? (to track your personality) • What disturbed me? (to track the tension within your values, attitude, and belief)

Note. ^a = p. 177; ^b = p. 115.

The participants received follow-up interview emails to clarify their degrees, completion years, children (number), and current positions. The creation of a table occurred so readers could quickly reference the participants. I also wrote a small biography for each participant based on her audio- and video-recorded interview. Each participant received and verified the accuracy of her biography via email and indicated if she wanted to share additional information.

Data Analysis Procedures

Researchers can use two types of coding during the data analysis process: deductive and inductive. Deductive coding occurs at the start of the research and entails creating a list based on problem areas, research questions, or hypotheses. Inductive coding consists of creating the themes that emerged from the data. For example, the researcher will identify and code similar ideas or themes across the participants during the interviews. The researcher can change the list of codes after finding additional themes or aggregating similar codes together (Miles et al., 2014).

This study did not include a deductive list of codes or commence with assumed codes. Instead, the creation of the codes occurred after conducting, listening to, and transcribing all the interviews. All the codes emerged from the content of the interviews, with the participants' experiences used to code the data. All the codes received definitions.

Data analysis began with transcribing all the interviews and adding all the field notes. The qualitative data analysis process proposed by Miles et al. (2014) was the means used to conduct two cycles of coding for the preliminary and final codes. The preliminary codes included words and their basic meanings; the final codes were those built on the preliminary codes to produce a smaller number of categories, codes, or themes.

The method of analyzing, reflecting, and interpreting the data commenced by attaching the preliminary codes to chunks of data. Miles et al. (2014) stated,

Codes are primarily, but not exclusively, used to retrieve and categorize similar data chunks so the researcher can quickly find, pull out, and cluster the segments relating to a particular research question, hypothesis, construct, or theme. Clustering and the display of condensed chunks then set the stage for further analysis and drawing conclusions. (p. 72)

The codes provided the opportunity to look at the data further and aggregate similar codes. First, I printed the Microsoft Excel spreadsheets for all participants with the raw data and empty columns for the preliminary and final codes. Then, I read through each column with the raw data and connected the statements to the research questions while thinking about the question in Table 9. The next step occurred by writing down a word or words that indicated what each participant said. Afterward, I posted the hard copies on the wall to get a better view of all the preliminary codes. A dry-erase board was the tool used to document the messages indicated by the initial codes and relate them to the research questions.

The final coding cycle consisted of condensing the codes and generating a pattern of codes (Miles et al., 2014) to determine the final codes to explain the results. Next, another analysis occurred to group similar codes. The analysis produced three codes or themes to answer the research question: barriers, motivation/support systems, and PhD space. Figure 4 shows the Microsoft Excel sheets with all the participants.

Figure 4*All Participants' Excel Files*

The theming of the data occurred to “identif[y] codes in the form of sentences capturing the essence and essentials of participants meanings” (Onwuegbuzie, Frels, & Hwang, 2016, p. 135). The final codes emerged after listening to the recordings three times, highlighting key statements, and reading all the Microsoft Excel sheets. (Table 12 is an example of the participants’ statements, initial codes, and final codes.) The analysis included highlighting over 280 statements related to the research questions, with the final codes producing the three emergent themes.

Table 12*Final Codes (Themes)*

Statements	Initial codes	Final codes (themes)
It had to be online I wasn't gonna do any residency requirements that didn't you know cut it for me I looked at	Flexibility	Barrier
And again just kind of do an empirical research you know I created the Facebook group called doctoral mom life because space just didn't exist like that when I was living by the way remember	Space to understand what they were going through	PhD space
I again my family um kept me motivated um i wanted to i have two nephews um they're twins and they were little how old were they i think they were seven when i left um and they've always of course they're like my babies people don't have kids but i i've always told them how important school and um i guess i i wanted to make sure that they knew like that i was a quitter um	Family support	Motivation
But I think for for us it's like my parents were always talking about college they don't really know and and it's probably something you hear across a lot of our stories right like they don't really know what you needed to do to get there but you really didn't have a choice so like the same thing yeah graduating high school it was like you're not gonna go get a job you're not gonna you're going to college we're not sure how that's gonna happen or how we're gonna pay for it or how we're gonna afford it but that's what you need to do so your choice is really what college are you gonna go to because that's your choice	Parents support college	Motivation

Protection of Human Subjects

This study occurred per University of the Incarnate Word guidelines for protecting human subjects. I completed the Collaborative Institutional Training course and obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval before conducting the research. Each participant signed the informed consent document. I protected the participants' information and stored it on an encrypted, password-protected laptop. I will delete all the securely maintained information 1 year after the completion of the research.

Findings

My Experience

“The truth shall set you free” (John 8:32). My history and government professor quoted this verse at my community college in 2002. Similarly, testimonios provide a voice to people to share their stories with the world. The testimonios of the participants in this study could enable others to see possibilities not previously seen. Huber (2012) described testimonio as “used by non-dominant groups to challenge oppression and bring attention to injustice in an effort to transform it” (p. 377). As indicated in Chapter 2, testimonio is a method used in CRT to describe and explain the lived experiences of people of color (Elenes & Bernal, 2010). Testimonios date back to the work of Freire (1970), who outlined the theories of oppression and liberation through the awareness and thinking processes of people. The people Freire described as oppressed were middle-class to poor families who had lost everything or experienced serious economic difficulties and faced “class-based society” discrimination.

This study presents the experiences of Latinas in their own words. The participants shared their stories of how they attained their terminal academic degrees to inspire, motivate, explain, and sustain others. I asked permission to use the participants’ real names to give authenticity to the stories presented in this paper. Most of the participants agreed, while others opted to use middle names as their identifiers. The Latina participants described (a) their experiences of successfully achieving doctoral degrees, (b) their motivation, (c) the facilitating factors in their success, (d) barriers, and (e) support systems. The chapter commences with introductions of the participants and tables showing their educational attainment. Next, there is a short biography for each participant, followed by the three emergent themes from their responses. Additionally, the chapter presents an analysis of the stories of each participant

organized around the “big” ideas that emerged from their stories: barriers, motivation/support system, and the PhD space.

The PhD space is a nonphysical place where current and past PhD students can tell their stories about attaining doctoral degrees. The participants defined this nonphysical space as the need to surround themselves with people who had been through the process of attaining doctoral degrees. For example, Christine created a Facebook group to bring women from across the United States together to create a dialogue. She explained, “Our network is a safe space to vent, seek out encouragement/motivation or ask for specific advice.” All the participants wished they had a place in their academic journeys where they could have spoken with others going through or who had accomplished the doctoral process to discuss ideas and best practices or receive encouragement.

Participants and Findings

Table 13 presents the names of all participants, including their educational histories, degrees completed, and the years in which they completed their degrees. The inclusion of participants’ educational histories provides a richer story of them.

Participant 1

Joan was born and raised in Brownsville, Texas. Her parents were migrant farmworkers who never completed college. Joan and her three siblings—an older sister, an older brother, and a younger brother—had worked in fields across the country as seasonal migrant workers. She was the first generation in her family to attend college and complete a terminal degree.

Barriers. Joan said she had a well-paying job when she decided to enroll in school and saw she could receive better pay with a college degree. She said, “I am starting [to] see how much people [who] went to college get paid versus people [who] don’t go to college.” Her

Table 13*Educational History of Latina Participants*

Participant	Bachelors	Year	Master's	Year	PhD	Year
Claudia	Bachelors in Biology	2000	Master in Business Administration	2004	Doctor of Philosophy in Organizational Leadership	2016
Joan	Bachelors of Arts Human Services/ Psychology	2010	Master of Public Administration Government/Non-Profit Management	2010	Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Leadership	2019
Jessica	Bachelor of Applied Arts and Science	2006	Master of Education in Learning Technology	2015	Doctor of Philosophy in Adult, Professional, and Community Education	2020
Monica	Bachelors in Music Education	1989	Master's in Music	1999	Doctor of Philosophy in School Improvement	2019
Christine	Bachelor of Arts	2000	Master of Arts	2006	Doctor of Education (EdD)	2017
Caroline	Bachelor of Arts	1997	Master of Arts Psychology in Organizational Development	2008	Doctor of Philosophy in Social Work and Social Research	2020
Nancy	Bachelor of Arts in Art History	2006	Master of Education in General Education	2009	Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Culture, Policy and Society	2020
Yolanda	Bachelor of Arts in International Relations	2003	Master of Public Administration	2008	Doctor of Philosophy	2019
Sandra	Bachelor of Arts in Psychology	2013	Master of Arts in Experimental Psychology	2017	Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology with a Concentration in Health	2020

husband did not see the need for her to go to college if she had a job with good pay; however, going to college meant more to Joan than just the salary. She knew she could attain jobs to make a difference and help other Latinas with a doctoral degree. She said,

I started attending college in '98. My husband is from Guatemala, Central America, and he only went to sixth grade, so for him, it was very difficult to understand the need for me to go to college. If I was already getting paid more than he was, then why did I need to go to college? I was fine, and I said, "Well, I just want to. I want to."

Joan said she encountered barriers while working on her bachelor's degree. She could not attend class during the day due to work and had a long commute between her job and the school campus. She decided to find a solution to continue pursuing her educational goals:

I wanted to keep going [to school]. At the time, I was working at Wells Fargo Bank as a teller, and then I started going to get my bachelor's [degree]. I first started going to a public university, to Iowa State University, [because] the tuition was good. But I was not a traditional student—I did not go straight out [of] high school, I already had a child, [and] I was already married. Even though the tuition was better at Iowa State University, [I] had to [take classes] during the day, and it took me 25 minutes to commute from the little town I lived [in] to Iowa State University, and then [the classes were] during the day, so I couldn't work.

There was a private university at the community college where I got my associate's [degree] that had a little satellite campus at the college. even though [it was] a lot more expensive, they had night classes, and the classes were small [compared to] Iowa State University. [At Iowa State], it [was] like a huge auditorium [for] your math class, and math is like a [different] language to me. I did Iowa State for two semesters, and I passed all of my classes. I withdrew out of college algebra 'cause I couldn't do it, and then that was when I decided I had to take classes at Buena Vista University. While I was taking classes at Buena Vista University, I was able to continue my job at the bank, and I got other jobs—one was [as the] office manager of an accounting firm.

Despite the barriers, Joan did not stop pursuing her education. However, throughout her doctoral program, she felt as though higher education did not provide equal opportunities:

How fair is it for somebody who's always worked at a pork plant [and] whose parents have always worked at pork plants, so they don't know somebody can get them a good position in the engineering firm down the street. But this guy now has an engineering degree, but he doesn't have the connections, and it's known, and everybody knows it [is about the connections], and that's why you get your LinkedIn account. But for our [Latinx] people, we don't know [about] these connections [that are] encouraged in higher education. [They're] not shared equitably to everyone.

What I am trying to get [at] is some of the things have been in place for ages [for getting jobs], have not been [for] my people of color. That is not fair, and there is not much being done to change that. It takes more of us [Latinx] to mold higher education to what it should look like [and] equitably serve everybody and give everybody an equal opportunity to succeed in academia.

Motivation/Support. Joan said that her family, her work over the last 10 years, and *ganas* provided her with the motivation to pursue her terminal degree. She explained,

What motivates me specifically [is that] my family [didn't] graduate from college. My parents did not attend college. Both of my parents are from Mexico and never had the opportunity to pursue an education, so that was part of my motivation. My *familia* [is my motivation].

I've [also] worked advising students for over 10 years, so that was another thing that motivated me. I wanted to be an example for my students who had the same experiences [as] I did, [particularly] students [who are] Latino first-generation college students. I was a migrant farmworker growing up, and that is another motivation of mine. To show people that every job, as long as it's honest, is a great job. You can be successful as a picker or you can be successful as the president of a community college, as long as you are honest and true to you. And then just *ganas, capricho* to be part of that. I am sure that [the] percentage [of] Latinas with PhDs. is changing all the time, but to be part of the less than 2% who have a PhD—*capricho* and *ganas*.

Joan mentioned how decision-makers “did not look like us,” even though they made decisions about “our people [Latinos/as]”:

Another motivating factor is being part of the decision-makers in order to help more people like me be successful in academia. I don't want to [be a] professor when I grow up, like I don't think I have what it takes to be a professor. I want to be in administration because, yes, I feel that research is very important, and I feel that the theories and the methods and all of that and the writing and knowing how to express yourself in writing is very important, but I feel it is more important to know the people who I want to help. [I want] to know the people I am doing this for. Eight years is what it took to complete my PhD.

She talked about her educational support system, which included her high school counselor, husband, and parents:

I had a migrant counselor [counselor assigned to children of migrant workers due to possible travel]. Her name was Mrs. Fame Sanchez, [and] she really [was] the one [who] motivated me to pursue an education. Mrs. Sanchez was one of the biggest cheerleaders for me, and [she] got me thinking about pursuing an education. She helped me to apply for colleges.

[My husband] understood enough about my research to know that I was doing all of this and I was staying up sometimes until 7 [a.m.] in the morning, writing, just for the three little letters to have a license to help more people [and] to be trusted. [Also], my mom and dad, *pues*, they just knew, since I was in high school [I would go to college]. They would tell me, “*Abier como le ases pero tienes que ir al colegio.*” My sister, well, she got married when she was 14, so she didn't go to college.

The PhD space. Joan said that “nobody really knows what it is to get a PhD,” and how, at times, she found it difficult not having people who understood “what you are going through.”

She stated,

[Everyone] understood why I was in college or at the university doing my PhD., but nobody—nobody—really knows what it takes, and nobody really knows every little detail that we have to work on. I don’t know if you belong to any Facebook groups, but some of those questions some of those ladies ask, nobody else understands, and it’s okay, and nobody has to [understand]. But it’s difficult, and it could be emotionally draining when you have to talk to somebody but you can’t because they don’t get it.

I mean, I would go back to the valley and, you know of course they wouldn’t say it to my face, but I’ve heard, “*Se quiere mucho porque ya tiene su masetre, porque ya tiene su master’s,*” or, “*Piensa que ya fue a college ya sabe mucho.*” You know, I am never gonna stop being from the barrio, I am always [gonna be] who I am, but you know, now I have the degree and other experiences.

Participant 2

Monica was born and raised in San Antonio, Texas. Her mother did not go to college, and her father had his high school diploma. Monica’s father became a police officer and received training from Bexar County Sheriff’s Department after returning from the Korean War. She was the oldest daughter of three children, with a younger brother and sister. Her mother remarried after her biological father passed away at 42, when Monica was 10 years old. Monica was a first-generation student to attend college and complete a terminal degree in her family.

Barriers. Monica talked about her experience applying to her doctoral program, including the application and the interview processes. Her strenuous application experience made her feel discouraged enough not to continue the process. However, when she received her acceptance letter, her husband reminded her of her goals and that she liked the school where she was accepted. Monica said,

I [went] to that simulation at Texas State, and I [was] emotionally and mentally and physically drained by the time it was done. Basically, it was like Survivor Island—they put you in these little groups, and you have to go through these simulations. The whole point was they wanted to see who did the reading, how [you] do your process, who [are]

the leaders—all of those types of things. There were like 50 of us [in the simulation], and they narrowed it down, and they [accepted] 18.

It was like Survivor but not like Survivor at Texas State. It was [like] Survivor [because] people broke out into groups. I remember it was all the African Americans in a pod, and then people from India were in a pod, and you had the Latinas and Latinos in a pod, and then there is me. But all [the pods were] the same type [and from the] same districts.

Monica started the doctoral program but reported experiencing several life-altering events during the program. She heard about the death of Mr. Salazar, her sixth-grade teacher and the person who first encouraged her to attend college. Also, during this time, Monica's husband went to Fort Leavenworth to finish his second master's degree. Monica also had to deal with breaking her foot and her mother needing neurosurgery. She said,

Starting the PhD program in 2015 [and] graduating in 2019—Salazar, [my teacher], died. My husband is retired military and works in Army North at Fort Sam, and he had an opportunity to go to the military school at Fort Leavenworth and earn his second master's. He has an MBA. [I also] broke my foot. Like, oh my gosh, whatever, break my foot. That's important because I am in a cast from December through February in February of 2018.

Days before her scheduled defense, Monica lost everything in a house fire. She said, “[I wanted to] stay there [in my house], but, by golly, I had a dissertation proposal scheduled for April the 11th, and I did it.”

Monica also described how she pushed herself to finish and reminded herself why she was “doing this PhD” and needed to finish:

It's this constant need [to complete the program]. You go through a struggle, [and you say], “Okay, gotta get through that,” but it's [also] this constant need to prove that I'm good enough or I'm worthy. I don't know where that [desire] comes from—it's like never being content or satisfied, and it's like I just need to keep pushing. I don't want to show you I'm the smartest person in the group, but I'm gonna prove to myself that I'm the smartest person. Yeah, I don't know where that comes from, and it's probably not good.

Motivation/Support. Monica discussed the people who supported her in her K–12 education. Although she wanted to be part of the school band, her family did not have the financial resources:

I went into band, [and] Mr. Salazar, my band director, really took an interest in me [and] helped me with the instrument. [He] said, “If you stay the first chair and you practice, your mom won’t have to buy anything.” So, [I said], “I really want to play the flute, but I’ll play that clarinet.”

Alfred Esquivel—both he and Salazar encouraged me to go to college, and that’s why I went to college. I mean, in my mind, [I said], “I’m gonna be a band director,” because in sixth grade [Salazar was] the only teacher [who] has taken an interest in an ability of mine. So, in sixth grade, I knew I was gonna be a band director of music.

Monica’s stepfather encouraged her to either go to college or get a good job so she could take care of her family. Her mother also encouraged her to get an education. Monica said,

My stepfather—boy, we lucked out getting the best man in the universe. He died 7 years ago, but he encouraged all of us [by saying], “You do what you need to do to take care of your family [and] put a roof over your head. You either go to college, or you get a good job where you can advance in life.” He was always encouraging [me], and I [went] to UTSA.

My mom always said, “You need an education, and if you’re not going to get all of those degrees, then you need to be really good at your job.” She used to always tell me when I wouldn’t practice my clarinet practice, “Okay, you don’t need practice today but just remember, somebody else is practicing. Someone else can be better than you.” So, I’d be like, “Oh, shit, I need to practice.”

Monica attributed her decision to pursue a doctorate to Carol Harold:

Carol Harold, I told her, “I am going to go get my certificate.” She said, “No, you’re going to go get your PhD” And I said, “No, I am not going to go get my PhD because that was supposed to happen in my 40s, and it didn’t happen in my 40s, and I have this timeline.” So, the PhD process really happened because of Carol Harold.

Then, [it was] me coming home and saying [to my husband], “Hey, honey, I think this is what I’m going to do.” Even though I didn’t get into UT, he’s the one who encouraged me. He was like, “Hey, do what you want to do.” I was like, “Well, it’s gonna take time, and this is gonna happen.” And he was like, “Just do what you need to do because I support you [to] do what you need to do.”

When Monica told Salazar she wanted to pursue her doctorate, he expressed his excitement. He stated that Mexicans, meaning people who identify from the Mexican culture, needed to get as much education as possible “so [they] are not judged.” Monica said,

Getting through that point or even to this point [was] because [of] Mr. Salazar again. He always followed my career, so even when I went to Harlandale, the man would show up [and] just follow me around and go visit classes with me. When I started working on my PhD and said, “Hey, this is what I’m going to do,” he was super excited. [Salazar] was like, “Monica, you know Mexicans—” that’s what he saw for himself—he said, “Mexicans need as much education as possible because you never want to be judged by the color of your skin.”

Monica’s support system included her husband, mother, and work family at Harlandale Independent School District. She stated,

My husband and my mom are my biggest support system, and then, going into this process, I had my Harlandale people who supported me. [I had a] support system [I] went to, [and the] support [was] constant. All of that was my mom because of her physical presence [and] then [also] my husband because he did the encouraging [and] then [also] my work family really came through, when I think about [it].

For example, when Monica lost everything to a house fire, her Harlandale office team helped her get back on track with her doctorate program:

[The] office, my whole team, they knew my secretary, [and she] knew my password to my Google Drive, and she found all my articles, and my mom would put all my articles [into] binders, like [for] creative leadership, creativity, [and] educational leadership. The [staff] printed out all of those articles and made me binders, so I was able to do that, and it was hard.

Monica summarized her motivation to attain her doctorate by saying,

Why did you do the PhD? [It’s] because of my mom and Mr. Salazar and my “*welita*,” Mary Zamora Saucedo. She always said, “One day, you need to write a book. You’re the one in the family who will write a book.” I think I always thought that book was about her and her struggles [of] becoming a nurse and everything she came from, I think it was Zacatecas, Mexico. But I think now the book was such an association, like she’d always say, “You’re gonna be a doctor—you’re gonna be a doctor,” maybe.

The PhD Space. Monica talked about the effect of her husband’s decision to pursue his second master’s degree. She felt he did not understand what she needed and that she needed his

emotional support while working on her PhD. The situation still caused her pain, which showed that even the closest individuals might not understand doctoral candidates' need for support. Monica recalled, "[He said], 'You're always busy with your PhD, and you're working on your dissertation, so you're not going to notice I'm not here.' And it's like, 'Yeah, I'm gonna notice you're not here.'"

Participant 3

Nancy was born in El Salvador and moved to Yonkers, New York. Her mother and father started but did not complete college. She had two younger sisters who had also attained their college degrees. Although others in her family had attained their bachelor's and master's degrees, Nancy was the first to earn a terminal degree: a doctorate.

Barriers. Nancy described the PhD process as "hard" and "emotional." She noted she wanted to give at some points because of the difficulties. She said,

[It was] interesting work, but it did take a lot out of me to do that. [What] I mean [when] I say that [is] because being a Latina and doing work on race in a different way takes a lot out of you in a personal way. It's emotional. The most important thing for me [was] making sure I finished because there were several moments when I didn't want to finish, when I was definitely thinking about not finishing. I mean, a lot of that was just the situations that we find ourselves [in] when we are getting a PhD.

Nancy discussed the cultural stereotypes about Latinas, recalling that some people had told her, "Your parents probably don't want you to go away for college." She called the cultural stereotypes a narrative about herself, saying,

[It was] always interesting when I got to my PhD program. People [had a narrative]. There's a lot of literature on why especially Latinas don't succeed in college and in higher education and education in general. My advisor would always have this narrative of me, like, "Oh, your mom [and] your parents probably didn't want you to go away to college. Your parents probably wanted you to stay close," or, "I'm sure it's been a struggle for you to be this far away from home, and now you're getting a PhD."

Actually, my mom was never like that. My mom raised me, so she was definitely the one at home doing all the cleaning, all the cooking, all the taking care of everybody, but for me, she always [encouraged me]. Yes, I had to do chores every day [and every] so

often, but it was never the priority for me. Always, the priority was, “Sit down, do your homework, [and] do the educational stuff. Everything else is secondary, just so you can take care of yourself.” It was never just, “Get married [and] have children.”

I mean, to this day, I still always tell people that my mom never ever put that on me in the way that people think. I didn’t get married until I was 33. It wasn’t that long ago.

Nancy worked on campus the entire time she attended school. Although she acquired research experience, the jobs provided little pay. She reflected on how she got through school with so little money:

The fact [was] that my stipend [was small]. I was a research assistant, and I was making, I think, like \$11,000 for the academic year, and then, if I could find summer work supplementing [that income], I think the most I ever made was \$18,000 for a whole year to live off of. When I think about that now, I’m like, “Oh, my.” I have no idea how I survived [or] how I was able to pay all my bills [and] how was I able to do all the things that I did, just to actually be able to finish a whole PhD [and] take classes. I mean, it was just so much of that kind of stuff.

Nancy reported losing a GA position she had enjoyed because it provided her with exposure to her future area of research:

As a first-generation college student [and] first-generation everything, [it was me] not knowing how graduate school really works, not knowing how a PhD works. I had no idea that what she was asking me was, “Do you want to continue to work with me on this research project and make it part of more research, or are you separating yourself?” I mean, my response was, “I’m separating myself, I guess.” So, after that, I actually lost my research assistantship, [and] I got put into another GA position, which was actually less money than what I had originally been getting. It also was not as, I guess, prestigious. It was copying paper, making copies and stuff like that. It was office work, which is not the same thing [as] when I had been working for [the professor]. [Previously], it was like transcribing [and] reaching out to other authors, [and] doing all of that kind of work that is important when [you’re pursuing a doctorate].

Nancy did not have a positive experience with gathering and interviewing participants. For example, the interested individuals who reached out about her research often criticized her for her word choice (e.g., “student of color”). Additionally, the death of one participant made her doctoral program a difficult experience. She explained how the participant’s death was “hard to process” because she had just interviewed the individual:

During the interview process, when I first sent out my call for participants, the call [was for] students of color and STEM or something like [that]. I used that term [students of color]. Well, it had gone out the department. I had sent it out to all the different department secretaries and department heads and all of that to share it, and I got one student who emailed me back. [It] was so awful, my gosh.

The participants were like, “Thank you for putting students of color at the top of your email because otherwise, I would have ignored it [or thought] it [was] just spam. [If it said] graduate students, I wouldn’t have thought it was for me, [and] I wouldn’t have even opened [it]. But, the fact that it specifically said students of color, I knew that meant me, and so I opened it, and I’m so glad I’m doing a study.”

The participants were getting paid also, so I sent the students a check via mail. I hadn’t seen [one check] get cashed, and I didn’t think anything of it—no big deal. Well, I got a call from the department secretary telling me that my participant had died suddenly. I had just interviewed him a few weeks ago, and I got this call because, in the student’s mailbox, the only thing that was in there was the envelope from me with the check. [The department secretary] didn’t open it, but my return information was on the [envelope], so she was able to find me. She looked me up and everything and was able to find me at my institution. She was like, “I don’t know your relation to the student, but I thought that you should know. Your envelope was the only thing in his mailbox, so I wanted you to know.”

Motivation/Support. Nancy talked about her childhood dream to become a teacher. She described her mother as her biggest supporter when she left home to pursue an education, saying,

I always wanted to be an educator. My mom still tells a story that when I was little, I always told her I was gonna be a teacher. I never wanted to be anything else but a teacher, and I ended up in a PhD program in education.

I definitely think my mom has been a driving force from when I was little. I remember being young, maybe 12 or 13 years old, and my mom—I don’t even remember how the topic came up—was like, “You have to go away. I want you to go away to college. Don’t listen to anyone else when they tell you to stay close. your job is to go away to college.” I think part of that [support] was her knowledge that [if] I [had] stayed home, [my life] might have been very different. My mom has always been that constant. I went through college, [and] she was the one supporting me, making sure I had money, making sure that I was still doing what I needed to do to finish a degree.

While completing her proposal, Nancy experienced pushback from her advisor about her topic. However, a previous supervisor/advisor emailed her current advisor to ensure Nancy could move forward with her research. Therefore, Nancy felt her previous supervisor/advisor enabled her to feel she had a support system, which motivated her to finish her degree. She said,

I went back to working with my old supervisor. She was my adviser when I started college. She ran a scholarship program for students of color that I was part of when I started college. She had a graduate assistantship with a new program working with students of color and STEM, so that's how I ended up working with students in STEM, and that's actually how I ended up also [deciding] in my study to focus on STEM students.

I had to go to her and say, "It's not working out in my department. Do you have anything? [Can I] come and work for you instead? She gave me that opportunity when she saw that I hadn't been progressing. I wasn't moving forward with my proposal, [and] she actually emailed my advisor. She knew my advisor also [because] when she went through her PhD program, she had taken several courses with her, so she knew her and gently asked, "How is this going? What's going on? Is there anything I can do to help Nancy through this process?"

Well, that put my advisor on [guard]. All of a sudden, she was all on alert [and] told my [previous] supervisor [that] I was having a lot of trouble, [and] she didn't understand why I wasn't progressing etcetera, etcetera, assuming that my supervisor and [I] weren't that close. She didn't know that my supervisor was basically my second mom while I was away [from home].

So, my [previous] supervisor quickly told me, "Um, why is she making it sound like you're the problem here." And I was like, "Well, let me tell you since I've never told [you]—let me tell you all the things she's put me through and all the things my committee has put me through and how many rewrites of my proposal I've had to do, which is why I haven't defended yet." And so my supervisor emailed [my advisor] back, and all she said was, "Well, I really hope you know I know Nancy's been working really hard. She does really great work for me. I really hope that I see her defend by the end of the semester." This was after my advisor had told me there was no way I could defend at the end of the semester because [of] all the million reasons professors are too busy, [and] it's not enough time.

Well, all it took [was] my supervisor sending her that email, and all of a sudden, I got an email [saying], "Let's try to set a date so you can defend your dissertation or your proposal by the end of the semester. I know that one of your committee members won't be around, but she has agreed to do it via Zoom and etcetera, etcetera." I was like, wow, she really felt like she was on the spot there. [The] tune has changed.

That [experience] was also really interesting because, otherwise, I would have had to wait for a whole another however long [a] period of time before I could defend. This was Fall 2015, I believe. I defended by that December. All of the winter break, I was able to take the time to do my IRB [and] then submit [for approval] right before classes began in the spring. I was able to start interviewing [and] putting [together] my study by [the] beginning of February because when I went through IRB, I had taken all of that time when I wasn't working, wasn't in classes, [and] wasn't worrying about a proposal or anything like that [to] work through the IRB.

The PhD Space. Nancy also discussed the difficulty of trying to explain to people what a

PhD requires and receiving responses based on assumptions about "what it takes" to complete a

PhD. Nancy explained how no one really knows about the doctoral experience until they have it themselves:

When I would try to explain [the doctoral experience] to people, they would just be like, “Yeah, [the] PhD [process] is hard, but you don’t know what I’m talking about,” because a lot of their experiences were very similar to what I went through. I ended up starting the PhD program, and my mom, at that point—I could tell she didn’t really understand what [getting a PhD] meant. She didn’t really understand what I was gonna be doing there [in the doctoral program], but she absolutely knew that I was gonna be a doctor, so that’s all that matters. I think she knew what it meant to get a doctorate, [but] she didn’t know what it meant to get a doctorate in education.

Participant 4

Claudia was born and raised in San Antonio, Texas. Her mother completed some college, and her father earned his bachelor’s and master’s degrees. She was an only child but not the first in her family to attend college; however, she was the first to complete a terminal degree.

Barriers. Claudia said she started her PhD program “very strong” and “ready to go.” When she got to the dissertation requirement, she found herself procrastinating. During this time, she became a mother and admitted she made that another excuse. At times, she felt disengaged from the work and completing the dissertation. Claudia said,

[There’s] a certain thrill of just being like, “Oh, I’m ABD because it was like almost done like just saying I thought maybe date like oh no big deal like I’ll get around to it. [But], man, [I told myself], I really don’t know if I can do this. Do I have the stamina, do I have the patience, do I have the intellect to [get] a PhD? It was so weird because I [had] kind of gotten to that point with no problems and no doubts [about] my ability, but it was at the dissertation stage that I was just like, “Oh, [how] can do this? [What] is [it] I have to do?”

That [doubt] was actually happening. I wasn’t making it up in my head, but I just used it as a reason to not focus because, again, I felt like if I was gonna write this and do my research, I had to dedicate all of my attention because it had to be right, it had to be relevant, and it had to be perfect. So, obviously, I didn’t have time to work on it when everything else in my life was going on. Yeah, it was [hard] work, and then after I had my son, I was like, well, I’m a mom.

Claudia said her advisor “made her” realize she needed to finish the dissertation and the PhD. Her advisor told her, “The longer we wait, the greater the likelihood you will not finish.”

However, Claudia reported completing portions of her dissertation and putting it aside again. She said,

The farther you get away from it, the easier it is to just kind of reason yourself out of paying attention to the fact that it exists. Finally, [my advisor] was like, “Look, I see this with students all the time. If you don’t reengage in the next semester, I’m gonna lose you, I know it.”

[My advisor] was like, “Okay, [at least] get to the proposal stage,” because I hadn’t even done my proposal. She [was] like, “Let’s get you proposed and let’s start doing your IRB stuff, and then you can see timelines and what it is that you want in terms of your goal for finishing.” And I was like, “Okay.” So, Fall 2015, that’s when [my advisor] got me [to] propose because I started to kind of be engaged like the fall of 2014, but I had my son, so I was like, “Oh, god, I have to take a break.”

[I] got everything lined up, and [my advisor] was like, “Okay, you’re good. Start collecting data,” and then I got hung up again. I don’t know what it was—it was kind of like I was making excuses for just not wanting to take the next step. In retrospect, I knew it was because I wasn’t sure I’d be able to actually write the dissertation. I was doubting the relevance of my research even then.

Motivation/Support. Claudia’s family always expected her to go to college. She shared that both her parents went to college, but only her father finished. Claudia said,

Education has always been really important to my parents. My mom did not get the opportunity to go to college. Even though she was valedictorian of her high school, she immediately started working at Kelly Air Force Base. Her lifelong dream was to become an attorney, [but] she never realized that dream. She always had that desire to instill in me, [saying], “You can go to school. Don’t let anything hold you back.”

My dad did have the opportunity to go to college, and he started a master’s program right after college and abandoned it while I was young. This was back in the day when UTSA was still out in the woods, [but] he completed his master’s, so he was also very much a big proponent of higher education. From a very young age, college was not an option [for me]—it was kind of a foregone conclusion that I would go, so I never realized the privilege of that mentality until much later. I also had the privilege of going to private school.

Claudia said the people in her life caused her to consider pursuing a master’s degree. While working in academia, she noticed the prestige of having a terminal degree, and she realized a PhD would provide her with a place in academia:

I had a scholastic mentor who was the executive director of the grant [who said], “You know, you should really consider getting a master’s.” I was like, “Yeah, but in what? I don’t want to do bench work. I don’t want to be a scientist in the lab.” But I was like,

“That does excite me, and I like to be sitting there all day pipetting things.” And [my mentor] was like, “Well, UTSA is starting an MBA program in health care administration, so you can marry the health care stuff with business. An MBA is pretty versatile.”

When working in that environment—and I don’t know if you’ve ever worked in higher education, like at a university or college—but that’s what I really started to see [how] an educational caste system exists in terms of how people respected one another, how people addressed one another, [and] how you were included or not in certain conversations based on your education level. What was interesting is that there were a lot of professors of color in the Department of Biology—not a lot of women but at least professors of color, [so] I could see that there was an effort to have diversification at [the] school.

[However], there was still that education difference, and one of the first things I noticed was the calling of the [last] name. Regardless of your position, you never called a colleague by their first name—it was always Dr. So-and-So. I always thought that was so fascinating. I was like, well, it’s a term of respect. But if you were a fellow doctor or [had] your [master’s] or PhD, you could call them by their first name.

All that signified to me was that if I was gonna stay in academia, I felt the need to somehow prove myself, like I wanted to get on a first-name basis with these people. I know, I know that sounds kind of petty. [It was] kind of ridiculous, but I felt like I needed to justify my place in my position and my intellect in some way, so that’s when I started looking at doctoral programs.

Claudia selected a doctoral program catered to working adults. She said,

[I] found out about the program at the lake. [What] intrigued me about it was that [it] was in leadership. Another big piece of it was that it had an altered schedule so that I could still work and not worry about money in terms of living and going to school.

Claudia also discussed her plan to finish in 5 years by following the doctoral program’s suggestions for taking the coursework and setting up with a cohort. The cohort arrangement provided her with a support system of classmates:

[I went] into the program, and [I] started off strong. One of the first things they [said in the program was], “You can get this done in 4–5 years [if you] stay on track. It’s 2 years of intensive coursework, and then you’re free to do your research.”

We were a phenomenal support system for each other when we were in classes together. Once we kind of disbanded after comps, it was it was a lot harder to stay in touch with everyone, so that motivation that we gave each other was lacking. I’m the type [who] likes to have reminders of support every once in a while, so not having that was hard. Yes, I had a support system with family and friends, but they [were] not [in the program], and [I was].

Claudia said her job as a grant writer and her husband's financial support enabled her to meet the final challenges and finish her dissertation. She explained her husband allowed her to take a pay cut so she could work fewer hours:

I started working for a nonprofit as their grant writer, so that gave me a lot of the flexibility to do my dissertation because I was constantly writing. If I wasn't doing my dissertation, I was writing a grant, so it was all kind of fluid. My whole world [was] just writing for that period of time.

I think a huge barrier for some is having financial support. Yes, the emotional support is very [helpful], but having that financial stability to be able to cut back on your hours and have time to focus—even if you are working a full day to still have time to focus on writing [is important] because, by that point, a lot of time is just sitting down and writing.

The PhD Space. Claudia discussed the importance of having a support system with people who understand the processes of being a doctoral student. She said,

There's something to be said for having a support system that's going through the same things that you're going through. It didn't matter if my cohort mates were female or people of color—we were still [all] going through that process, and the process almost overrode the demographics of the cohort because you were all in this space trying to finish. Not having the [cohort support] made me lose my momentum.

Participant 5

Christine grew up in the Salinas Valley in California. Her father was a migrant worker, and her paternal grandparents migrated from Mexico to Texas. Her father earned a Bachelor of Arts; her mother, who immigrated from the Philippines, attended some college but did not complete a degree. Christine was not the first in her family to attend college but the first generation to earn a doctorate. Christine's two younger siblings—one sister and one brother—had both earned bachelor's and master's degrees.

Barriers. Christine recalled when she first wanted to complete her doctoral degree. She noted she had no clue or guidance on how she would accomplish her degree; she knew she wanted to do it and that it had to fit her schedule. She said,

Looking back, there's not a lot of assistance or guidance when you're in that [PhD] space. I had no idea about some people earning their doctorates for free. I had no idea. [The doctoral program] had to be online. I wasn't gonna do any residency requirements—that didn't cut it for me [where] I looked at.

Christine also talked about the importance of having her daughter close to be there for her child. Therefore, she arranged for babysitting in the same space while working on her doctoral degree. Christine wanted to successfully fulfill both her duties as a mother and her educational goals. She discussed the difficulty of completing a doctoral degree and meeting her timeline, saying,

It was a very long and lonely process. [My] support system was definitely comprised of babysitters, but I'm such a control freak that it was on-site babysitters. I would go to the office and work, so I read annotated outlines during the week and then would drive to the office Saturdays and Sundays and really work from probably 7 [a.m.] to anywhere from 3–5 p.m. But the babysitters—I would have in the office next to me so I [could] be the control freak that I am.

I might be the first person you've interviewed who has met [the doctoral degree] timeline, but I could also tell you three times when I sat there and wanted to quit. It was hard. I was just like, "This isn't for me." I think you know one telling story in my journey is.

But, yeah, I mean, I was ready to quit at least three different times. I remember I couldn't get my proposal approved, [so] I struggled by myself from December—no excuses [for] me—June 2016 to December. [It was] not easy. There were many nights of crying. I am not going to even pretend like this was some magical Disneyland journey. I mean, it was hard, and it [would have been] so easy to quit.

Christine knew being a Latina was a barrier, but that did not matter to her:

[For] barriers, I'm a woman. I'm a little Latina woman, and no one expects me to be a PhD [candidate]. [Getting a PhD requires] perseverance and passion, but I think what was missing in that, especially for just for myself, was [that] you have to learn to be comfortable being uncomfortable, and you have to learn to ask questions.

Christine finished her doctorate within her self-determined timeframe but admitted she knew little about getting through the dissertation requirements. She navigated an unknown space with no guidance and with "pushback" from her chair:

I remember I [didn't] know dissertation coaching existed. I didn't know editors were out there. I didn't know it likens itself to being a published [if an] author [has] got a bunch of

people reading their stuff after they write it—that's normal. What I've discovered down the line is they want to keep you in [the doctoral program] as long as they can. You are their ticket to their stipend every month; [they're] like, let me just have her hang on a little bit more.

[I had a] Caucasian chair who was like, "I can't tell you what to write. You need to figure it out for yourself." I was like, okay, but there's a piece missing. They're always telling us the what but not the how. I didn't have the how in Chapter 3, especially [which] was about the how, so I moved from case study to phenomenology, and he fought me for a long time [on that decision], but he eventually relented and let me pursue phenomenology, and after that, it just flew.

It's hard [because] I think one barrier is no one shows you the bigger picture. You're kind of plodding along. It's like tunnel vision, like, okay, so here's my chair saying, "Yeah, I think you should publish this." I'm like, "Okay, can you show me how because I have no idea. I don't know who to contact, how to present myself, what editor to hire, [or] any of that stuff.

[When I] hit the methodology chapter, I [had] impostor syndrome. [I thought], "I don't belong here. I don't know. I'm not a methodologist. I can't fake this." I remember sitting in his office, and I had got to Chapter 3, and I was like, "Listen, I just might settle for the EDS, [which is] the Specialists in Career Certificate." He [was] like, "No, you have to [continue]. You're [so close] with [just] two chapters away [from finishing. What are you thinking?]" So, I just dug in and ended up finishing.

Motivation/Support. Christine said education was always a "must" in her home. She knew she wanted to be an educator and that her "end goal" was obtaining a doctorate. Christine stated,

[My doctoral journey] actually starts with [my dad] because if he [had] not pursued higher education through the EOP program, "college, college, college, college, college" would have never been a narrative for me. My father is Mexican, [and] I remember asking my dad the questions, "Okay, well what happens after high school? What degree is next, and what degree follows that? Then what [comes after that]?"

I remember always being enamored at different commencement ceremonies by the three stripes on the robe and the TAM [and think], "I want that." But I didn't know what it took to get [to] that [and that it] was very, very difficult and challenging. But for me, that visual really set my path.

I always wanted to be a high school English teacher, [and] I knew I always wanted to be an athletic coach. From there, I went into student teaching as an avid tutor [and] became an avid teacher. [I] knew that getting the doctorate was my end-all, be-all. I remember [when my daughter] hit about 9 months, and I said, "You know what? The time is now. I want to be done by the time she's ready for piano lessons and dance lessons. [I want to] do this. That is my goal. Let me start now [and] let me be done before she hits the age of 5." That was a goal that I had.

Christine noted that her husband and parents helped with her daughter and gave her time to focus on her doctorate. Her other biggest cheerleaders were the school custodians. Christine explained,

My husband was very supportive. He understood the long periods of writing. Both of our parents are in California, so they would take turns coming up [and] watching our daughter I could go and write for long periods of time. [In the] program, I mean I'm gonna be honest, the two people at school who cheered me on—who do you think it would be, [the] chair? No, [it was] the custodians at my school.

Those two [custodians], Frank and Paulie, became my work [cousins]. They were there on the weekends. They made sure the lights were on, [and] they made sure the air conditioning was on. I could count on one hand how many times my school administrator asked me, “Hey, how’s it going?” in 4 years.

Christine found an avenue to pay for school while still working. She used a defiant tone when she said she wanted to finish “in time” because she did not want to spend any more money:

[In] my case, [for] financial aid in- [and] out-of-pocket, I was very blessed when I got higher help. I think one of the kind of tickets to my current workplace was [them saying], “Well, we can’t pay you as much as you made in California, but we will help you get any kind of other degree that you want.” So, that helped. [My work] paid for half [of my schooling], which was great. So part of that [for] school is [my job] will pay for half, but then you owe them the time, so now I’m doing my time.

[I’ll] tell you what—my motivation was that tuition payment. [That] is what it was. People [are] asking [in] the [doctoral Facebook] group all the time, and I [say], “You want motivation? You need to get a Post-it and write down how much you spent on [getting your degree]. Once you see that number, I [can] tell you there will be plenty of motivation to [get it] done.”

The PhD Space. Christine created a Facebook group as a space for “PhD women” to share and better understand their experiences. The group was a space where women achieving their doctorates “can ask questions” to others going through or having completed the process. Christine said,

I created the Facebook group called Doctoral Mom Life because space just didn’t exist like that when I was living [that] way. When I look at all the women in the Doctoral Mom Life group now, we all have each other’s [back], and we all kind of live by the mantra, “We’re gonna lift as we climb up this ladder now, but I’m gonna pull you up with me. If I don’t know [the answer], let me direct you to somebody who does.” We really have been successful in creating that space.

Participant 6

Carolina was born and raised in Long Island, New York. She and her parents, two sisters, and one brother immigrated to the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Her father originally came from Spain, and her mother and siblings were from Uruguay. Carolina's parents served as translators for the United Nations for more than 25 years, which enabled her and her siblings to access education grants for grade school and higher education. The youngest of four children, Carolina was not the first in her family to attend college. Still, she was the first in her immediate family to serve in the military and earn a doctorate, in large part due to funding from the GI Bill.

Barriers. Carolina moved back home to serve as caretaker for her ill mother but still desired to attend school to pursue her PhD. She found a doctoral program close to home. Although she completed much of her coursework, she found caring for her mother a challenge to finishing her PhD. She said,

I was going to move back home back to Oregon, where we are now. My mom was starting early-onset Alzheimer's, [and] she [got] progress[ively worse], so that was the only reason to come home. Living on my own at that point, I was able to knock out a lot of my coursework. [However], my mom was having increasing health issues, so that was for sure a distraction.

But I was able to not get a lot of stuff [done] because I lived on my own for a couple of years, and then my mom just really declined, [and] my sister needed help, so I moved in with her to help. That, for sure, not just financially but just [the] headspace [needed for the situation] definitely lengthened the trajectory to finish.

Carolina also had a hard time finding a program that would "take" all her life achievements into account (i.e., her military and previous business experience). She said,

I really struggled to find a [doctoral] program. I felt like I was talking to people, and [they were] just kind of the stereotypical academic elites. I was like, "Okay, maybe I didn't do x, y, or z, but I'm a badass. I have something to contribute right now."

Carolina struggled to support herself financially while attending school, but she overcame that obstacle:

[I had to] supplement [my] income. The only income I was getting was either part-time, like fellowships or like GRAs, and then I had a service connection disability from the military, so I was getting money for that. For sure, that added to the stress and whatever residue from [my] time in the military.

Although the then-6 months of public health actions against the COVID-19 pandemic presented a further barrier to completing her degree, she was able to finish. She said, “Six months ago—of course all this [is] not even 6 [or] 3 [or] 4 months ago—all this COVID [stuff] started as well. [The pandemic], in addition, lengthened whatever goal I had to finish in a certain time. I was like, ‘This is stressing me out.’”

Motivation/Support. Carolina considered herself privileged to have parents who supported higher education. Because she joined the U.S. military, the GI Bill covered most of her educational costs. Carolina decided to pursue a PhD while looking for jobs and seeing the requirements. She stated,

I had a lot of privilege, for sure, from an earlier education standpoint, [as] I got grants through my parent’s jobs. They were translators for the United Nations. I had my GI Bill, [the] Montgomery GI bill, and that was a huge launching pad for me. [However], I went [a] different [path]. I wasn’t in education anymore. I went into business.

I don’t know if I would [have had to] pay out of pocket or go into debt for [school], especially with a PhD. So, to date, the GI Bill covered all my master’s [and] about half of my doctorate. The rest I [paid for] with grants and fellowships.

I was actively looking for another job that paid way less but had some science sense of purpose, and I came across [a job] by accident. [The job was] like, “Oh, well, you need a master’s, but it has to be within a certain timeframe. I was like, “Okay, well, I’m outside [a] different timeframe.” [The job description said], “Or, you can have a PhD.” I’m like, “I don’t have a PhD.” I’m like, “Why don’t I have a PhD?” So, I tell you [I] hatched [the plan to get my PhD] on Tuesday at 10 o’clock at night while I [was] job searching. That’s kind of how it came about.

During the PhD program, Carolina received support from her classmates, family, and mother. She stated,

[There's] five of us, including me. We were pretty tight-knit, [but] we had some ups and downs as a group. My family was supportive, but they were those [people who said], "Of course you're going to do that. Like, whatever." They've been very supportive of that. My mom's [also] been kind of [proud]. I know she's proud of me.

The PhD Space. Claudia talked about not having people around her who could relate to the PhD experience. She said,

Other coworkers [and] members had family support, but they kind of couldn't conceptualize what that meant. Especially friends who were first-generation [students who] then went on to get a PhD—the concepts you're describing are just night and day. It's hard to even talk about [the doctoral program] and justifying that [it's] not a waste of time. Right, that didn't happen.

Participant 7

Sandra was born in Leon, Guanajuato, Mexico, and moved to Pauma Valley, California, at the age of 7 years. She attended school in the United States from the second through 12th grades. Her parents were farmworkers educated only up to middle school (eighth grade) in Mexico. Sandra was the first generation in her family to attend college and complete a terminal degree. She was the youngest of three children and had an older sister and brother.

Barriers. Sandra found it difficult to navigate the higher education system because she was the first in her family to attend college. She said, "When it came time to apply for college, I wasn't even aware [of] where to go or what to do. My parents are farmworkers, and they don't speak English, so I really didn't have a lot of guidance."

Sandra attended graduate school for her master's and PhD degrees in El Paso, Texas. She moved to Texas from California and considered attending school a great opportunity due to her stipend and tuition. However, Sandra found her first year of living on her own in graduate school difficult. She said,

Once I moved, there were definitely times when [it was rough]. I [was] away from home, [and for] the first time, I was on my own. I knew literally zero people here [in Texas], so I think the first year was very [tough]. I wanted to drop out so many times only because I

think we all realize [in graduate school] that you're no longer the smartest kid in your class—everybody's smart. Of course, you just take a big piece of humble pie when your professors question you and ask you to think a little bit more critically. Of course, I was like, "What? I'm already like smart, [so] why are you questioning me?" I think that was the hardest [part]—being away from home and feeling like I didn't really have my support system as close as I would [have in California].

The first year was a little rough, not only because I was away from home but [because] it was such a transition. I started [graduate school] right from my undergrad, so [I was] 24 years old. Even though I had been kind of guided through the process of applying to graduate school, I don't think anybody could prepare you [for] what to expect. [However], I did well, and grad school was just a big reality check, like you're in the big leagues (PhD) now—you have to step up and [not] just panic [because of] all these deadlines.

During her time at the University of El Paso, Sandra hoped to acquire a full-time job after completing her PhD. However, she ended up taking a full-time job before completion. She stated,

Another barrier [that caused] me [to take] longer than I wanted [to finish my doctorate was] I started a full-time job as a program evaluator, which is my current position now. Of course, working full-time and still trying to manage research [like in] undergrad and everything—it just became super overwhelming.

During her PhD program, Sandra encountered a couple of "bumps on the road" due to an advisor. She said their personalities "did not match" and, at times, she had to do "all the research" with no guidance. She felt her advisor should have taught her instead of asking her to do "busywork." Sandra said,

[In] my program, my relationship with my mentors [was] another barrier that I faced. I started off with one mentor, and he was doing the type of research that I wanted [to do]. He was doing health research with Latinos, and I was like, "Great! I want to work with him. I've read some of his papers. He's great." It just [was] one of those [situations]—[after I] met him and liked [him], our personalities just clashed. He was showing a lot of favoritism to another um person from my cohort, and, of course, I don't do well with that either. He ended up leaving for ASU, and he took the person he favored [with him].

Luckily, [I] was able to match with someone else [and] have them take me under their wing, but then I also had issues with him because he was very hands-off—like too hands-off. I understand that you want to give your students some independence [so they] become critical thinkers and so forth, but [I was] fresh out of undergrad and trying to figure out [my] master's master thesis. I was completely lost sometimes, and he really didn't give me much guidance.

[I] don't see myself putting up with another project with him. I can't. [But, at the time], there was really no one else in the department [who] was doing the kind of research I was interested in. So, luckily, I developed a good relationship with a mentor who was more social and [in] my field [of] health disparities and Latino health. We talked, and he was like, "You know what? I'll take you under my wing. Don't quit. You can't quit." And then I was like, "Okay, sir."

Sandra continued her education and became engaged; however, she also caught COVID-19 the semester she defended her dissertation and graduated. She said, "Then I got engaged [and], of course, that was also stressful trying to plan a wedding and buy a house, so life got a little bit in the way."

Sandra also talked about how Latinas can be barriers to their own success because they question their abilities and what they can achieve. She stated,

Another barrier, honestly, [is] I think ourselves—Latinas. I think I was a big barrier to myself. Just in general, [I was] thinking and questioning myself a lot [and] doubting. I mean, I remember, honestly, like before I defended, I was just so anxious, and I was like, "Well, what if I don't do this right, then what?"

If I didn't do that analysis and just question myself, [that would have been better]. My husband was like, "What are you doing? You know this stuff better than anybody." He's like, I heard you [talk about this] so many times. You know this." And I'm like, "No, are you sure?" I would literally just leave, and I wouldn't eat. It was just a lot [of] overthinking and not being confident.

Motivation/Support. In high school, Sandra became motivated to attend college when she heard everyone talking about it. She felt college was the "next step" in her life. Sandra's parents also emphasized the importance of school and told her she "could do better." She said,

I didn't really, per se, ever see myself getting a PhD [in high school]. I always knew I wanted to go to college only because I kept hearing about it during high school, like, "You need to get a college degree. You need to get a college education to be successful." So I always knew that I wanted to [go to college], but I didn't really know how I was gonna get there.

My parents always emphasized how important school was for sure, but I think it also had to do with the fact that I also liked school. Yeah, they did put the bar kind of high, I'm not gonna lie. My brother could bring home a C, and it was fine, but I would bring home a B, and they would [say], "We know you can do better." So, of course, I was like, "Yes, I can do better."

After high school, Sandra made acquiring a bachelor's degree her "Number 1 priority." She enrolled at her local community college and received help from the state-funded Extended Opportunities Program and Services (EOPS) to navigate her journey as a first-generation college student.

I'm the youngest of three. My oldest sister actually started college, and then she got pregnant [and] had twins and was not able to complete her education. That always kind of stuck with me. I was 16 when she got pregnant. Even though I wasn't even [in] a relationship or anything, I was always like, "Oh, I don't want to be the girl that gets pregnant and doesn't go to school," just because I always knew that I wanted to at least have a bachelor's degree.

I didn't really want to go away [for college]. I knew that I wanted to stay home only because I wasn't even sure what I wanted to [do]. I knew I wanted to go to college, but I didn't know what the heck I was going to do in college, and I didn't really see the need for me to go far away—that wasn't an option for me. So what I did is I went to community college, [and] I signed up for Palomar College.

[I was in] psychology for the longest time. I was part of this program that helps students—I think it's called EOPS [for] equal opportunities—where they provide services and help students who are first-generation and low-income. I don't even know how I came across that program, to be honest with you, but somehow, it was a godsend because they were very helpful. I had a counselor who helped me take my classes who met with me and just kind of guided me as to what to do.

While attending community college, Sandra saw an open position at California State University San Marcos for the Mark Scholar, which allowed her to gain experience in conducting research. She said,

I saw this opportunity that they were looking for students who had good grades and were interested in doing research, and they were going to pay people, so I was like, Gold! I can basically get paid. They're going to pay my tuition, and I'm gonna get research experience, which I've been wanting to do for a long time.

Sandra knew she wanted to continue her education, so she applied for graduate school and received some guidance on the process:

At that point, I was like, "Well, [I] need to get a master's because [I] can't do much with the bachelor's [degree]. So, of course, I was like, "I want to get my master's and then start working." And then they're like, "Well, why not [get] a PhD?" And I was like, "What? A PhD? I don't even know how I would even get [one]."

And so, they were like, “Well, we can help you.” So then, that’s when I was like, “Okay, sure.” I mean, no one in my family [has a PhD]. My parents don’t even have a high school degree or diploma, so it was very like, “What in the world am I being offered?”

I was like, “You know what? I’m just gonna do it. Why not? I’m just gonna sign up, and I think it’s gonna be good for me. Whether I end up going [to the] PhD program or not, I still think it’s going to be helpful. I’m going to get to network and just meet people. And just the different opportunities that I was given besides, obviously, the stipend and my tuition, but [I was] able to go to conferences as an undergrad [and] conduct my own experiments. They just exposed me to so many different things that I would not have even thought of when I first started my um college journey.

The MARC Scholars program is called OTRES [Office of Training, Research, and Education in the Sciences]. Basically, they helped us with [our] applications, like the GRE and letters of [recommendation], [and] everything. They help you [with] everything, and [they] even helped us [figure out] what schools we should apply for. [They] basically showed us the ropes, which I had absolutely no clue [about]. I would have been completely lost on how to even consider the GRE or anything like that [without them]. Being part of that program, I think, was key to my success. I don’t think I would have [done it without them]. I just received an email from them and opened it, and as an undergrad, [I was] like, “What is this?” But they kept sending it to me, so finally, I was like, “Okay, what is this MARC program all about?” I’m glad I applied and was able to get a lot from it.

Sandra explained that the “whole time” she attended college, she felt motivated by her family. She was inspired by how much her family had already done to come to the United States for a “better opportunity at life.” Her nephews also motivated her, and she wanted them to know she was not a “quitter.” She said,

My parents have just been super key [to my success], and [they] help me with anything. Whenever I struggled, I’ve always shared with them, like, “You know, I’m not doing so well here.” They only got a high school education [and] they moved to the states for, as cliché as it sounds, a better future for their kids, so I think that their support has definitely been the biggest motivation. What kept me going [was] knowing that they gave up so much so we could pursue the American dream. [That] and just knowing how proud [they were].

Again, my family kept me motivated. I have two nephews, they’re twins, and they were little—I think they were 7—when I left, and, of course, they’re like my babies. [I] don’t have kids, but I’ve always told them how important school [is], and I guess I wanted to make sure they knew that I wasn’t a quitter.

Sandra described experiencing several challenges toward the end of her program, and she talked about how her last advisor “held her together.” Her advisor supported her and kept her on track to finish:

Because of Dr. Michael Zarate who supported me, I was like, “I’m just gonna stick around.” My chair of the department was also super helpful and [was] saying, “We need you to stay. We see potential. You’ve got this.” And I was like, “Okay, fine.”

I ended up having another anxiety attack and just telling my mentor, “Doctor, I can’t do this. I’m at [the] point where I don’t feel well. Writing this proposal is literally giving me so much anxiety that I don’t feel well.” [My mentor] was super supportive and was like, “Take the summer off. Focus on yourself—the proposal can wait. I don’t want you to do anything to yourself.” And I was like, “Okay.”

Throughout it all, my advisor was super supportive. I think he’s another reason why [I] kept going. He believed in me. He knew that I could do it, so of course, [I was] like, “I’m gonna do it.”

The PhD Space. Sandra felt that although people “made it seem like they knew” about the process of getting a doctorate, those who have not experienced it did not understand the process. As a result, she said no one could give her advice on her experiences in the program. Sandra reported venting to her mother:

I still remember when I told my family that I was gonna apply to graduate school, and they were like, “Okay, you’re just gonna go [to school] here?” I was like, “No, it’s in Texas.” Everybody was like, What? Why can’t you just go to [school] here in California? Why do you have to move away?” It was kind of [hard] having to explain [my decision] to them.

To this day, I really don’t think my family knows what I do. I don’t know what I do. But I think a turning point for them [was] knowing how serious I was that I was willing, in a way, [to] give up my world to pursue this dream that I had of becoming a doctor. My mom [was] like, “Well, look like the doctor, like you’re going to be a doctor.” I’m like, “Well, I’m not that kind of doctor.” I think they knew that I was serious then about wanting to get my PhD. Luckily, I was very fortunate that they’ve always been super supportive.

But I don’t think [my family] understood truly what I was feeling and what I was going through because, of course, this is foreign to them. They would just be like, “Well, we know you can do it.” And I’m just like, “No, I know [I can do it].” Sometimes, I didn’t really want advice—I just wanted to vent.

Participant 8

Yolanda was born and raised in San Antonio, Texas, by parents who had immigrated to the United States from Northern Mexico. Her father completed the fifth grade, and her mother completed the sixth grade. Yolanda was a first-generation college student born in the United States and also in the first generation in her family to attend college. She had three sisters, two older and one younger. All her siblings received bachelor's degrees, and she and one sister completed terminal degrees.

Barriers. Yolanda talked about facing barriers. For example, “right before she started her PhD,” she dealt with the death of her brother-in-law, who was a motivator to start and “life in general.” She said,

I was like, well, I'm not going to be able to do [graduate school] here, and then we actually had [a] marriage. All of that happens—life happens. My brother-in-law actually passed [away] during that time, so it was like, “Okay, life happens.” So, we were dealing with that. That happened in July, and then, at that point, I'm like, “You know what? I just need to change jobs [and] move to a different campus.”

I think [it's] just life, right? Like, I don't want to read—I want to go do something fun. I want to go to the movies. I want to go [out]. My husband, he was all in. [He was] like, “I'm all in [for you to get your doctorate]. I know you're not going to be able to do certain things. I know we may not be able to travel; you may not be able to attend birthday parties or family events. You got to pick and choose, and you know you [have] forego [certain things] to be able to get ahead, well that's what you need to do.”

Yolanda described herself as a barrier at times because she questioned why she was “doing this” and sometimes procrastinated. She said,

The barriers you hit [are] like, “Well, am I doing this right?” I think it's your self-questioning, [like], “Am I doing the right thing? Should I be doing something else?” I mean, really, [one of] the barriers was myself being a procrastinator.

Motivation/Support. Yolanda's parents emphasized the importance of attending college, although they did not know how to navigate the college education space themselves. Her parents told her focusing on education was the only thing to do:

My parents were always talking about college. They [didn't] really know [about college, though], and [that's] probably something you hear across a lot of [Latinx] stories: [the parents] don't really know what you need to do to get [to college], but you really don't have a choice. [It was] the same thing [for] graduating high school. It was like, "You're not gonna go get a job—you're going to college. We're not sure how that's gonna happen or how we're gonna pay for it or how we're gonna afford it, but that's what you need to do. Your choice is really what college you are gonna go to."

Growing up, my dad was like, "Your job is to get good grades in high school." I didn't have a part-time job or anything like that. Both of my parents were very focused on us in our academics and making sure that we were doing well in school. [My dad] would always say, "Your job is to go to school. You don't need to worry about getting a part-time job," even though I wanted to work.

Yolanda talked about how her sisters supported her, especially because they also went to college. Yolanda used her sister's experience to anticipate, understand, and navigate the demands of higher education. She stated,

[I have] three sisters. Two of them did go to college, and my younger sister did as well. I kind of had [my sisters] as an example. My oldest sister was the first one to go down that journey of college, [which was] something that was totally foreign to us. She kind of started that for us.

[My older sister] was an example [because] she did [college successfully]. She was also instrumental in my college decision-making because she [was] like, "Well, academically you can get in [to these colleges]. Apply [to these ones]." She had already left the state [when I started college]. I was like, "Well, if she can do it, I should be able to do it [too]."

From [my sister's] perspective, she wanted me to leave the state just to get a different perspective on life [and] experience different things. She was like, "What you experience [in] college is not going to be what you experience if you stay in San Antonio or in Texas. You need to leave."

I really attribute the push to go to college to my parents and a counselor I had [who] knew my sister. I was coming up behind my sister, [and the counselor] knew her, and she was, I feel, more academically gifted than myself, but he was like, "Oh, okay, so you're one of the Reyes girls. I'm gonna take you under my wing." [He] wasn't actually my counselor because he was the senior counselor, but [he said], "I'm gonna help you [with] whatever you need."

[That counselor] was very instrumental in saying like, "Don't limit yourself to San Antonio when you're looking for college opportunities. Don't limit yourself to Texas. You don't have to limit yourself to Texas." He was [one] the ones who helped me kind of start thinking outside the box, like, "Well, maybe I can you leave the state [for college]."

Yolanda remembered visiting her cousins at their universities and deciding she wanted to go to college after seeing the campuses. She stated,

I actually also had a couple of very close cousins of mine who also were examples as well. I had a cousin who went to school in Massachusetts [who was] older, and then the other one went to California to study. I remember, growing up, when we would go on vacation, we went to California. At the time, I had two cousins who were in school there. One of them was at Stanford, and the other one was at Berkeley. Part of our vacation was going to visit these college campuses.

Ultimately, Yolanda decided to leave San Antonio and attend school in Massachusetts (Boston University) to get her bachelor's degree:

I ended up leaving. I went out of state for my bachelor's degree, and I think it was probably one of the best things I did because I learned a lot about people and just how different other places are in comparison to South Texas. You find you're in a space where you're one of a handful of Latinos.

Yolanda based her educational trajectory and motivation to pursue a master's degree and beyond on her desire to expand her career opportunities. She decided to "take that jump" and applied to graduate school:

I started my first job in higher education and wanted just to take some time off, so I took a few years off [of school] and then decided to go and get a master's degree in public administration. [I went to] graduate school at UTSA, and [it was] a different experience because [I was] working. It [was] not like undergrad at all.

Yolanda thought about getting a PhD But felt unsure about it until she spoke to the vice president of her workplace. She stated,

I remember having a conversation with one of my vice presidents, and I asked her, "How do you know when you're ready to pursue [a PhD]?" She's like, "You just have to do it. Just do it. [If] you know that this is something that's in your plan, you're gonna get one eventually, so what is stopping you from just applying? Just apply. That's what you have to do. [You have to] take that first step and say, 'Okay, I'm just going to put my application out there and just see how it goes.'" After having that conversation with her, I started looking at programs.

After what we experienced with [the death of] my brother-in-law, I was like, "I'm just gonna do it. What am I waiting for? Life is short. I'm just gonna apply."

So I looked at a program, [and] I was like, "I'm just gonna apply. If it's my time, [they'll] accept me, and if it's not my time, that's okay, [too]. I'll apply next year [or] in a

couple of years.” That’s really why I took the jump. I was inspired by what my brother-in-law had done in his life, and [that’s why I said], “Why not? I’m gonna do it.”

While in her doctoral program, Yolanda had a positive experience with and received support from her classmates:

One of the things I appreciated about the program is that they were looking at the student holistic perspective. Yes, they were looking at the academics, but in the interview [they were] asking you, “Why do you even want to get into this field? What do you think you can bring [to the field]? We could teach you all the rest, [and] we can get you on the right path.” [The program] was more [about] getting to know the student. I remember that [and thinking, “Oh, okay, that makes perfect sense.

I also remember hearing everybody and their stories, like how they came to be [in the program], what had motivated them, [and] what had stopped them. I remember hearing from one student, and she was like, “It took me the 10 years to finish.” She was like, “Life happened.” She had all these things that happened in her life, and she was like, “I just need to finish—I just need to.” She [was] like, “You may come to a place where you’re like, ‘Holy crap, I’m at Year 10.’” But she was like, “That’s okay, but you just need to push through and finish.”

The faculty, I feel, are a little more diverse than [what] you would see in other programs, so I just felt [the doctoral program] was just a very nice environment [that was] very inclusive [and] very diverse. I think you could see the diversity in our cohort because you had everything. I mean, everything across color, age, every gender—everything.

Yolanda mentioned relying on the support from her cohort to get through the doctoral process and complete her degree. She stated,

[My] cohort, we were so supportive of each other. You would see other cohorts from the K–12 program, and they weren’t as [supportive]. They were more competitive with each other and not as, I guess, supportive of each other. For [my cohort], we were like, “This is a long haul, people. I’m not trying to compete for the best grade in the class. I’m not trying to [beat] you.” It was, “How can we get each other through this course? How do we help each other? [The difference] was very apparent in a course that we had that was a mix of both cohorts.

[The cohort was] helping us get through the program [with] each other. We would [have] group texts, [and] we would go have dinner sometimes after class or after our finals. We just always had somebody that we could go to.

After classes are done, what normally happens is everybody kind of just goes their own way. [But for our cohort], 2 weeks ago, we did a Zoom happy hour with most of our cohort mates. We have three people in our cohort who still need to either propose or defend, so we started checking in on people. [One of my cohort members] texted me the other day and said, “Hey, I just submitted a draft to Ross Gordon for review.” I’m like,

“Oh, that’s awesome! Good job!” I was checking in on her and stuff. I think [the cohort] was one of the big motivators for me.

Yolanda’s husband also did not doubt her ability to finish the doctoral program. Yolanda said,

We were at the [university] bookstore, and [my husband] was like, “I’m gonna buy this shirt.” It had the [university] logo and everything, and I’m like, “I’m [just] going to orientation—I don’t even know if I’m going to finish.”

But he was like, “Well, I’m going to buy this, and I’m gonna wear [it] at graduation,” blah blah blah. I’m like, “I’m just getting started. This is [gonna be] a long haul.” But [my husband] was confident. He [said], “I know you’re gonna do it.”

The PhD Space. When Yolanda started the doctoral program, she understood it was a different world; however, she knew others in the program “were in the same boat.” Therefore, she knew she could “talk it out” with other doctoral students because they all experienced the same process:

[I got] accepted [into the program], and it was like, “Wow, I’m in a PhD program. That’s so crazy.” [I was] nervous because it’s like now [I was] in a different world. It’s like a different world [because] I’m around all these like professors who, at some point, are gonna be [my] colleagues.

[I was] reading Aristotle [and] Socrates [and that] type of stuff. I remember reading it and being like, “I don’t even understand what they’re saying.” I read it again—I read it like three times—[but] I [still didn’t understand].

Then we showed up for class, and we all we don’t know each other well. We’ve only met each other at the orientation. We’re kind of just quiet [because] it was the first day of class. And then, finally, somebody just says, “Did you guys have a hard time reading the material?” And then it was like you could hear this exhale from everybody, like, “Yes, oh my god, it was so dense!” We kind of started engaging in that conversation, and I think it felt good because it was like, “Okay, I’m not by myself. I’m not dumb. We’re all in the same boat.”

Participant 9

Jessica was born and raised in the south side of San Antonio, where she continued to reside at the time of the study. Both her parents were born in the United States, her father in Michigan, and her mother in Texas. Her parents were the first in the family to graduate high

school, and Jessica was the first to attend and graduate college in her immediate and extended family. Jessica had one sister who did not attend college.

Barriers. Jessica's parents wanted her to attend college; however, her idea of college included leaving home. Her parents quickly discouraged that notion because they expected her to go to a college in San Antonio, closer to home. She stated,

When it came time to putting in applications and navigating that space on my own, my parents were like, "[Going out of San Antonio]—that's not what we mean. That's not going to happen. You're not going anywhere. You're going to stay home, and you're going to go to PAC or SAC. Those are your options."

That was really a bummer for me because I thought, "I'm from the south side. I grew up on the south side, and that's where everybody goes when they're going to college. They're going to graduate and go to PAC, and I'm going to see all the same people." That whole stereotype that [staying near home] wasn't like real college [made me feel] really disheartened. I was bummed. I thought it was gonna be lame, so I kind of stopped out quite a bit. I would start and then stop and then start [and then] stop because I just didn't connect with anything [at college].

However, after finishing her bachelor's degree, Jessica wanted to continue her education. At that point, her family felt she already had done enough to get an education and a good-paying job, a balance she needed to figure out. Now that she was married and had a family, she needed to prioritize:

At that point, my husband was like, "Well don't you think you should work first before you start trying to get a master's or do anything [like that]? At that point, I had my second child, so it really changed the dynamics of what I wanted to do versus what was realistic for myself or my family.

The other thing was being able to finance school on top of having a family that was relying on me as well. So [my master's] just got delayed and pushed back. For a long time, I thought, "Well, I'm lucky enough that I graduated college. Maybe I'm pushing it by trying to get a master's." But the more I worked with this guy, the more I started to think, "Okay, this guy can do it. I don't know why I keep putting myself in a box, telling myself, 'It's too much. You're thinking too big for yourself. Stay in your little space.'" I kind of had that same reinforcement [from] my family. I was paid well at my job, so it [was] like, "Why are you trying to [do more]?"

There was also this culture of like, "What [more] do you need? You don't need [you master's]. You're a college graduate. What do you need to do anything else for?" And just kind of even having family not even understand there's more college than once you graduate. Obviously, they understood [that] to be a medical doctor [requires] a lot of

school, but other than [going] past graduating college, [they think], “That’s it, you made it. There’s nothing more to do, [so] why are you talking about [more]?”

When Jessica started to look at doctoral programs, she questioned her ability to gain acceptance:

I don’t I mean that [I thought getting my doctorate was] way beyond what I should be doing, like, “I shouldn’t be doing that. I [will be] too old for that by the time I finish.” [I was thinking], how is [the degree] going to help us financially?” I just kind of started with negative thinking, and then, at that point, [I was] really thinking, “There’s no way I’m good enough for that. That’s for smart people, and that’s not something that I’ve self-identified [with].”

[But] as soon as I finished my grad program—literally as soon as I received that email that I passed my comps, that email that said you’ve met all the requirements for graduation, that next week, I was emailing people asking for letters of recommendation to apply for a PhD program. Every step [of the way], there were interviews for the program. Everything I did, I was like, “Well, this is where they’re gonna tell me no,” or “This is where they’re gonna tell me no.” [But] they didn’t. They just kept saying yes, and I just kept going on.

Even when she got into the PhD program, Jessica questioned how she had gained admittance.

She said,

Sitting in that orientation, and everybody’s doing their introductions [and] what they’re doing with their work [and] their research [and] what they’ve done, I was so overwhelmed. Imposter syndrome totally set in. [I was] like, “I think they made a mistake. How did I get in here? These people are ridiculous. I don’t even want to introduce myself because I’m gonna just be like, ‘HI, I’m Jessica, and I don’t know how I got here.’” That was the only thing that kept coming to my mind, and it took a while for me to feel comfortable in the program.

I would I use the analogy that I felt like I was at a club and, somehow, I got into the VIP section, and I just wanted to look down [and] not draw attention to myself because I didn’t want them to say, “Hey, how did you get in here? You don’t belong here. Get out of here.”

Jessica decided to carry herself differently while attending the PhD program:

I had to behave in a certain way because I’m from the South Side, and I don’t want to say I fit most stereotypes, but I fit a lot of them. I didn’t speak like the people in my class were speaking. I was speaking slang—I do all of that. To be in that space, I felt like I needed to act like the people who were there, and that was really hard at first. I really started to feel like maybe I had made the wrong choice. [I wondered], “Maybe I don’t belong here. I [wonder] how long can I keep this up.”

Jessica recalled struggling to describe the program's expectations to friends and family during her studies. She also mentioned the many personal sacrifices she made to graduate. She said,

[I had] to sacrifice a lot of things that I didn't even realize would be a sacrifice. I knew it was gonna be hard and I knew there was gonna be a lot of work, but I didn't really understand like, "Oh, well, I can't go to my daughter's basketball game anymore, and I can't go to my son's event, or, oh no, I can't go to my cousin's birthday party or whatever." [I had to] kind of balance [my] world.

[Also, I didn't] know that part of being in the program is, on top of all the coursework, [is] to research and present at conferences. [I was like], "On top of all of this, I have to do that? Why didn't anybody tell me?" That's just the expectation—that's how it is.

[Another] challenge [was] having support, where it's like, "Well, hey, I'm interested in that, you're interested in that, let's do something together to ease the burden of it." I can't imagine being able to do that without having that support at school.

Motivation/Support. Jessica's family talked about her next steps and supported the idea of college. However, her parents could not tell her what to expect, as they did not go to college themselves. She said,

The expectation from my nuclear family [was] to go to college. But the understanding of what that meant was not ever really clearly stated. Going to college for my parents meant going to community college. We never had conversations about what to expect in college [or] why you should go to college, other than that's what you need to have a better life. There was no elaboration [and] no explanation.

My desire to go to college stemmed from [thinking], "Well, that's kind of how it is. It's just the next step—what I'm supposed to do." I [went to college] not because I was driven to do it or felt like [it was] important or that I had a passion for whatever—I was just doing what was the next step for me.

At first, Jessica did not feel motivated about completing college. However, in the process, she started getting serious about finishing. She recalled the people around her "pushing her" to finish:

I got to a point where I got married [and] I got pregnant, and then it was like, "Now I'm serious. Now I have to do something." I took as many credits as I could, and I pulled it [off]. At that point, it was more about finding something that was gonna give me a degree [and was] something that I thought was valuable or important or work that I wanted to do. It was just a means to an end, period.

I started to take school more seriously in terms of work. [I thought], This is work, and I just got to do it because I got to do it.” My husband was supportive [and] my parents were supportive, and I graduated [and] got my undergrad degree.

Jessica felt she needed to take the next step by getting her master’s degree, but she waited “a while” because she had a good job. She described how her motivation stemmed from herself and the idea that “If others have done it, I’m good enough.” She stated,

And then, immediately [after undergrad], [it] was like, “Well, this is great. I’m gonna go for my master’s. I’m gonna do that. [But] I didn’t pursue my master’s for a while. I started working, [and] I found that I really liked the job I was in. I got promoted pretty quickly multiple times, and then I started to move up in my field. I started again [to] have that desire to go back to school and learn more. I had more focus in terms of I was not just gonna go get my master’s because I thought, “This is awesome.” There [was] something more out there. I felt, this time, like there was a purpose behind it.

Even though I had that guy [who] was the bane of my existence for the whole time we worked together, I really attributed that relationship to really giving me that push to not be afraid to pursue my master’s. When things got hard, I just kept thinking, “Okay, he did it,” and then it kind of turned into a game that my husband and I had. We would identify somebody else we knew [who] had like an advanced degree, [and] then it was like, “Holy crap, okay, this kind of added to my sense self-efficacy.” I know that I am more with it than these people, and yet they have their [advanced] degrees.

Jessica looked for a PhD program that fit her needs, and many people supported and encouraged her to apply. She stated,

[Someone] talked to me about online schools, and I was like, “Those aren’t a real thing. I don’t want to do that.” And he was like, “No, [they’re] very real. I mean, there are obviously some programs out there that you want to stay away from, but [online programs are] a viable option. You should really look into that.”

I was like, “Okay,” but he was pretty persistent. He would email me like, “Hey, have you looked at [programs]? What programs have you looked at?” He would send me some programs that he knew people who were in the programs vouched for. He did that multiple times, so that kind of motivated me [and] got me like excited [and thinking], like, “Okay, this can happen. This is doable.” That kind of took me aback that I had so many people reaching out to me to support me, so that gave me the *gananas* to do it.

Self-reflection enabled Jessica to stay motivated in the PhD program. She stated,

For one of my classes, we had to do a reflection and talk about why we were there, why we applied for the program, and what our goals [were and what we wanted] to get out of it. I really kind of had to stick with that, with my feelings, and what I really wanted for myself and why I was doing [the program]. That was really helpful.

I think [reflection is] so important for anybody who's getting ready to start a PhD program. [It's important] to reflect back on [your goals] throughout and update [the reflection] as you go through [the process]. [That] really helped to center me back [and think about] what [I was] there [in the program] for and that it was what I wanted. When I started to think of these things that were challenging, I felt overwhelmed. [Then], I would reflect back on that and see how [it was] in line with why I was there. [The reflection] would help me to kind of be like, "Okay, this is worth it. It's for you. This is what you wanted."

Jessica felt motivated and considered her sacrifices to attain a doctoral degree worthwhile when she heard her daughter wanted to do the same thing:

Hearing my daughter say she [wants to] get her doctorate and her having the knowledge of what that path is going to look like for her [and] taking her to research conferences with me so she can see what it's about—that, in itself, has been [great] as a mother. I keep saying it's for me, but even just knowing how it's impacted her [and] my son, too, [is great]. But, as a female[myself], I feel more so [it's important] for [my daughter] to know that it's possible for her.

Jessica also relied on the support of her husband, who took care of the kids and told her it was "okay to miss" family events. She said,

Support in that way [from my husband] has been helpful. I didn't need support like, "Let me read this article for you and tell you what it means." I needed, "Hey, it's cool. I'll take care of you." [I needed someone to] take my kids somewhere so [I] don't have to." [I wanted to hear], "Hey, don't feel bad about missing this event," or, "Hey, you're doing great, and I'm proud of you." That's really what I needed for myself [and] my ability to continue.

The PhD Space. Jessica said that, at times, she had "no one to talk to" who understood her experiences in the doctoral program. Sometimes, she felt challenged by her family's lack of understanding of the additional things she needed to do outside of classes and her dissertation. She said people could understand the program unless they were a PhD student or had finished their degrees:

[It] was a challenge not having anybody at home to talk to. The challenge of the experience was overwhelming. Fortunately, being in the cohort [helped]. [I] certainly [was] not bonding with everybody, but I felt like I bonded with enough people to where we kind of had our support group together. We were able to create networks and study together and just [create] support systems. That, for me, was huge because I was able to

rely on somebody. I was able to reach out to people for support to kind of navigate that space.

Explaining to my family [was hard], like, “I can’t [do something], [I] have to work on this paper.” And [if] it [was] during a break, [they would say, “You’re] not even in school right now.” It’s like, “Well, no.” [They would ask], “How much is that [paper] worth?” And it’s like, “Not only am I not getting a grade for this, but I have to pay \$400 to go to this conference to present it if it gets accepted.”

That was something that my family was not on board with. They didn’t get it. [They were] like, “How can you give your time to do that, but you won’t come over to do this with us?” That was a challenge.

Summary

The goal of this study was to understand Latinas’ experiences in seeking and completing their doctoral degrees. This study focused on the factors that enabled the participants to stay motivated. The research was a means of supporting and increasing the number of Latinas completing doctoral degrees. This chapter presented the salient takeaways from the testimonios of Latinas who sought and completed their doctoral degrees. The participants explained the barriers, support, and motivations they encountered that obstructed and enabled them to finish their doctoral degrees.

First, the participants described the barriers to completing their degrees and how they addressed them. The participants also discussed the motivational factors in their educational journeys. They spoke about the importance of support systems comprised of husbands, friends, coworkers, parents, and family members. Finally, the women stressed the importance of understanding the realities of a PhD program. The Latinas in this study questioned how people could understand what that PhD space looked like unless they had been through the process. The participants did not have identical stories; however, they all discussed how they stayed focused and motivated, their support systems and barriers, and how they successfully achieved their doctoral degrees.

Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher was to design the study, develop the interview questions, collect the data, and analyze the participants' information. As I collected the data through interviews, I listened carefully to these Latinas' stories. I remained neutral, taking the participants' stories and presenting them from the women's perspectives by reporting the findings and interpreting their stories through the LatCrit and testimonios lenses.

I self-identify as a Latina. After conducting a DNA test of my ancestry, I discovered my ethnic breakdown: 56% Indigenous Americas—Mexico, 25% Spain, and 19% a mix of different areas. My educational background includes an undergraduate degree and graduate degree, and I was a doctoral candidate at the time of the study. I also had 16 years of leadership experience in business and worked to develop many other women into leadership positions or guide them to complete their degrees.

As a woman who identifies as a Latina, it was my duty to preserve and maximize the authenticity of all participants and present their stories from their unique points of view. The goal of the research was to remain true to the participants and retell their stories as authentically as possible. I brought all of myself to the study, and I could not separate myself from the research because I was also a Latina pursuing a terminal degree. As I conducted the study, some of the participants' stories resonated with me and my trajectory to a terminal degree.

Conclusions

Reason for My Study

From my kindergarten through high school years, my parents, family, and high school counselor expected me to go to college after high school. On my mother's side, some had acquired a college education in Mexico, while others did not attend college at all. My mother earned a Bachelor of Economics from Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico, and my grandmother obtained a secretarial associate's degree from Bernardino del Raza. Some of the family on my father's side acquired some college education in the United States. The family members who did not attend college did not do so for at least two reasons: the need to help the family financially or for some reason or no desire to go to college. The strongest memory I have of my grandmothers was their family focus, as they seemingly never thought about themselves. If they had desired a college education, I would not have known: For both of my grandmothers, the family came first. They prioritized taking care of their husbands, children, and grandchildren.

I started my doctoral program in Fall 2011. During my coursework, my professors always emphasized writing papers based on the topic that would one day be the concern of the dissertation. One professor suggested having an idea for the dissertation topic from the outset. As I started to read on my topic of interest—Latinas completing their doctoral degrees—I came across many articles about the underrepresentation of Latinx in higher education, which I found interesting. I investigated the topic in greater depth as I continued my coursework at the University of the Incarnate Word.

The literature showed significant differences in the educational attainment of Latinx compared to all other ethnicities. Researchers have focused on Latinx attainment of bachelor's degrees and the barriers to their achievement in higher education. The majority of the literature I

reviewed suggested Latinx underrepresentation in education reflected the oppression of Latinx at all levels of education. Testimonios in previous research have shown systematic racism and bias toward the Latinx community. However, I struggled to accept these findings, as I came from a community where people who looked like me (Brown, Latinx, Mexican American) were lawyers, doctors, mayors, politicians, business owners, and teachers. From my perspective and based on my experience, I did not see significant differences in the educational attainment of the Latinx community. I believed anyone who desired to attend college or university could; however, students had to learn how to get into college. I assumed that students needed to work hard, study, create a plan, and execute it to earn a degree.

As a result, I was shocked by everything I read about educational attainment in the Latinx community. I read about how many high school counselors direct Latinx students to trade degrees or tell Latinas to become secretaries. I expected to use the stories I collected in my research to illustrate systemic racism and bias and leverage the stories to influence change. The research and other things were my motivation for investigating Latina students and how they have successfully acquired their advanced degrees. Therefore, I focused on the conditions, contexts, decisions, and behaviors of successful Latinas who had achieved terminal degrees.

Discussion of Conclusions

This section presents the study's conclusions on how the participating Latinas successfully acquired their advanced degrees based on their testimonios. Analyzing the testimonios suggested that cultural obligations might be unrecognizable for various reasons, including (a) cultural obligations are the norm in Latinx culture, (b) the participants could have acculturated their gender roles, (c) the participants felt motivated because they wanted to be agents of change for other Latinx students, and (e) positive reinforcement from a young age

produces resilience. Additionally, this section presents my observations based on my experience as a Latina acquiring a doctoral degree. From my perspective of participant-observer, the interpretation of the participants' testimonios included my experiences. Creswell (2012) explained the participant-observer role:

To truly learn about a situation, you can become involved in activities at the research site. This offers excellent opportunities to see experiences from the view of participants. A participant observer is an observational role adopted by researchers when they take part in activities in the setting they observe. (p. 214)

Conclusions From the Participants' Testimonios

In their testimonios, no participants indicated they dealt with the cultural obligations of familismo and marianismo. None of the participants reported that their parents, spouses, or children expected them to prioritize family needs over their educational goals. Familismo and marianismo are standard cultural expectations of the Latinx culture; however, the participants discussed familismo and marianismo as overstated or even outdated cultural characteristics. My interpretation of cultural obligations (familismo and marianismo) is that the modern meanings of these terms have changed due to changing times; for example, each generation has moved further away from traditional cultural perspectives. Another possible explanation is that the participants did not explicitly mention cultural obligations because they were unrecognizable parts of their lives.

Although all nine participants identified as Latinas, they might not have perceived cultural obligations, instead seeing them as cultural norms. The participants did mention their mothers, husbands, children, and family members; however, their verbiage, tone, and body language did not indicate that caring for family was an obligation. For example, the participants with children mentioned wanting to remain present and available for their children. Some of the participants with younger children wanted to finish their doctoral programs before their children

started school, whereas those with older children wanted to finish by the time their children graduated high school. For example, Christine started her doctoral program when her daughter was 9 months old. Christine said she wanted to finish her degree so she could spend time with her daughter, saying, “I want to be done [with my degree] by the time she’s ready for piano lessons and dance lessons.” Another participant, Jessica, wanted to finish her degree by the end of her son’s senior year so she could support him after high school. She said, “My goal was to be done [with my degree] by his senior year, [or] at least not to have a heavy load, because I wanted to be there for everything.” The participants talked about their families and who was part of their lives while completing their degrees.

Another conclusion is that the participants had acculturated to the U.S. tradition of both men and women attending college and acquiring well-paying jobs to bring income into their households. The participants related how their parents emphasized the importance of getting good grades in K–12 so they could attend college. The Latinas reported that their parents told them to focus on doing well in school. They considered their parents’ encouragement foundational to aspiring to college, not just with a bachelor’s degree but also a terminal degree. For example, Yolanda said, “My dad was like, ‘Your job is to get good grades.’ In high school, I didn’t have a part-time job or anything like that. Both [of my] parents were very focused on us in our academics.” Nancy described how her mother always checked up on her: “My mom has always been that constant [supporter]. I went through college. She was the one supporting me, making sure I had money, making sure that I was still doing what I needed to do to finish a degree.”

This study’s results suggest that as part of acculturation, Latinx may have shifted their cultural views of gender roles. The testimonios indicate that Latinas might fill gender roles as

daughters, wives, mothers, and caregivers with a more nontraditional, non-stereotypical approach than indicated by the previous research. Many Latinas still take on traditional roles as wives and mothers, but their modern roles include acting as students and career women. Latinas often multitask, using a nontraditional approach to fulfill their obligations as wives, mothers, students, and career women. Latinas do not have to limit their aspirations, and they can have it all if they desire. The participants' testimonios suggested a modern ideology of gender and gender roles, which could have been another reason for the women's success in completing their degrees.

The participants saw their doctoral degrees as an opportunity to inspire others in their families and gain permission and access to decision-making positions related to the Latinx population. The participants' desire to become examples of what Latinx can achieve and be agents of change for others like them enabled them to accomplish their advanced degrees. For example, Joan stated, "I wanted to be an example for my students [who] had the same experience that I did [and] for students [who] were Latino [and] first-generation college students." Other participants felt motivated to finish because they did not want their family members to see them giving up on their aspirations. Sandra stated, "I guess I wanted to make sure that [my nephews] knew I wasn't a quitter." Jessica took her daughter with her to conferences to be surrounded by other successful Latinas.

In their testimonios, the participants talked about *ganas*, or the desire to make a difference for their families, their communities, and the Latinx people. The participants believed that no matter the difficulties in acquiring their terminal degrees, they needed to give it all to get it all (*ganas*), and that they could only accomplish their goals by earning their doctorates. For example, Christine stated, "The tone always changed when they knew that you were working on a doctorate." Similarly, Joan said, "You have to have a title to be allowed at the table where

decisions are made [and] those decisions are about us [Latinx].” Therefore, a conclusion of this study is that the participants wanted to become agents of change and for others to take them seriously. The results suggest the participants believed having their terminal degrees would allow them to speak up and access places where others made important decisions about issues related to the Latinx community.

Finally, the testimonios indicate that, from a young age, the participants received support and could accomplish any educational goals they set for themselves. When the participants were children, their friends, families, and teachers reinforced their abilities or discussed the importance of doing well in K–12 so they could attain the fundamentals needed to succeed in college. The positive reinforcement from a young age produced resilience in the participants, which contributed to their success despite the challenges they faced. Table 14 presents testimonios showing how the participants felt while completing their doctoral degrees.

Researcher Participant Observer

As I listened to the participants’ testimonios, I marveled at the similarities of their stories to mine. I expected different results because the extant research indicated that Latinas face barriers preventing them from completing their degrees at any level. Additionally, I had witnessed the barriers found in the job industry by previous researchers; therefore, I assumed Latinas could not successfully complete their degrees because of these barriers, both in academia and the workplace. In the workplace, I saw more men get promoted quicker into leadership roles than the women I knew who could also fulfill the jobs. Previous research indicated that Latinas faced many barriers and set aside their educational goals. However, my story enabled me to believe that if I had achieved my bachelor’s and master’s degrees and gained admittance into a doctoral program, so could any Latina. The participants’ outcomes aligned with my conclusions

and beliefs. Starting from the first interview, I listened to each participant's story. The first participant had experiences similar to my own

Table 14

Process of Doctoral Degree: Testimonios of Participants

Participant	Statement
Claudia	"Man, I really don't know if I can do this like do, I have the stamina do I have the patience, do U have the intellect to be a PhD."
Christine	"It was a very long and lonely...but yeah, I mean I was ready to quit at least three different times"
Carolina	"Headspace defiantly lengthen the trajectory to finish"
Sandra	"Yeah the first year was a little rough um not the only because I was away from home but just it was such a transition"
Yolanda	"I think just life like I don't want to read I want to go do something fun I want to go to the movies"
Jessica	"Having to sacrifice a lot of things that I didn't even realize would be a sacrifice you know like I knew it was gonna be hard I knew there was gonna be a lot of work but I didn't really understand"
Nancy	"There was several moments where I didn't want to finish where I was defiantly thinking about not finishing"
Joan	"But when you think about it's not hard, it's about doing the classes and it's about writing the dissertation. And doing the investigation, the process the navigation the what is next, umm it's hard but it shouldn't be it shouldn't be it should be as simple as the 4-year graduation plan"

while growing up: family expectations about getting an education, people who supported her, and my exact reason for getting a doctoral degree. I wanted to be an example to my family and community and make a difference one day as an agent of change. Therefore, this research showed that Latinas can achieve terminal degrees.

The participants also had familismo and marianismo testimonios similar to my own experiences. No parent, spouse, or child expected me to set aside my educational goals for family needs. My parents always talked about the importance of getting good grades in K–12 to succeed in college. They did not expect me to get married immediately after high school or have children

right away. Additionally, my parents did not set expectations for me to be their caregiver when they grew old. Instead, they told me I had one job: to get good grades and go to college.

When I became a mother and then a wife, my husband never discouraged me from continuing my education. In the first half of my doctoral program, I was a single woman and focused on work and school. In the second half of the program, I met my husband and had a baby. Like many of the participants, I also had to miss out on family events or time with family because I had to write or edit my dissertation. As the participants mentioned, they looked at the bigger picture. Similarly, I also saw completing my doctoral degree as consisting of small sacrifices for a larger prize.

Like my participants, I wanted to earn my doctorate to make a difference in the world as an agent of change. I wanted the title to have permission to be in rooms where decisions are made, and I want the access to make change. I cannot cure the underrepresentation of Latinx in educational achievements, but I can find treatments to make microchanges that affect the macrolevels of the educational achievements of all minorities. I also want to be an example to my family and those in my community that they can do anything; it is all about giving it *ganas*. I especially want my children to understand they can accomplish anything they want and that their culture or ethnicity should never be the reason they cannot complete their goals.

Like the participants in this study, I also received support during my K–12 years and my bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs. In K-12, particularly high school, the focus was on college. In the ninth grade, the students at my school started binders of information about the careers they found interesting and the universities they wanted to attend. By senior year, the students selected the top three schools they wanted to attend and worked toward the universities' required grade point averages and standardized test scores. No one told me I needed to go to a

certain school or select a particular career because I was a woman or a minority. Instead, the focus was on earning the grades to meet university requirements and gain admittance.

In conclusion, listening to the participants' stories and comparing them to mine suggests that Latinas no longer see cultural obligations as duties they need to fulfill. However, I also believe there are Latinx cultural expectations embedded within the study participants and myself.

According to CRT, racism is a phenomenon socially embedded in society and therefore invisible and normal. I truly believe the participants and I no longer see cultural obligations and gender roles as barriers but as embedded in normal, everyday activities. I drew this conclusion by asking interview questions to elicit genuine answers, not asking leading questions, such as "Did you feel discriminated against because you are a Latina or do you believe cultural expectations were a barrier to finishing your doctoral degree?" Positive reinforcement from a young age shows Latinx they can do anything. This study's findings suggest that understanding and not necessarily adopting Latinx cultural obligations, not allowing gender to indicate the path for success, and wanting to make a change for other Latinx enabled the participants to complete their doctoral degrees successfully.

Limitations of the Study

This study produced transferable findings because all the participants self-identified as Latinas. Qualitative research is not about building results to make generalizable statements. The goal of qualitative research is to conduct an exploratory, descriptive study and illustrate ideas useful for facilitating the success of and supporting particular populations. Many of the participants came from Latinx subgroups: six had parents from Mexico, one had parents from El Salvador, one had parents from Uruguay, and one said her family was born and raised in Texas. Additionally, five of the participants attended doctoral programs in Texas, while four attended

programs throughout the United States. Half of the participants were first-generation students to attend college.

This study produced results useful for further research. Due to the diversity of the participants, future researchers could provide additional insight into how Latinas successfully acquire advanced degrees. The study produced results transferable to women with the same background and the broader category of Latinas in general. The participants' stories resonated with me due to my own experiences obtaining a doctoral degree, which further suggests the transferability of the results.

The participants sought to make a difference within their communities and see more Latinas complete terminal degrees. They told me they were happy to share their stories and hoped they could help bridge the gaps of educational attainments within the Latinx community. The nine participants were a small sample of the population; however, their stories had a similar trajectory. Their trajectories also resonated with me because of my experience with my terminal degree. I conducted this research to discern if my experience with attaining a terminal degree was an anomaly and examine the accuracy of previous research about the barriers Latinas face to accomplishing terminal degrees.

Dependability

I am confident in the results of this study and its dependability due to how I conducted the research. The study provided the participants with a space to tell their stories. Additionally, the interviews did not include leading questions. Each interview commenced with an opening conversation, during which each participant suggested using her real name or a pseudonym. I read the study's purpose and research questions in my IRB subject consent form to the participants and then said, "I am here to listen to your story and document it." Member checking

also occurred during the interviews for clarification. One type of member checking was having participants review their mini-biographies to ensure accuracy. Chapter 4 also provided detailed information on the processes used to collect and interpret each participant's interview. Therefore, using the same approach to talk to the participants would produce similar results. Appendix B provides the participants' transcribed interviews as evidence of the testimonios.

The purpose of choosing testimonios as the method was to uncover the truth about a group historically oppressed in attaining terminal degrees. The participants' firsthand testimonios were the means to understand their journeys and experiences of completing their terminal degrees. Scholars have used the testimonio method to advocate for social justice, bring attention to injustices, and collect stories from historically oppressed peoples. The testimonios in this study suggest that cultural rules are no longer barriers to Latinas achieving terminal degrees. The testimonios showed the participants had created something new and helped clear the path so other Latinas could achieve their educational goals.

Credibility

The study produced credible information because all the participants expressed their desire to participate in the research and share their stories voluntarily. The consistency of their stories also suggests the study's credibility. Achieving data saturation after nine interviews indicates the credibility of the information. As indicated in the section on dependability, I had a connecting conversation at the start of each interview to get to know each participant. The goal was for the participants to feel comfortable sharing their stories. All the participants expressed their excitement to share their stories and their desire for more Latinas to attain doctoral degrees. I also found the participants' stories credible because of their similarities to my own journey. As indicated earlier in this chapter, most participants shared their K–12 experiences, which I

documented because they provided me with future research ideas. All the participants found time in their schedules to contact me and participate in interviews. The participants' willingness to share their time indicates that their investment in this research consisted of more than the methodology. Finally, the authenticity of the study consists of integrity and credibility. A goal of the study was to capture the participants' stories by not going beyond or adding to the data. Trust in the information provided credibility to the research. This study produced believable results anchored in the information received from the participants.

Theoretical Implications

In some way, CRT and LatCrit cannot explain all the participants' experiences. However, this research did produce a counter-narrative to the expected results. According to McCoy and Rodrick (2015), CRT focuses on seven key points. First, racism is a socially constructed phenomenon; this study did not focus on how one group is superior to another. The participants in this study brought up incidents of racial discrimination. For example, one wanted to focus her dissertation on race and faced opposition; however, she persisted and completed her study on the desired topic. The participants did not elaborate on the incidents of racial discrimination because they expected me to understand as a fellow Latina. Another reason racism was not a topic in the testimonios could have been that it is a socially embedded and thus invisible and regular phenomenon in society. The participants in this study might have seen discrimination and racism as normal and something they needed to get past to move forward.

A second key point of CRT is collecting "experiential knowledge" from people of color to understand their experiences in education. This study consisted of collecting stories through the participants' testimonios to gain a critical understanding of how Latinas can successfully accomplish their doctoral degrees despite the socially constructed racism. Therefore, this study

could provide important insights to people at all educational levels (K–12 and beyond) who have a role in influencing and supporting Latinas.

Third, the interest convergence principle of CRT, in which people of color want to achieve equal advancement and power, emerged in the participants' stories. All the participants discussed wanting their doctorates to achieve equality in academia and gain access to important decision-making places. The participants wanted people to treat them differently because they had "Dr." in front of their names, and they wanted to help other Latinas achieve the same.

The fourth principle of CRT theory, intersectionality, consists of how women of color experience oppression due to their identities as women, daughters, mothers, caregivers, and wives and the intersections of those identities. According to Crenshaw (1991), women of color experience discrimination based on sex, race, class, and gender; often, these factors overlap and have an effect on women. The participants did not state their identities as a problem; however, when listening to their stories, I heard the effects of the intersection of being women, daughters, mothers, caregivers, and wives in their lives and how they needed to manage all aspects of those identities. Most of the Latinas mentioned and figured out how to handle being minorities at their workplaces and schools. The participants knew they had entered a system built for White people, but they did not define the future of their education based on this, a finding that also related to the fifth point in the CRT theory. The CRT principle of Whiteness as property indicates that Whiteness has historically been a way to dominate owning property and attaining an education.

The sixth CRT principle, critique of liberalism, indicates that attainability can occur gradually over the years. The sixth principle aligns with the stories of the participants in this study. Although many participants doubted if they could attain their terminal degrees, they continued on their educational journeys with support and motivation. The seventh key point of

CRT—a continuous commitment to resisting inequalities and creating access—aligns with all nine participants’ stories, as they showed their commitment to push through barriers and access their terminal degrees at any cost. The findings suggest that the participants succeeded despite systemic challenges of race and racism, a finding that aligns with CRT. Therefore, the study produced a counternarrative from the stories of these women. This study provided a foundation for a counterstory that did not necessarily apply to the experiences of this study’s participants.

The participants’ stories produced a counterstory, or a different narrative of the experiences of Latinas completing their terminal degrees. This study was a means of exposing the counterstory because “counterstories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32).

Solorzano and Yosso (2002) said,

Counter-stories serve at least four functions as follows: (a) they can build community among those at the margins of society by putting a human and familiar face to educational theory and practice, (b) they can challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society’s center by providing a context to understand and transform established belief systems, (C) they can open new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing possibilities beyond the ones they live and demonstrating that they are not alone in their position, and (d) they can teach others that by combining elements from both the story and the current reality, one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone. (p. 36)

The participants in this study revealed a different narrative of completing their terminal degrees, perhaps due to enculturation and acculturation. Enculturation was a possibility for the participants because most were first-generation U.S. citizens; therefore, U.S. culture was the first they were born into and experienced. All the participants identified as Latinas, a requirement for this research; however, the original narrative of most Latinas failing to complete terminal degrees could have changed since the previous research. Second, acculturation may have also occurred because the participants changed certain Latinx cultural norms and found their own

way to identify with both the U.S. and Latinx cultures. The counterstories in this study could be a way to start changing the dialogue about Latinx lacking the ability to complete terminal or other higher education degrees.

LatCrit is a way to understand the forms of oppression faced by Latinx. The theoretical lens focuses on immigration, language, culture, gender, and sexuality (Elenes & Bernal, 2010) in the context of the Latino/a cultural experience. CRT and LatCrit are productive ways to conceptualize the methodology through storytelling and counterstorytelling to explain their lived experiences (i.e., storytelling, narratives, and testimonios). The testimonios in this study indicate that minorities can overcome years of historical oppression and attain their terminal degrees despite the challenges. This study showed that, historically, social justice has not been part of the U.S. educational system despite the measures taken to address illegally limiting Latinx students' access to education. Latinx students continue to face a disproportionate lack of equitable access in K–12 education. They are the most underrepresented population in educational attainment, with significant differences in the number of degrees conferred compared to other races and ethnicities. However, the stories of the nine Latinas in this study indicate that, despite everything, Latinas can attain their terminal degrees.

Recommendation for Future Research

The analysis of the testimonios showed commonalities between the types of institutions participants attended during their K–12 education. The women mentioned attended private, parochial, or college preparatory K-12 schools. Therefore, the results indicate the need for future research on the differences between Latinas attending private versus public K–12 schools. Future research could indicate the advantages to Latinas attending private schools compared to those at public K–12 institutions. Additionally, scholars could focus on private versus public schools at

the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Such research could show how K–12 institutions can better serve their communities by tailoring their schools to their students’ needs.

Researchers should also reevaluate the cultural and gender norms for Latinas in the Latinx community. Castillo and Hill (2004) discussed the challenges faced by Latinas in “fulfilling” their “traditional” roles while completing higher education. The participants in this study discussed their multiple responsibilities as daughters, wives, mothers, and students, but they never discussed these roles in the context of “fulfilling” or being forced to fill these roles. Therefore, the literature has outdated information on cultural perspectives, specifically on Latinas’ educational aspirations. A recommendation is to research the cultural and gender norms for Latinas in the 21st century. This study’s results suggest the extant literature presents outdated gender roles and norms for Latinas. Therefore, a need exists for further research on how generations of Latinas have lived in the United States. Such research could indicate that the further people are from their home cultures, the more significant the differences in their cultural perspectives. Scholars could also investigate current gender roles and norms by breaking down the culture and ethnicity of each group within the Latinx culture.

The Latinx population consists of 15 subgroups from 15 different countries. Another recommendation for future research is to break down the 15 subgroups to understand the various cultures within the Latinx “categories.” Scholars could first focus on researching and capturing the cultural norms for each subgroup and explore where the people of these 15 subgroups tend to immigrate into the United States. Instead of classifying all Latinx under the same category, researchers should strive to learn more about the 15 subgroups. Such information could enable scholars to research and better understand the specific cultures within the Latinx population.

Summary

At the start of my doctoral journey, I became interested in understanding why Latinas are less likely to attain terminal degrees. The testimonios of this study's participants indicate the need to hear and document more Latinas' successes stories in attaining terminal degrees. The stories of Latinas' degree attainment in higher education could be a way to increase Latinas' terminal degree completion. A need exists to bring these women's stories to students at local high schools in predominately Latino communities to show what Latinx students can achieve if they so desire.

During my PhD program, most of the literature I read about Latinas in higher education focused on the negative aspects of the Latino culture and Latinas. The literature suggested that Latinas' communities told them they needed to become wives and mothers before they became too old, and they would have to be caregivers of their families if they did not marry. Additionally, most of the extant literature I read suggested that family members and friends did not believe Latinas belonged in any level of higher education (i.e., bachelor's, master's, or PhD programs). According to the literature, Latinas would rarely achieve their terminal degrees due to barriers such as the inability to fulfill their duties as wives, mothers, career women, and students while pursuing their education. However, the Latinas in this study explained that although they encountered barriers, they overcame them.

This study showed that the participants connected their successes to their past experiences, which provided them with the tools they needed to achieve their terminal degrees. The majority of the women shared their historical backgrounds, such as their K–12 education, which allowed them to understand the stories of their later achievements in higher education.

The participants connected their past K–12 experiences to their experiences in their doctoral programs.

The participants in this study also reported that their previous or current jobs impacted their doctoral program experiences. Additionally, the participants stated they had people around them who believed in them and their educational goals. This study produced rich information and in-depth stories via the virtual Zoom interviews with the participants. The participants shared their in-depth testimonios because they believed their success stories could encourage more Latinas to pursue their terminal degrees.

The participants provided firsthand accounts of their educational trajectories, including the important contributors and how they achieved their doctorates. Also, the participants dismissed the belief that Latinas should not seek terminal degrees. The participants' stories suggest Latinas can be good daughters, wives, and mothers while seeking their terminal degrees. Through their testimonios, the participants shared their stories of how Latinas can fulfill “traditional” roles while pursuing their educational goals.

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Appendix: Participants Consent Form

Subject Consent to Take Part in a Study of
CAMINOS ABIERTOS PARA LAS LATINAS: STORIES OF LATINA WOMEN TO THE PH.D.

University of the Incarnate Word

Authorized Study Personnel: Jessica Ballesteros, Doctor of Philosophy, Student
Dreeben School of Education
210-710-3413
jerangel@student.uiwtx.edu
Dr. Artur E. Hernandez, NCSP, NCC, Professor
Dreeben School of Education
210-283-6409
aeherna8@uiwtx.edu

Key Information: Your consent is being sought for a research study. The purpose of this study is to document the experiences of Latina women who currently live in the United States who sought and completed their doctoral degrees in education (Doctor of Philosophy). The focus is on documenting and analyzing your journeys from start to finish, including the process, you as Latina women followed to seek and complete your doctoral degrees. The Latina women who choose to participate in this research study need only to meet the following criteria, Latina/Hispanic female; completed their doctoral degree in the last five years; worked full time while enrolled in the doctoral program; were single or married at the time of attending their doctoral program. I will use testimonios as a methodological design approach to illuminate and documented your experiences as Latinas on embarking on the challenges of attaining your doctorate degree.

If you agree to participate in this study, the project will involve:

- Procedures will include in depth recorded interviews
- 1-3 number of visits are required
- These visits will take 1 hour in total
- There are minimal risks associated with this study
- You will not be paid for your participation
- Your participation is voluntary, and you may decide not to participate at any time

Invitation: You are invited to volunteer as one of 1-15 subjects in the research project named above. The information in this form is meant to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please ask.

Why are you being asked to be in this research study? You are being asked to be in this study because you have completed a doctoral degree (PhD.). The participants for this research will be Latina women who are currently living in the United States.

What is the reason for doing this research study?

The goals of this research study are to evaluate Latina's experience in seeking and completing a doctoral degree, what kept them motivated, and to acquire knowledge to increase the number of Latinas completing doctoral degrees in the future. For the purposes of this research, it is essential to select participants who are willing to share their information-rich experiences so the researcher can gain an in-depth understanding to answer the research question. By discovering and identifying the extent to which the various systems influenced the Latinas in finishing their degrees, this study seeks to identify and mitigate the barriers they encountered to enable more Latinas to complete their doctoral degrees.

What will be done during this research study? I will be conducting in-depth interviews in order to document Latinas' experiences of seeking and completing a PhD. I will schedule all interviews for no more than one hour, due to the current COVID-19 outbreak, social distancing is required, I will be collecting data by conducting interviews virtually. For example, via zoom, face time, or any software that will keep social distance as asked by the CDC and other government entities. I will keep these recordings stored in a password protected hard drive and all interviews will be kept for one year. Once interviews are transcribed, they will only be used by me (Jessica Ballesteros). If you prefer not to be audio-recorded, I will take notes instead. I may quote your remarks in presentations or articles resulting from this work. A pseudonym will be used to protect your identity, unless you specifically request that you be identified by your true name.

What are the possible risks of being in this study?

Your participation in this study has no risk to minimal risk. This is due possible to recollection of past trauma.

What are the possible benefits to you?

You are not expected to receive any benefits from being in this study.

What are the possible benefits to other people?

The benefits to society may include, looking at commonalities and differences in each of the stories of the Latina women completing their doctoral degrees. Other Latinas wanting to further their education can also read these stories and see how it is possible to attain such degrees regardless of ethnicity or background.

What will being in this research study cost you?

There is no cost to you to be in this research study.

Will you be compensated for being in this research study?

You will not be paid for your participation in this research study.

How will information about you be protected? Everything we learn about you in the study will be confidential. The only persons who will have access to your research records are the study personnel, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and any other person, agency, or sponsor as required by law. If we publish with results of the study, you will not be identified in any way, unless you give explicit permission for this below.

The data will be stored electronically on a secure server and will only be seen by the research team during the study and for 1 year after the study is complete.

What will happen if you decide not to be in this research study or decide to stop participating once you start? You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can stop being in this research study at any time, for any reason. You do not have to answer any question you do not want to answer. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator or with the University of the Incarnate Word. You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled. If you decide to withdraw from the study, any information collected from the participant will be used if the participant decides to withdraw before finishing the study.

What should you do if you have a problem or question during this research study? If you have a problem as a direct result of being in this study, you should immediately contact one of the people listed at the beginning of this consent form.

If you have any questions now, feel free to ask us. If you have additional questions about your rights or wish to report a problem that may be related to the study, please contact the University of the Incarnate Word Institutional Review Board office at 210-805-3036 or 210-805-3565.

Optional Study Elements

Consent for future use of data

Initial one of the following to indicate your choice:

_____ I give permission for my deidentified data to be used in the future for additional analysis or other relevant research studies. I understand that no additional informed consent for this use will be sought. I understand that my deidentified data can be stored indefinitely.

_____ I give my permission for my data to be used for this research study only. I do not give permission for any future use beyond the scope of this research study. I understand that my data will be destroyed within 1 year(s) after completion of this study.

Consent for use of contact information to be contacted about participation in other studies

Initial one of the following to indicate your choice:

_____ I agree to allow the researchers to use my contact information collected during this study to contact me about participating in future research studies.

_____ I do not agree to allow the researchers to use my contact information collected during this study to contact me about participating in future research studies.

Consent

Your signature indicates that you (1) consent to take part in this research study, (2) that you have read and understand the information given above, and (3) that the information above was explained

to you, and you have been given the chance to discuss it and ask questions. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

Jessica Ballesteros

Name of Principal Investigator/Designee

Signature of Principal Investigator/Designee

Date



IRB Approved
Approval # 20-03-03
Date 3/18/2020