

# The Influence of Family Dynamics on Ethnic Identity Among Adult Latinas

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**Abstract** The literature on the development of ethnic identity within the young adult years and during childhood is plentiful. There is less research that examines how this development continues beyond young adult or college years. Research suggests that major life events experienced in adulthood could cause individuals to enter a period of identity reconstruction, yet little is known about this process. Because family and/or familism has been established as an important aspect of Latinos' identities and lived experiences, this study seeks to examine the dimensions around family dynamics and their potential influences on ethnic identity development processes among adult Latinas. Findings indicate that Latinas often make sense of their ethnic identity when major life events associated with family dynamics occur; such as marriage, childbearing, and negotiating relationships with family members as culture is being transmitted across several generations. These findings have implications for understanding adult education students as well as considering the influence of education on the family dynamics of Latinas.

**Keywords** Family dynamics · Ethnic identity · Latinas

## Introduction

Understanding the identity development of adult Latinas is important to consider for various reasons. First, national trends indicate that Latinas (females) are outperforming Latinos (males) in educational institutions (NCES 2009; Watford et al. 2006). In 2007 for example, about 61% of the bachelor's degrees conferred to those of Hispanic descent were earned by women. And Latinas accounted for about 65% of the master's degrees conferred to Hispanics in that same year (NCES 2009). The gender disparity is smaller when looking at doctoral degrees conferred, but slightly more Hispanic women (56%) earned doctoral degrees in 2007 than Hispanic men. However, these gender disparities among the Latino population in doctoral production could be seen as concentrated in certain fields. More Latinos, for example, earned doctoral degrees in physical sciences and engineering than Latinas, while more Latinas earned doctoral degrees in social sciences and education (Watford et al. 2006). Since a growing number of Latinas hold post-secondary degrees, it is necessary to carefully consider the gender-specific research that encompasses the Latino/a culture.

To understand the potential challenges adult women may experience with regard to ethnic identity developmental tasks, more research is needed. Some have found that Latinas have additional issues to consider during the college years in comparison to white men and women and Latino men (Rodriguez et al. 2000). These issues or stress factors include lack of financial resources, academic issues, gender-role stereotyping, and family obligations and expectations (Rodriguez et al. 2000). The increase in Latinas in education combined with the little research that

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considers their gendered experiences prompts a need to understand the family, work, and general life experiences of Latinas, and the role education may have on their lives.

This need frames the questions of interest in this study. This study examines the dimensions around family dynamics and their potential influences on ethnic identity development processes among adult educated Latinas. Using open-ended survey questions, participants were asked to respond to general questions about identity. During data analysis, the research team found that family dynamics played a major role in Latinas' understandings of their identity. More specifically, we found that Latinas often make sense of their ethnic identity while they negotiate relationships with family members (i.e., parents, spouses, and children) and during the process of transmitting culture across several generations.

### Theoretical Framework

Ethnic identity is typically understood as an individual's sense of belonging to part of an ethnic group (Bernal et al. 1993; Phinney 1995; Phinney and Ong 2007). And ethnic groups (or ethnicity) are defined as individuals who share common cultural characteristics such as language, food, and other customs (Atkinson et al. 1993; Phinney 1995). As such, Latino ethnic identity is conceptualized as an individual's sense of belonging to the pan-ethnic group labeled "Latino" that is commonly used in the USA. This term is used to refer to individuals of Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban descent, along with those from other Latin American countries. While this pan-ethnic term hides the heterogeneity of the Latino population in the USA, even with respect to ethnicity, it has become a useful term when referencing this population (Gimenez 1997).

The development of ethnic identity among the Latino population is sometimes discussed under the concept of acculturation (Keefe and Padilla 1987). Berry (1980, 2003) has defined acculturation as the change in one or more groups that follows when two cultural groups come into contact. As such, those who have examined Latino ethnic identity are interested in the extent to which Latinos have remained culturally distinct and to what extent have they acculturated to the American way of life. Keefe and Padilla's (1987) work, for example, has shown that level of acculturation and Latino ethnic identity work hand in hand. They found that the most unacculturated Latinos in their study identified as Mexican and primarily identified with Mexican culture. Though few in number, the least likely to possess very little affinity with the Mexican culture mostly identified themselves as Americanized (Keefe and Padilla 1987). Most Latinos in their sample, on the other hand, could be labeled as acculturated or embracing a

"bicultural" identity. While studies that examine the extent to which Latinos have acculturated have proved to be helpful in understanding Latino ethnic identity, they do not necessarily address how shifts in or re-evaluations of ethnic identity can continue well into adulthood, even when certain levels of acculturation have been reached.

Identity development later in life has been addressed in the literature, but few studies have specifically focused on the developmental processes for Latinos in adulthood. Marcia's (2002) work on the developmental process beyond late adolescence principally guides the conceptualization of this study. Marcia identified that in the later adult years there is an "identity reconstruction" process (p. 15). This process entails an experience that causes disequilibrium in one's life and prompts the individual to enter a re-formation period that promotes some reconstruction of one's identity, but does not create a disintegration of the identity. This process of reconstruction could indicate the possibility of revisiting the previous developmental tasks, as a natural part of the developmental process for adults later in life. Marcia's work suggests that major life events experienced in adulthood could cause individuals to enter this period of reconstruction. Other studies have also explored the issue of change over time with respect to identity. For example, the influence of environment and events were found in Helms' (1995) work, which considered that these factors could cause change in ethnic/racial identity, but did not explore the type of change, the type of events, or the possibility of a reconstruction process within identity development. And neither piece specifically examines the ethnic identity development process for Latinos generally or Latinas specifically.

This study considers the potential influence of family and family dynamics on ethnic identity formation and/or re-evaluation among adult Latinas because the Latino population has traditionally been described as being particularly family oriented or displaying more "familism" or "familialism" than other racial/ethnic groups (Baca Zinn 1982; Marin 1993). Familialism is defined as "that cultural value which includes a strong identification and attachment of individuals with their nuclear and extended families, and strong feelings of loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity among members of the same family" (Marin, p. 184). The literature also suggests that familism is a multidimensional construct that has been measured in a variety of ways (Baca Zinn 1982; Ramirez and Arce 1981). Familism can be measured via demographic trends (i.e., fertility and divorce rates), family structure (i.e., presence of extended family in one household), attitudes, and behaviors (Ramirez and Arce 1981). It has been suggested that first-generation Latinos or immigrants display the highest levels of familism based on these indicators (Landale et al. 2006). In subsequent Latino generations, it is argued, we may begin

to observe a decline in familism as evidenced by lower fertility rates, an increase in the prevalence of divorce and less frequent contact with extended family members (Landale et al. 2006). Others, however, found that acculturation does not cause the Latino family to breakdown (Keefe and Padilla 1987; Rueschenberg and Buriel 1995). Keefe and Padilla even suggest that the process of acculturation makes the local extended family among Latinos grow stronger. Similarly, Rueschenberg and Buriel (1995) found that while the external aspects of family functioning among Latinos do change with acculturation, the internal aspects of family functioning do not. In other words, while more acculturated Latino couples do become more involved with US social systems and institutions (i.e., external functioning), they do not alter their intra-familial relationships or interactions. It was found that acculturated couples continue to be concerned and committed to the family. While these works do not explicitly explore the impact of family dynamics on the development of ethnic identity among adult Latinos, they do suggest that family and/or familism is an important aspect of Latinos' lives.

Chicana and Latina feminists have written about the impact of family on ethnic identity for decades (Anzaldúa 1987; Barrera 1991). While valuable, these works tend to be more reflective in nature rather than research oriented. Some research, however, has shown that family does influence identity (Bernal and Knight 1997; Torres 2004). Bernal and Knight argue that family structure, acculturation, and enculturation all impact children's ethnic identity. Acculturation in that text refers to the influence of non-familial agents (e.g., schools, peers, and the media) on ethnic children. During this process, children learn the values and customs of the dominant culture. Enculturation on the other hand, refers to the "...socialization of ethnic group children in their respective cultures" (16). They argue that children learn about their culture (e.g., values, customs, and language) via their parents and community members. Children's ethnic identity in turn impacts children's ethnically based behaviors. These behaviors are mediated by children's cognitive abilities because negotiating both familial and non-familial influences can be a complex process. This suggests that young children may not be able to articulate issues of ethnic identity, but adolescents and adults are better equipped to understand identity development processes as they occur.

Torres' (2004) work, for example, showed that the level of acculturation among parents influences how Latino first-year college students self-identify with regard to race and/or ethnicity. She found that students of more acculturated parents appear to be comfortable in both the Latino and Anglo culture. In contrast, less-acculturated Latino parents sometimes lacked an understanding about college, which prompted the need for Latinas to negotiate both traditional Latino gender roles as well as

Anglo-oriented gender roles. The works referenced thus far demonstrate that the family, but particularly the level of acculturation within the family, influences ethnic identity as well as gender-role expectations.

The present study recognizes that level of acculturation has impacted how Latinas make sense of their ethnic identity. However, we suggest that once acculturated, Latinas can continue to undergo developmental tasks with respect to their ethnic identity. Furthermore, those developmental tasks can be triggered by family dynamics such as having children or getting married. This is because the bodies of research cited provide support for two major ideas. First, identity development is a process without an endpoint. Thus, identity development or a re-evaluation of identity can occur well into adulthood. Second, family has played a major role on the ethnic identity development among Latinos/as.

### Conceptual Framework and Methodological Considerations

Because of the exploratory nature of this study and the challenges created by using an online survey data collection method, the researchers selected a pragmatist epistemological approach to study the impact of family dynamics on adult Latina identity development. Since the purpose of this study was to reach a potential pool of educated adult Latina participants in a variety of contexts and with varying characteristics in age, levels of education, and regions of the USA; the resource thought to be the most appropriate to achieve this goal was the use of the internet as a data collection instrument. The sample was gathered primarily through alumni or professional listservs in an effort to find individuals with some level of higher education. The electronic submission of responses allowed for greater exposure and multiple contexts to be reached. As a result of using an online survey, the ability to interact with participants was lost and therefore required an epistemological approach that considered the outcomes of the research as more critical than other aspects of the research process (Crotty 1998). Under the pragmatist approach, "the meaning of experience becomes an exploration of culture," thus allowing for the understanding of ideas or concepts to be interchangeable between experience and culture (p. 74). Furthermore, a pragmatist approach places primary focus on the research question(s) and allows the researchers to make decisions around what will help answer the questions of interest by making the questions "more important than either the method or the philosophical worldview that underlies the method" (Creswell and Plano Clark 2007, p. 26). Finally, pragmatism allows researchers to "judge the quality of a study by its intended purposes, available resources, procedures followed and results obtained, all

within a particular context and for a specific audience” (Patton 2002, pp. 71–72).

Once the survey was created, it was uploaded into a web format. An internet link to the survey was created in order to facilitate the electronic submission of responses. This method of data collection allowed for greater exposure to the desired sample and greater possibility of capturing various life experiences. Though not ideal for the exploration of ethnic identity formation, this method of data collection was deemed sufficient for this exploration.

The findings in this study are from a larger study that included both Latino men and women. For this reason, the sampling methods will be explained from a broad perspective and then narrowed to the women considered in the analysis for this particular study. Initially, a purposeful sampling technique (Patton 2002) was used to distribute the electronic survey using various listservs with a Latino/a audience. The primary criterion for selecting a listserv focused on whether members were likely to be non-undergraduate college students to increase the potential of reaching participants beyond the college years. The listservs focused on professionals working with Latino students and Latino alumni groups from various known universities. The listservs selected were known by the researchers and allowed for access to post the request for participation. A snowball technique was used to increase the sample, by asking participants to pass the survey on to others that may be interested in participating.

## Method

The electronic survey used asked a series of demographic (i.e., gender, age, and education) and open-ended questions that guided the participant to explain how she saw herself in regard to her Latino identity. Additional questions asked whether the participants’ perceptions had changed over time. The construction of the survey was influenced by the ideas within narrative inquiry that promote the understanding of individual meaning making by soliciting the stories of the participants (Clandinin and Rosiek 2007). The open-ended questions provided participants an opportunity to write out narratives of personal life experiences relating to their ethnic identity in response to the open-ended questions with instructions to provide examples or explain situations. Participants were asked the following open-ended questions:

- Please share why you chose the description [cultural orientation] above?
- Would your response have been different at another point in your life?
- When you were younger, please explain any events or circumstances that influenced how you self-identify.

- How does identity influence your life goals, relationships, and how you see the world?
- As an adult, “have you experienced a life change that caused you to re-evaluate the meaning of your identity?”

Attention was paid to creating questions that would ask for processes about how understanding of identity occurred. For example, prompts such as “how” or “why” were added to encourage explanations about certain responses.

## Sample

Of the 92 respondents, 13 had incomplete responses and were deemed unusable. Of the 79 remaining participants, we selected the women in the sample to consider the question of interest in this study. Of the 63 Latinas in the sample, most (59%) indicated they were born in the USA with foreign-born parents. The range in educational background included high school equivalency to doctoral degrees, of which the majority of respondents had a master’s degree (41%), with the next largest educational attainment group being bachelor’s degree (33%). The age range of the group was 20–55 with a mean age of 31.86. In the demographic section of the survey, participants were also asked to self-report the representation of Latinos in their communities. Forty-one percent of the participants claimed to live in communities that do not have a critical mass of Latinos (less than 24% of the total population), while 38% of the participants reported living in communities with large Latino populations that comprise 50% or more of the total population. The remaining lived in communities with Latinos representing between 25%, but less than 50% Latino in the population. This distribution of community characteristics provided a diverse sample for consideration. The final demographic question asked participants to choose from four descriptions that pertain to self-identified cultural orientation (Torres 1999). The majority of participants self-identified as having a bicultural orientation (60%) indicating a high comfort level with both Anglo and Latino cultures, 27% selected Latino Orientation indicating higher comfort and preference to associate with Latino culture rather than Anglo culture, and 11% self-selected Anglo orientation indicating their preference and higher comfort level to associate with Anglo culture as opposed to Latino culture. There was one individual who self-identified as marginal, indicating they were not comfortable in either culture—this was an unexpected result and the responses provided did not provide much insight into this choice.

## Analysis

The analysis of the data was done using open and axial coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The techniques used

allowed for the voices of the participants to drive the findings of the study. A research team of six members began with a subsample of 20 surveys and the total responses to the open-ended questions. They completed a first round of open coding to identify the initial ideas that emerged from this subsample. From this initial list of about 20 open codes, the research team regrouped these codes into broader concepts consistent with the axial coding process. Discussions between the research team often revealed that team members were interpreting responses in similar ways but identifying the phenomenon with different labels. Thus, the axial coding process resulted in eight codes, such as Changes in Environment, Definition of Identity, or Family Dynamics, that described the processes experienced by the participants that may have contributed to how they constructed, reconstructed, and made meaning of their Latino identity. The remaining survey responses were coded with these eight codes using ATLAS.ti (1999). One of the eight codes produced during the axial coding process was the “Family Dynamics” code. Generally speaking, the Family Dynamics code reflects when participants talked about family as part of their meaning-making process with respect to ethnic identity. This code was refined into two subthemes, Transmission of Culture and Negotiating Relationships, which allow for a more in-depth understanding of how family dynamics influence Latinas.

## Results

The focus of this study is to explore the influence of family dynamics on the identity development process for Latinas beyond the college years. The findings indicate that approximately 54% ( $N = 34$ ) of the Latinas participating in the study stated that family dynamics influenced their ethnic identity in some capacity. Among these women, two themes emerged to explain how family dynamics influences ethnic identity. The first theme, found in 11 of the 34 surveys, was labeled as *Transmission of Culture* (see Table 1). This family dynamic focused on the intergenerational transmission of culture. More specifically, participants often reflected on how their own parents transmitted the Latino culture or diverse cultural experiences as well as how they currently transmit or plan to transmit aspects of

the Latino culture to their own children. This created a two-way transmission of culture with rich descriptions of these processes. Often, these early experiences caused initial reflections about ethnic identity while more recent experiences with their own children caused these Latinas to re-evaluate or reaffirm their Latino identity.

The second theme of family dynamics, found in 7 of the surveys, is *Negotiating Relationships* (see Table 1). This type of family dynamic described situations or experiences whereby participants made sense of their ethnic identity while negotiating relationships with others, particularly partners or spouses. Negotiation of relationships was particularly common for Latinas who married outside of their racial and/or ethnic group. Additionally, both themes were discussed in six surveys. Each subtheme is described using examples from the data to illustrate the range experiences found during analysis.

### Transmission of Culture: Early Experiences

As mentioned previously, many participants talked about how they learned from their parents to value their own culture and as a result learned to come to terms with their ethnic identity, but they also learned about the cultures of other racial/ethnic groups. Maria, 52 years old, described experiences early in her life as impacting her ethnic identity, but also her comfort level with people of diverse backgrounds.

I was raised in a Polish neighborhood but yet my family followed all of our Hispanic traditions. My father was very involved in the Mexican patriotic organization of Chicago. Growing up I did run into some prejudice but it mostly came from the parents of my friends. Going into high school I interacted with many other cultures and I find them as interesting as I do my own. In my work environment our company’s CEO embraces diversity. We have many organizations representing various cultures. They each hold events that educate the entire work force.

By following “Hispanic traditions,” Maria articulates that her parents valued Latino customs and wished to pass those down to their children. Yet, her environmental influences also promoted an appreciation and understanding of other cultures. Given these experiences, it is not surprising to find that Maria responded that she identified with a bicultural orientation, feeling comfortable with both Anglo and Latino cultures. In this quote, there is also an acknowledgment of racism against Latinos as well as an understanding that these comments came from a generation (parents of her friends) that may not have accepted the diversity that is prevalent now. This comfort with diversity

**Table 1** Frequency of family dynamics code within surveys

Family dynamics code within surveys	34
Transmission of culture	11
Negotiating relationships	7
Transmission of culture and negotiating relationships	6
Other family dynamics	10
Total $N$	63



and interest in other cultures other than her own has also carried over into her childrearing practices. When asked how her ethnic identity influences her life goals, relationships, or how she sees the world, Maria responded by saying, “I promote the values of respecting all cultures through my children.” Many Latinas discussed their childrearing practices or goals when asked how their identity impacts their life goals or relationships. This finding will be discussed in more detail.

Ana, aged 32, also illustrated how early experiences influenced her self-identification. Like Maria, Ana responded that she possessed a bicultural orientation. Her reflections on how her childhood experiences influenced her understanding of ethnic and racial interactions illustrate how cultural transmission can be interpreted.

I think that my biggest influences were my parents and family. In my immediate family we were exposed to the diverse friendships that my parents had. We were able to watch them interact with people of different cultures, and I know that it is these interactions that had a big influence on me. On the other hand, I also witnessed extended family like cousins or aunts/uncles who only had relationships with other Hispanics. I saw and heard how these types of relationships seemed very narrow-minded and exclusive of other ideas and influences. I knew that I would never be that way.

For Ana, the lesson learned from her parents’ behavior is that diverse interactions are better and expose a person to more ideas. This lesson translated in her being able to understand the benefits of diverse interactions. One benefit of these diverse interactions is seen in her response to how her identity impacts how she sees the world. She stated:

I think that because I don’t see the world and other people as “out to get me” or “out to keep me down” I am able to comfortably move in diverse social circles. I feel that I don’t automatically think that a new person is judging me because I am Hispanic, yet I am also not so naive to think that everyone is as open as I am.

These experiences have caused Ana to have a more realistic view of the world, one where not everyone’s actions are racially motivated and some are not so open to diverse experiences or relationships.

In another example, Gabriela, aged 28, describes a similar experience when she was young, yet her transmission of culture was oriented in a different direction.

My parents have always instilled a strong sense of our culture, and therefore, I have never had a time where I did not have a strong self-identity. I have found that

certain political issues (i.e., Prop. 187) always fuel my desire to educate others about misguided stereotypes that tend to permeate the US culture when referring to Hispanics and Latinos, which as a result always reinforces my self-identity.

Through these and other responses, Gabriela illustrated a strong sense of herself as a Latina. In fact, Gabriela self-identifies as Mexican. This identity was initially made strong because of her parent’s influence, yet she chooses to continue with this commitment as an adult. Her desire to “educate others” illustrates that the transmission of culture is not just within families, but can be extended to others through better understanding.

Results also indicate that language is an important component in the transmission of culture. When asked about how early experiences influenced how she self-identified, Emily, aged 33, talked about the importance of becoming bilingual and racial dynamics that influenced how she viewed the transmission of culture.

Most people assume I was Mexican because of my dark features. I have experienced that in both high school and college. I usually try to explain, if asked, that a lot of people are multiracial and there is a difference between cultures. My parents taught me English and Spanish when I was young. One instance comes to mind is that most of my friends were told by parents and or their peers not to speak Spanish as people may look down on them. It was then, I told myself that I would master both languages with a minimal accent and would be proud to speak them both.

Emily illustrates the meaning-making process that Latinas must go through as they decide which interpretation of culture they want to integrate. In this case, her friends’ parents provided a negative view of her culture where she could have seen herself as inferior because she spoke Spanish. In contrast, her parents provided a positive view—in her adult years, Emily can reflect and understand how she chose the positive interpretation rather than the negative interpretation. By maintaining the Spanish language, she transmits a form of culture that is done through language and positive understanding of culture.

#### Transmission of Culture: Childrearing

Transmission of culture also involved Latinas thinking about how they would transmit aspects of the Latino culture to their own children, but most importantly, having children was often cited as a reason for an evaluation or re-evaluation of ethnic identity. When talking about how her identity as a Latina influenced her life goals, relationships,

and how she sees the world, Deborah, 25, talked about being a role model to her children.

It helps me to push harder in everything I do. I want to prove to others that Mexican Americans are smart, they are educated, and they can do anything an Anglo American can do. I am proud to be Mexican–American. I look for positive Mexican–American role models for my boys. I try to show them how great we are because we are Mexican–American.

Deborah finds it important to not only instill pride in her children, but also advocate for Latinos overall. Childrearing was commonly mentioned in the transmission of culture. Another example emerged when considering whether any life change caused Latinas to re-evaluate the meaning of her identity. Raquel, aged 40, mentioned adopting a child as the trigger for this re-evaluation of ethnic identity.

Everything in my life re-affirms my identity. However, having adopted a baby from two Latino ethnicities different from mine, has prompted me to think about her identity and my role in developing it. Should I raised her as a Puerto Rican or should I teach her about her two ethnic backgrounds? I'm not sure yet. My family just tells me to raise her Puerto Rican, but deep inside I know she is not. Should I raise her with pride on the three countries and let her decide how to identify herself? Should I teach her to identify as a Puerto Rican and teach her to respect the other 2 countries? I'm still thinking about this.

The narrative above shows us two things. First, it demonstrates that a major life event triggered a re-evaluation of ethnic identity for Raquel. And second, Raquel is committed to instilling (transmission of culture) a strong Latino identity in her child. While Raquel is unsure which Latino culture she will focus on while raising her child, Raquel will certainly transmit a strong Latino identity to her child. The distinctions among Latino cultures of origin also illustrate a rich process for the transmission culture and the diversity among Latinos.

Similar to the importance of language in the transmission of culture from parents to our participants, participants mentioned transmitting the Spanish language to their own children. Carmen's (aged 37) narrative, for example, not only shows us that she has undertaken some tough identity developmental work (she is now a proud Latina), but she is committed to teaching her daughter the aspects of the Latino culture.

Now that time has passed and I'm grown up, I'm proud of my Latina heritage (finally!) and I enjoy speaking Spanish with friends. I'm teaching our daughter Spanish because it's important that she

speaks both English and Spanish. I also make sure that she is accustomed to being around people of all colours and backgrounds. I believe racism starts very early and the only way to prevent racism is to make sure our children are used to being around people of all colours and backgrounds. Teaching children about languages and how we are all the same HUMAN RACE, beings with different languages and skin colours, yet all EQUAL is an extremely important message to teach our children. The best way is by example and by making sure we point out these things openly. Making sure our daughter sees us being equally friends with people of all colours is a great example to bring peace in this world. The sooner the exposure to these experiences the better. You can't teach that in books. It's the type of thing you can only learn through personal experience.

The narrative provided by Carmen illustrates that choosing a positive interpretation of Latina identity should not be taken for granted. As Carmen illustrated, she is "finally" proud of her Latino heritage suggesting that this was not always the case. In addition, her positive meaning making as a "grown up" allows her to transmit this positive interpretation to her children.

### Negotiating Relationships

Results indicate that conversations about the transmission of culture and negotiating relationships can go hand in hand. Negotiating relationships refers to experiences whereby Latinas made sense of their ethnic identity while negotiating relationships with others, particularly partners or spouses, but also family members. Negotiation of relationships is particularly common when Latinas have married outside of their racial and/or ethnic group or who have family members who are not Latino. Elizabeth, for example, does not discuss making sense of her ethnic identity while negotiating a relationship with a non-Latino partner or spouse, but she does negotiate relationships in a multicultural home. This is because Elizabeth has a non-Latino father and a Latino mother. She discussed learning about the Latino culture from her mother and negotiating the tensions present in her multicultural home environment. In the quote below, Elizabeth, aged 33, described learning about her Latino mother's culture.

When I was younger and in high school, I did travel several times to South America where my mother is from. There I grew to love and appreciate my mother's culture and my heritage. I loved the culture more than what I was raised with in America. As I have grown older and more educated, I have realized

that I do have stronger ties to the Anglo community rather than the Hispanic community.

While Elizabeth recognized that the trips to South America were learning opportunities, they also allowed her to experience positive interpretations of the Latino culture and become proud of her Latino heritage. Even if she later recognized her stronger tie to the Anglo culture, her negotiation of relationships provided positive aspects of the culture. From the quote below, we note that gaining a positive interpretation may have been difficult to do in a multicultural home.

The negativity my own father would say against Latinos when he was upset with my mother. I had to take off all the conflict between my parents who came from two different cultures and people groups. I began to learn to rest and not be in fear. It continues to shape me today.

From this narrative it appears as if Elizabeth frequently had to negotiate the relationships with her parents in order to make sense her ethnic identity.

Cella, aged 51, who has used a plethora of terms throughout her life to identify herself (i.e., Chicana, Hispanic, Mexican, and Mexican–American), does cite marrying outside of her ethnic group as the major life event that caused her to re-evaluate the meaning of her identity. She stated:

The only thing I can think of is when I got married. I had to learn how to fully embrace another culture (African-American) in my home life, especially as it impacted our children. My husband and I both had to learn how to hold onto our cultural uniqueness while also validating each other's cultural heritage.

Cella's story is a perfect example of the negotiation that must take place between two individuals trying to manage a home represented by two cultures.

To illustrate the intermingling of the transmission of culture with the negotiation of relationships, we reference Carmen's story once again. We had previously noted that Carmen had undertaken some difficult identity developmental work in the past. Here, Carmen talked about the importance of teaching her children Spanish as well as negotiating a rather tenuous relationship with her mother-in-law as part of her identity development process. She begins her narrative by describing the racism she encountered when she first moved to the USA.

When I first moved to the USA (to Colorado) in 1983, the problem of racism was much worse. And to top it off if [when] I spoke Spanish at the market with my sister people would give us dirty looks and assume we were illegal aliens; they'd either make rude

comments such as "go back to your own country!!" or they'd pretend we weren't there. That was awful, especially since I was only 12. I felt so rejected. Over the years I've learned to accept that such cruel behaviour is a result of ignorance. It's still tough, but I've learned ways to cope. Now I've been married for 16 years and I'm still dealing with similar problems. For 16 years my mother in law has addressed everything to my husband, as if I didn't exist. That too is a form of racism.

Carmen's narrative illustrates that the negotiation of relationships can also be with extended family. Given the importance that Latinas place on familial relationships, her mother-in-law would be seen as an important component of her family, and thus the behavior of this woman can have a negative influence of Carmen's self-identification. Carmen can reflect back on racism experienced in her younger years, and it is likely that this ability to recognize behaviors as racist helps her understand the behaviors of her mother-in-law.

## Discussion

An examination into the dimensions of family dynamics and their potential influences on ethnic identity development processes among adult Latinas reveal that identity development does continue beyond the college years as suggested by the work of Marcia (2002). As stated earlier, Marcia's work proposes that major life events experienced in adulthood may cause individuals to revisit the previous identity developmental tasks. While most of the Latinas in the study reflected on how their early experiences impacted their current outlooks on life and/or ethnic identity, many also discussed marriage and motherhood as triggering evaluations or re-evaluations of ethnic identity. This process of re-evaluation of ethnic identity has also been seen among adult Latino men, but a change in the racial composition of the environment or a new job often triggers this evaluation (Torres et al. 2012). In reference to these early experiences, many Latinas learned about their own culture and what is meant to be of Latino descent, but many also learned to be comfortable with people from cultures different from their own. As such, many of these women identified with a bicultural orientation. These types of family interactions or "transmissions of culture," as we have labeled them in this study, also occurred between the participants and their own children. In the context of transmitting the Latino culture, Latinas identified having children as an event that caused them to think about their own ethnic identity, but also how they will help their own children with ethnic identity formation.



The second major finding of the study is that adult Latinas undertake ethnic identity developmental tasks while negotiating relationships with partners or spouses, but also other family members. Furthermore, this is particularly the case when Latinas have family members or a partner or spouse of a different ethnic group. That Latinas with family members or partners or spouses of different racial/ethnic groups undergo additional identity developmental tasks is supported by other studies as well. Hill and Thomas (2000), for example, found that women in black–white interracial heterosexual partner relationships all experienced some form of racism because of their relationships. All participants, however, also discussed active involvement in their racial identity development by rejecting negative narratives other imposed on them and by transforming or generating more positive narratives about their relationships (Hill and Thomas 2000). While this study did not examine the extent to which Latinas in interracial homes or relationships experience racism, their narratives indicate that these interracial relationships often caused them to think about their ethnic identity and how they will maintain the uniqueness of their own culture, while respecting that of their spouse.

The results of this study also demonstrated several important lessons. First, the exploration of family dynamics illustrates that family members provide both positive and negative interpretations of culture and identity. Latinas exposed to positive images of culture and identity probably find it easier to develop a strong sense of ethnic identity. Those exposed to negative images, however, could easily become victims of stereotype threat by internalizing negative images of the Latino culture (Rueschenberg and Buriel 1995, 1995; Torres and Baxter Magolda 2004). The ability to understand that the negative messages were racist and then transform their understanding of culture into positive messages illustrates strong identity development among these women. This strong identity development is particularly evident among the women who experienced negative messages in their own families or neighborhoods.

Second, the transmission of culture extends beyond both the nuclear and extended family; for some of these women educating others outside of their family was as important as educating those within the family. While the literature does address the transmission of culture from parents to children, this study also illustrates the experiences of the sandwich generation. Many of our participants are negotiating their parents' notions of Latino culture and identity with their own notions about how they will teach their own children about Latino culture and identity (the sandwich generation). We call this process of negotiating different notions of Latino culture and identity as “Cultural Customization” a process whereby a participant takes in information from parents or an older generation but

customizes practices to align with their current circumstances such as new family structures, changes in social norms and values, or changes in environment (e.g., racial/ethnic composition). Cultural Customization might be necessary because the norms, values, or practices of the older generation may not be completely viable or realistic in a Latinas' current life circumstances. This is particularly evident in Raquel's situation, where she has adopted a child who is not Puerto Rican as Raquel and her family, but is of two Latino ethnic groups. Raquel's family urges her to raise the child as a Puerto Rican, suggesting she should teach the child about Puerto Rican culture. Perhaps, knowing that today's world allows and encourages individuals to explore and identify with multiple racial/ethnic groups, Raquel is not entirely comfortable with her family's wishes. In essence, Raquel is trying to balance the norms or values of an older generation (her parents) with the norms and values of today's society.

And finally, the women who could reflect on how their own understanding of culture was influenced by family seem better able to articulate how they will transmit culture to their children. For the most part, the Latinas in our study spoke of positive experiences impacting their understanding of culture. Many spoke about their parents exposing them to various ethnic and/or racial groups early on. Others spoke about the importance of becoming bilingual at a young age. Not surprisingly, these women plan to adapt similar strategies with their own children. In the end, many of these women hope to instill a strong Latino/a identity and sense of pride in their children. While not directly indicated, the level of education of these Latinas and their intent to educate their children could explain the interconnection between education and identity. These women customized cultural expectations in order to continue transmitting the values they liked and to more closely align their own lives to those values. This form of customization is illustrative of the influence of education on identity and the fluid nature of ethnicity as more Latinos are educated within the US system.

The findings of this study have implications for practice when one considers that more non-traditional college age students are entering higher education institutions and graduate schools. This will create situations where higher education administrators and faculty will be more likely to encounter these students during a stage of identity development or reformulation. Family dynamics such as marriage and having children can trigger the identity developmental or re-evaluation process among adult Latinas. And these major life changes are common among many adult women within higher education. Having children, for example, causes Latinas to reflect on how they will transmit their Latino culture to their own children. Many times, the strategies look similar to those employed

by their own parents. Sometimes, however, the strategies look different as Latinas customize the cultural norms, values, or traditions they have learned from their parents to meet the needs of their own children and families.

Ethnic identity development or re-evaluation does not only occur in non-traditional age students or those involved with all aspects of higher education, but also among Latinas in other professions or life circumstances. In other words, new Latina professionals, seasoned employees, or stay-at-home mothers may experience this identity developmental process when major life events occur or when they are negotiating relationships with family members. Understanding how these life events and family dynamics can influence ethnic identity can help institutional agents (e.g., educators, doctors, employers, social workers) to meet the needs of adult Latinas.

### Future Research

There is much research that can be done in the area of adult Latina ethnic identity development. As a result of data in this research project and the limitations we had, further research is needed to achieve a deeper understanding of the influence of family dynamics on identity among Latina adults. Since our study did not include one-on-one interviews with participants, a greater understanding of this process can be achieved with face-to-face interaction where the researcher can probe for further understanding. Also, the use of the internet to distribute the survey resulted in a sample of highly educated Latinas. Caution should be used when applying the findings of the study to the overall Latina population. In-depth consideration of the impact of family dynamics on ethnic identity among Latino adults also needs a closer examination. This study opens the door for considering the influence of family dynamics among minority populations within the USA. Research should also be done with other diverse populations and occupations to investigate whether, and how, family dynamics influence ethnic identity among other groups.

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