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# Self-segregation or self-preservation? A critical race theory and Latina/o critical theory analysis of a study of Chicana/o college students

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This article uses critical race theory (CRT) and Latina/o critical theory (LatCrit) to analyze the main findings of a longitudinal study of Chicana/o college students. Having found that when Chicana/o college students associate with other Chicano/as, their socially conscious values are reinforced, they increase their likelihood of pursuing careers in service of their communities, and they are more inclined to become involved in community service activities after college, this article adopts CRT and LatCrit to analyze the relationship between Chicano/a college students and their Chicana/o peers, within the broader racialized context of higher education. It examines how the arguments supporting the “racial balkanization” myth are framed by institutional racism, and reveals how and why Chicana/o college students benefit from associating with their Chicana/o student peer groups by drawing from their cultural resources to mitigate the racialized barriers erected by universities. The analysis argues for utilizing race-oriented epistemologies that can help account for the racist and white supremacist ideologies that frame and promote deficit-based beliefs about students of color in higher education.

## Introduction

Most of us have noticed that students of the same race or ethnicity tend to hang out together on college campuses, whether it is in the residence or dining halls, or simply in conversational groups on campus. These same-race peer association patterns typically do not attract much attention when it is white students who are hanging out together. However, when students of color<sup>1</sup> are observed associating with each other, their same-race affiliations are lamented in the public and private discourse as the cause for the *racial balkanization* of college campuses (Bloom, 1987; D’Souza, 1991).

*Racial balkanization* is perceived as the tendency for students of color to self-segregate from the university’s predominantly white student body and into their respective racial “enclaves” (Altbach & Lomotey, 1991; Astin, 1993b; Duster, 1991, 1993, 1995). In addition to polarizing the campus along racial/ethnic alliances, the process of *balkanization* is purported to have a negative effect on a range of post-college educational (cognitive) and behavioral (affective) outcomes for students of color (Berube & Nelson, 1995; D’Souza, 1991). In other words, if you are a student of color, particularly an African-American or Chicana(o)/Latina(o) student, affiliating with your own racial/ethnic peer group in college is presumed to have a negative influence on your learning, behavior, and values after college (Bloom, 1987; Duster, 1995; Schlesinger, 1993).

### Previous research

The *racial balkanization* argument, however, remains unsubstantiated by empirical data (Astin, 1993b; Smith et al., 1997), existing largely as a myth that is sensationalized by popular press anecdotes that frame it within a “political correctness” public discourse (Berman, 1992; Smith et al., 1997; Tatum, 1997). Indeed, a deeper analysis of the *racial balkanization* myth reveals how it is undergirded by a racist, white supremacist ideology (hooks, 1995), that is influenced by cultural deprivation and deficit theories about students of color (Tatum, 1997; Valencia, 1997; Valencia & Solorzano, 1997). The proposition that an ethnic/racial student peer group will exert a negative influence on its members because of the peer group’s ethnic/racial composition is deeply rooted in traditional cultural deprivation and deficit theories (see Baca-Zinn, 1989; Coles, 1967; Foley, 1997; Gandara, 1995; Lewis, 1965; Menchaca, 1997; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999).

While recent research in the field of higher education has concluded that there is little empirical evidence to assert that students of color “self-segregate” any more than majority white students (Astin, 1993a; Antonio, 1998; Duster, 1991; Villalpando, 2002), this research has not considered the premises that undergird the *balkanization* myth in the first place. Most of this research has adopted traditional psychosocial higher education theories to examine the extent to which students really “self-segregate,” and has framed its results within the ongoing debate about the benefits and costs of diversity and multiculturalism in higher education (Appel, Cartwright, Smith, & Wolf, 1996; Smith et al., 1997). While on the one hand refuting *racial balkanization*, this research may also indirectly affirm the cultural deprivation/deficit premises about students of color that undergird this myth. By adopting conceptual lenses that ignore race-oriented epistemologies (Scheurich & Young, 1997), neglecting to account for the racist and white supremacist ideologies that frame and promote the racial balkanization myth, current research in the field of higher education often contributes to the perpetuation of deficit-based beliefs about students of color. To avoid replicating deficit-based research and to pivot the analysis onto the racialized structures, policies, practices, and discourses in higher education that impact the experiences of students of color, I adopt Critical Race and Latina/o Critical theories as the interpretive lenses in this empirical analysis of the experiences of Chicana/o<sup>2</sup> college students.

### First phase of research

In the first phase of an ongoing longitudinal study of Chicana/o college students, I discovered that same-race peer group affiliations for students of color *do not* have a detrimental impact on their post-college outcomes but, in fact, benefit them in important ways (Villalpando, 1996). The first phase of the study explored how a Chicana/o college student peer group influences Chicana/os’ socially conscious values, their pursuit of careers in service of their community, and their involvement in community service activities.<sup>3</sup>

During this first phase, I followed a national cohort of approximately 200 Chicana/o and 200 white college students from 40 universities throughout the United States. The study began by surveying the students in 1985, and continued with follow-up surveys of the same students at two additional time points, in 1989

and 1994. In sum, data were collected on this cohort of students over nine years, at three separate time points: in 1985, 1989, and 1994. I employed multivariate analyses to examine the results of the study.<sup>4</sup>

This initial phase of the study has provided empirical quantitative evidence that students of color derive a range of post-college benefits when they associate with a same-race peer group during college. The results of the study show that when Chicana/os affiliate with other Chicana/os during college, their socially conscious values are reinforced, they increase their likelihood of pursuing careers in service of their community, and they are more inclined to become involved in community service activities after college. And, interestingly, the study also discovered that when white students interact with Chicana/os, they too derive the same types of post-college benefits as Chicana/os. But, when white students interact primarily with other white students, they do not derive any of the benefits accrued from interacting with Chicana/os (Villalpando, 1996). These results also underscore the educational value of affirmative action by illustrating how the presence of Chicana/os can help institutions fulfill their mission to prepare educational leaders for service to communities.

Having found that there is a positive benefit to Chicana/os (and white students) from frequently associating with a Chicana/o peer group, the first phase of the study helps to refute some of the assumptions that bolster the *balkanization* debate. The study also helps to contradict some of the arguments advanced by cultural deprivation and deficit theories by providing empirical evidence of the value of affiliating with an ethnic/racial peer group. The Chicana/o peer group's positive influence in developing or reinforcing altruistic values clearly suggests that the peer group is not culturally deficient or deprived but may actually possess *cultural resources and assets* that sustain and foster positive dispositions among individuals.

The concept of *cultural resources* proposes that there is a set of cultural practices, beliefs, norms, and values that, among other things, may nurture and empower individuals who associate with the group. The concept is similar to the *community funds of knowledge* concept proposed by Gonzalez et al. (1995), and Velez-Ibanez and Greenberg (1992), and resembles the set of nurturing family characteristics identified by Gordon (1995) in his anthropological review of studies on African-American culture. The *cultural resources* concept draws from the work of progressive scholars who have reconceptualized traditional sociological and anthropological deficit theories of culture (Tierney, 1993; West, 1993), language (Valencia, 1997), class (Foley, 1997; Giroux, 1983), gender (Collins, 1986; Hurtado, 1989), and ethnicity/race (hooks, 1990; Solorzano, 1997) in order to provide more robust and valid explanatory frameworks for research in education and the social sciences.

The first phase of the study provides quantitative evidence that affiliating with a Chicana/o college peer group exerts a positive influence on several post-college outcomes for Chicana/os, and suggests that a Chicana/o peer group's cultural resources and assets may play an important role in influencing the success of Chicana/o students. To better understand the *types* of cultural resources and the *process* by which they help to mitigate the isolation (Astin, 1982), marginalization (Astin & Burciaga, 1981; Rendon, 1992) and the racism faced by Chicano/a college students (Scheurich & Young, 2000; Solorzano & Villalpando, 1998), in this article, I adopt the analytical perspectives offered by critical race theory (CRT) and Latina/o critical (LatCrit) theory, including the counterstory methodology to guide the presentation and analysis of the data.

### **Critical race and latina/o critical theories as an interpretive framework**

Critical race theory (CRT) and Latina/o critical theory (LatCrit) form an interpretive framework developed by legal scholars of color to address issues of social justice and racial oppression in society (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Delgado, 1995; Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993). Though CRT and LatCrit had their genesis in the legal field, they are increasingly being adopted by education scholars who acknowledge the need to apply race-oriented epistemologies for their research in education and the schooling process (see Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Parker, Deyhle, Villenas, & Nebecker, 1998; Solorzano, 1997; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solorzano & Villalpando, 1998; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Tate, 1997; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999). Within the field of higher education, CRT and LatCrit are also becoming increasingly important tools to broaden and deepen the analysis of the racialized barriers erected for people of color (see Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solorzano & Villalpando, 1998; Taylor, 1999; Villalpando & Delgado Bernal, 2002; and Yosso, 2001).

CRT and LatCrit explore the ways in which alleged “race-neutral” laws and institutional policies perpetuate racial/ethnic subordination. These frameworks emphasize the importance of viewing policies and policymaking within a proper historical and cultural context in order to deconstruct their racialized content (Bell, 1995; Crenshaw et al., 1995). They challenge dominant liberal ideas of colorblindness and meritocracy and show how these ideas operate to disadvantage people of color while further advantaging whites (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000).

While there are many theoretical similarities between CRT and LatCrit, they are distinct in important ways. LatCrit is supplementary, complementary, to CRT (Valdes, 1996), having derived from CRT partly out of a need to address issues that were broader than race/ethnicity for Latinas/os.<sup>5</sup> Like CRT, LatCrit is conceived as an anti-subordination project, but also embraces anti-essentialist principles (LatCrit Primer, 2000). It encompasses all of the assumptions and underpinnings of CRT, but extends toward a progressive coalitional Latina/o pan-ethnicity (Valdes, 1996). LatCrit helps to analyze issues that CRT cannot or does not, like language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, identity, phenotype, and sexuality (Espinoza, 1990, Garcia, 1995; Hernandez-Truyol, 1997; Johnson, 1998; Martinez, 1994, in Delgado Bernal, 2002; Montoya, 1994). LatCrit is a more valid and reliable lens to analyze Latinas/os’ multidimensional identities and can address the intersectionality of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression for Latinas/os more appropriately than CRT (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). LatCrit has encouraged greater analysis of identity construction of racially subordinated people at both the individual and group level (Johnson, 1998) and within post-identity politics (Valdes, 1996). Delgado Bernal (2002) observes that LatCrit has added layers of complexity to the formation of identity and construction of knowledge by looking at the intersections of immigration (Garcia, 1995), migration (Johnson, 1998), human rights (Iglesias, 1996; Hernandez-Truyol, 1997), language (Romany, 1996), gender (Rivera, 1997) and class (Ontiveros, 1997).

There are at least five defining elements that form the basic assumptions, perspectives, research methods, and pedagogies of CRT and LatCrit (Matsuda et al., 1993; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Tate, 1997; Villalpando & Delgado

Bernal, 2002). These elements help to frame this examination of how Chicana/o college students benefit from associating with their Chicana/o student peer groups by drawing from their cultural resources to mitigate the racialized barriers erected by universities.

*The centrality of race and racism*

CRT and LatCrit acknowledge as their most basic premise that race and racism are a defining characteristic of US society. In US higher education, race and racism are imbedded in the structures, discourses, and policies that guide the daily practices of universities (Taylor, 1999). Race and racism are central constructs, but LatCrit proposes that they also intersect with other dimensions of one's identity, such as language, generation status, gender, sexuality, and class (Crenshaw, 1989; Valdes, 1996). For people of color, each of these dimensions of one's identity can potentially elicit multiple forms of subordination (Crenshaw, 1993), yet each dimension can also be subjected to different forms of oppression. For example, language oppression by itself cannot account for racial oppression, nor can racial oppression alone account for class oppression.

*The challenge to dominant ideology*

CRT and LatCrit in higher education challenge the traditional claims of universities to objectivity, meritocracy, color-blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity. These theoretical frameworks reveal how the dominant ideology of color-blindness and race neutrality act as a camouflage for the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in American society (Calmore, 1992; Delgado, 1989).

*A commitment to social justice and praxis*

CRT and LatCrit have a fundamental commitment to a social justice agenda that struggles to eliminate all forms of racial, gender, language, generation status, and class subordination (Matsuda, 1996). In higher education, these theoretical frameworks are conceived as a social justice project that attempts to link theory with practice, scholarship with teaching, and the academy with the community (Solorzano, 2000).

*A centrality of experiential knowledge*

CRT and LatCrit recognize that the experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate and critical to understanding racial subordination. The application of a CRT/LatCrit framework in an analysis of research and practice in the field of higher education requires that the experiential knowledge of people of color be centered and viewed as a resource stemming directly from their lived experiences.

The experiential knowledge can come from storytelling, family history, biographies, scenarios, parables, *cuentos*, chronicles, and narratives (Bell, 1987; Delgado, 1989, 1995; Olivas, 1990).

*An historical context and interdisciplinary perspective*

CRT and LatCrit challenge ahistoricism and the unidisciplinary focus of most analyses in educational research. In the field of higher education research and practice, these frameworks analyze race and racism in both a historical and a contemporary context using interdisciplinary methods (Delgado, 1984, 1992; Garcia, 1995; Olivas, 1990).

These defining elements of CRT and LatCrit form a framework that has application to real-life problems in higher education and in the broader society. It is especially applicable to the realm of higher education given how the American legal system has historically used race/ethnicity, national origin, language, class and an ever-changing conception of justice in the construction and implementation of laws that influence higher education (Solorzano, 2000; Taylor, 1999). CRT and LatCrit provide a set of basic perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that can identify, analyze, and transform those structural, cultural, and interpersonal dimensions of higher education that maintain the racial, ethnic, gender, language, and class subordination of people of color in universities (Villalpando & Delgado Bernal, 2002). A CRT and LatCrit framework is useful to theorizing and examining the ways in which race and racism impact on the structures, processes, and discourses within higher education by, for example, pointing to the contradictory ways in which universities operate, with their potential to oppress and marginalize while also emancipating and empowering (Solorzano & Villalpando, 1998).<sup>6</sup>

### **Critiques of CRT**

There are two major critiques of CRT and LatCrit that have been offered in the legal scholarship and are relevant to the field of education. The first critique alleges that CRT essentializes the racial/ethnic identity of people of color (Kennedy, 1989), while the second major critique challenges the reliability and validity of CRT and LatCrit counterstories (Farber & Sherry, 1997; Posner, 1997).

Kennedy (1989) argues that CRT scholars engage in identity politics by reducing racial and ethnic identity into a single identifying characteristic. He claims that CRT assumes that there is a monolithic African-American, Chicana/o, or American Indian experience that does not leave room for the complexity of identities that exist within society. However, in the field of education, Sleeter and Delgado Bernal (2003) point out that while most CRT scholars do indeed forefront race, “it is viewed as a fluid and dynamic concept and as one of the many components that are woven together to form one’s positionality in a shifting set of social relationships” (p. 26). Indeed, Valdes (1996) and other LatCrit scholars are particularly explicit about defining LatCrit as an “anti-essentialist” project to ensure that race is not viewed as the only important dimension of social oppression.

The use of counterstories (discussed in greater detail in the following section) represents the second major critique of CRT and LatCrit. Posner (1977) contends that scholars of color do not tell stories that are any more different than the stories told by white scholars, and questions the methodological rigor of the “raced” composite characters and biographical narratives. Farber and Sherry (1997) also argue that CRT counterstories lack methodological validity and reliability because they cannot be generalized as representative experiences of people of color. Sleeter and Delgado Bernal (2003) disagree that counterstories are not generalizable, indicating that they derive their generalizability “through their resonance with lived experiences of oppressed peoples, rather than through parametric statistics . . .” (p. 249). Moreover, as the following section illustrates, counterstories are more than a methodological tool; they are a way to ground the real-life experiences of marginalized peoples within educational theory, policy, and praxis.

### Counterstories as the method

In this analysis of Chicana and Chicano college students, I incorporate their experiential knowledge by drawing from the counterstorytelling method in CRT and LatCrit (Delgado, 1989). Delgado (1989, 1990) points out that CRT and LatCrit rely on the use of counterstories offered by members of marginalized groups who, by virtue of their marginal status, are able to tell stories different from the ones white scholars usually hear. These counterstories can be in the form of dialogues, chronicles, and personal testimonies (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). In contrast, a “majoritarian story” is made up of presuppositions, received wisdoms, and shared cultural understandings offered by whites in discussions of race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Solorzano & Yosso (2001) further offer that a discussion of race in a majoritarian story is a story by those who have racial privilege, and becomes a tale where racial privilege seems “natural” and unquestioned because people see it as a “natural” part of everyday life. Thus, the counterstory is a method of telling the stories of those experiences that are not often told by and about those who are marginalized by society (Delgado, 1989). It is a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege, and can shatter our complacency, can challenge the dominant discourse on race, and can be used in the struggle for racial reform (Solorzano, 2000). Counterstories can provide data that offer individuals a way to see the world through others’ eyes and enrich one’s own reality (Delgado, 1989).

Following Solorzano and Yosso’s (2001) model for constructing a counterstory with CRT, I used Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) concept of “theoretical sensitivity” and Delgado Bernal’s (1998a) concept of “cultural intuition” to create the counterstory in this article. The counterstory stems from the research process itself, existing literature on Chicana/o college students, and from my own professional and personal experiences.

I gathered the first source of data for the counterstory from the preexisting data I collected through the survey interviews that spanned a period of nine years. I reviewed these data with theoretical (Solorzano & Villalpando, 1998), epistemological (Delgado Bernal, 1998a), and analytical lenses (Pizzaro, 1998) that look at the intersectionality of race/ethnicity, gender, language, immigration/generation

status, and class and the experiences of Chicana/o college students to examine the concepts emerging from the following questions:

1. How do Chicana/os interpret the reasons and ways in which they participated in the Chicana/o student peer group?
2. How do Chicana/os describe their Chicana/o student peer group's central cultural practices, beliefs, norms, and values?
3. In what ways did the Chicana/o peer group nourish, or empower, Chicana/os' success?

I then applied other sources of data from higher education research (including Astin, 1982; Aguirre & Martinez, 1993; Altbach & Lomotey, 1991; Gandara, 1994, 1995; Delgado Bernal, 2002), the social sciences (including Chapa, 1991; Foley, 1997; Scheurich & Young, 1997, 2000), humanities (including Anzaldua, 1987; Castillo, 1996; Trujillo, 1998), and the legal literature (including Delgado, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Valdes, 1996), as well my own professional and personal experiences to inform my analysis. Once these sources of data were compiled, examined, and analyzed, I created composite characters that engaged in a critical dialogue and told a story about the concepts in the analysis presented in this article (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).<sup>7</sup>

### **The counterstory**

This counterstory provides a dialogue that illustrates the concepts raised by the questions in this article and applies the elements of CRT and LatCrit. The counterstory is about three Chicana/o composite characters: one is a college professor and two are undergraduate college students.

Cuahutemoc Romo and Gloria Martinez<sup>8</sup> are upper division students attending Rocky Mountain West University (RMWU), a comprehensive, doctoral Research I institution in the West. RMWU is a predominantly white campus, with an undergraduate student body of over 25,000 students, of whom less than 700 (about 3% of all undergraduates) self-identify as Chicana/o or Latina/o. RMWU resembles the national enrollment rates of Chicano/a and Latina/o college students at four-year public universities, where less than 7% of all students identify as Chicana/o or Latina/o (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). The racial climate of the campus is also similar to the environment that exists at many of the predominantly white institutions attended by Chicana/o and Latina/o students. There is a small ethnic studies program where most of the university's Chicana/o and Latina/o faculty teach, which was founded in the early 1970s after a tense series of challenges and demonstrations by African-American and Chicana/o students and community members who demanded greater access and educational equality for students of color. The population of students of color on the campus has grown significantly since the early 1970s, but their dropout and graduation rates have not improved proportionally during this same period of time. Presently, activism by students of color within RMWU has begun to resurface in light of national challenges to affirmative action and the persistent underrepresentation of faculty and students of color across campus. In the last two years, students of color have held several campus marches and sponsored colloquia that challenge the

university's commitment to increasing educational equality and outcomes for students of color.

Dr. Chenchon Leon is an assistant professor of higher education at RMWU. As a Chicano scholar, Dr. Leon is the only professor of color in his department, and only one of nine Chicana/o or Latina/o tenure track faculty members at RMWU, which employs well over 1,200 tenure-track faculty. Nationally, he makes up part of the 1% of the American professoriate who self-identify as Chicana/o (Villalpando & Delgado Bernal, 2002).

*Self-preservation or self-segregation?*

*It is almost noon, and Dr. Leon is leaving his office to meet Cuahutemoc and Gloria for lunch as part of their standing Tuesday meetings. As he hurries toward the student union, he is brooding over his busy schedule for the week, and thinking to himself. . . . Even though this is an especially hectic week for me, I'm glad I have a chance to find time to meet with Cuahutemoc and Gloria. I agreed to sponsor them for an independent study this term after seeing how excited they got about the possibilities offered by critical race theory (CRT) and Latina/o critical theory (LatCrit). I introduced them to these lenses last semester when they took my undergraduate higher education diversity course, and they proposed working on a paper with me that analyzes the current status of Chicana/o college students through a CRT/LatCrit lens. How could I refuse?*

I've been meeting with them weekly to discuss the literature they're reviewing and to help them frame the paper. But, more importantly, I have a chance to help them make tangible connections between CRT/LatCrit and their own experiences as Chicana/o college students here.

Yes, it's taking a lot of my time, just like my senior colleagues said it would. They advised me not to do this independent study because it really did not contribute much to the way in which my productivity as a research professor is evaluated. But, I decided to do it because this would give me the only opportunity to discuss these frameworks – and to discuss them with students of color. There are hardly any students of color in my department and the courses that my department needs me to teach seldom present an opportunity to introduce CRT or LatCrit. Yet, I'm using these lenses in my research and I really need to discuss them with others. So, even though I really don't get any "credit" for this independent study, I benefit from it intellectually by having Gloria and Cuahutemoc push me on the explanatory value of these frameworks. I also like to think that they benefit from having a relationship with a Chicana/o faculty mentor.

As usual, they're already in a lively discussion by the time I sit down with them. And, also as usual, they are talking about their recent experiences and trying to relate them to CRT/LatCrit tenets. I join them with my slice of pizza and try not to interrupt their conversation, but Gloria startles me when she blurts out, "I hate this. Look around this dining hall. We are the only Chicana/os in this entire place. All of the white fraternity boys are in that corner, the sorority girls are right next to them, and the jocks are across the way."

It quickly becomes clear to me that we will not be discussing this week's readings. There seem to be other issues that are more pressing for Gloria, though they are clearly related to their work with CRT/LatCrit.

Cuahutemoc and I look around the dining hall and notice that she's right: the entire hall seems divided into separate groups of white students. Gloria continues, "but listening to those white students in our sociology class this morning complain about how 'minorities always separate themselves from other students,' you'd think that what we're seeing here would be completely reversed. You'd expect to see hundreds of students in this dining hall who were all African-Americans, American Indians, Asian-Americans, or Chicana/os sitting in our own little corners, not wanting anything to do with white students."

"*Fregado!*"<sup>9</sup> ("Darn it!") she exclaims using her typically colorful Spanish expressions, "there are only four brown faces in this hall, and one of them is sitting at the fraternity table! How can they not see how wrong they are? Do they really believe that we are segregating ourselves from all of the white students in this place? Don't they realize that we are just sitting here, eating, or talking together, as friends, just like they are?" (Tatum, 1997).

Gloria and Cuahutemoc are unusually assertive students, with a very strong sense of cultural identity and critical consciousness that I don't find with many other students of color on this campus. And, I have learned that when one of them poses a question like this, they are not looking for me to answer it. They're really trying to engage each other in a free-spirited dialogue, and I end up playing the role of moderator, interjecting comments framed through CRT/LatCrit lenses. These conversations are incredibly insightful learning opportunities for all of us.

Cuahutemoc tries to be supportive as he sees how frustrated Gloria is, but cannot pass up the opportunity to offer one of his spirited social critiques, the likes of which have earned him a reputation among his Chicana/o friends as the resident social philosopher. "*Chale* ('Man') Gloria," he exclaims, "if you had taken the Whiteness Theory class with me last semester, you would have learned that, in this case, white folks don't see what you see because this 'self-segregation' stuff is a part of their 'white privilege' (McIntosh, 1997). These white college students live in a world where the mainstream ideology revolves around white supremacist principles (hooks, 1995), but they don't recognize it, even if they are confronted with it. So, of course they don't see themselves segregating from students of color, they only see students of color segregating themselves from them. They think that what they do as white members of society is natural, and everything else that doesn't appear familiar or is different from them or what they do is unnatural."

He chuckles and goes on, "I get a kick out of some white folks who really want to oppose this ideology by insisting that they have a 'colorblind' stance and do not see people's races or ethnicities, as if somehow this can magically rid them of racist behavior (Thompson, 1999). They just don't get it."

After staring at Cuahutemoc for a moment, wondering how I will ever be able to convince him to harness his incredibly insightful intellect by pursuing an academic career, I quickly propose that this is a perfect example of where CRT & LatCrit can help to challenge the notion of Chicana/os as "others." These frameworks, I offer, help us see how Chicana/os have historically been constructed as outsiders, foreigners, or as others (immigrants, non-English speakers, etc.) to serve a racist, white supremacist ideology (Villenas & Deyhle, 1999).

Gloria agrees and adds, "Well, even the idea that we 'self-segregate' and do not interact with whites is just plain wrong Dr. Leon. Just tell me, how could we ever survive in this environment if all we did was to hang out with other Chicana/os, especially when there are so few of us here. We don't have a choice but to interact

with white students since they make up well over 80% of all students at this campus and across all of American higher education” (U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

I ask how the professor reacted to the comments by the white students this morning. “Well,” says Cuahutemoc, “for me that was actually the worst part of this morning’s class. He’s a white guy from New York who claims to be a big supporter of ‘diversity and multiculturalism.’ In fact, he’s always telling us that he is a ‘proud liberal who supports civil rights as long as no one is given an *unfair advantage* based on their race.’ He’s always talking about the importance of ‘color-blind meritocracy,’ whatever that means. Anyway, he totally agreed with the students’ comments, and even added that students of color who only affiliate with other students of color do so to their own disadvantage. He rambled on about how higher education research has found that students benefit greatly when they become integrated with the university’s mainstream academic and social spheres (Tinto, 1987). He said that their graduation rates and potential for greater career earnings increase as a result of becoming ‘academically and socially integrated’ into the campus (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). He tied all of this together by suggesting that students of color who did not participate in mainstream student clubs, but instead chose to be involved with ethnic student organizations, were hurting themselves in the long run. Can you believe it? He seems to prefer that those of us who are members of MEChA<sup>10</sup> or the Black Student Union should instead be members of a white fraternity or sorority? If I wasn’t so insulted by the idea that I am being harmed by participating in an ethnic student organization, or by having a peer group of my race, I would find his suggestion comical!”

Actually, I answer, your professor is a little misinformed on his research. The research he’s citing is based almost entirely on middle-class white students, so he is incorrect to generalize the “integrationist” findings to students of color. In fact, some new research suggests exactly the opposite. Chicana/o college students appear to benefit from affiliating with other Chicana/os during college. Their altruistic values are reinforced, their commitment to pursuing a career in service of their communities increases, and they are more likely to participate in volunteer service activities long after college, directly as a result of having been a part of a Chicana/o peer group during college (Villalpando, 1996). Both Cuahutemoc and Gloria nod in agreement, having heard me recite these findings over and over again during the last year.

Cuahutemoc then adds an interesting twist to the conversation, “You’re absolutely right, Dr. Leon, but I think we’re missing the real issue here. We really should not be wasting our time discussing the validity of whether we self-segregate and cause the ‘racial balkanization’ of the student body at this campus. Or, whether we are harmed intellectually and socially if we affiliate with other Chicana/os. We know that these perspectives have a deep-rooted racist foundation. What we really need to be addressing is the concept of culturally assaultive lectures that Villenas and Deyhle discussed in the article we read this week (1999). Students of color have always been exposed to insensitive, racist discussions and comments in the college classroom (Solorzano & Villalpando, 1998), but in a strange way, it seems that lately, especially since the passage of anti-immigrant and anti-affirmative action legislation around the U.S., professors feel a certain freedom to speak more openly about their racist beliefs. Some of my professors have really surprised me about how openly hostile their comments have been. Some talk about the need to abolish what

they perceive as reverse discrimination in the college admissions process that favors students of color over whites (Parker, 1998), while others talk about the need to build more prisons, which happen to be disproportionately represented by African-Americans and Latina/os. Of course, when I am one of only two or three students of color in a class of 30 or 300, it really feels horrible when students begin to look at me to respond to these types of comments. You know me, I don't shy away from a good debate, but there is only so much energy I can devote to these incessant attacks before they begin to wear me down."

There is an awkward silence in the conversation, as I notice Cuahutemoc's eyes beginning to get teary. Gloria finally breaks the painful silence by making a reference to the research literature they've been reviewing, "Besides finding the concept of culturally assaultive lectures in Villenas and Deyhle's article (1999), we also found it in Solorzano and Villalpando's article on Chicana/o undergraduates (1998), and in Solorzano and Yosso's article on Chicana/o graduate students (2000). All of these articles touched on the emotional and psychological violence heaped on Chicana/o students as a result of the racist comments and beliefs expressed by white students and faculty in colleges. But, as you pointed out Cuahutemoc, they don't even know they're doing it.

That's usually right, I added. A CRT and LatCrit frame suggests racism is normal in higher education and exists in many forms (Ladson-Billings, 1998), though one of the most prevalent appears to be institutional racism (Reyes & Halcon, 1991; Padilla & Chavez, 1995). Institutional racism often exists in higher education through the use of what Scheurich & Young (2000) call "standard operating procedures" that hurt people of color while advantaging white members of the dominant race. So, you are right in observing that college faculty and students often engage in a racist public discourse and racist practices without having the slightest awareness of their racism, given that their discourse and behavior is "standard practice" in the academy. In fact, their racist discourse and practices are not always as blatant and overt as you have described. People of color often hear and experience less overt forms of racism, more subtle, less obvious, almost automatic forms, the type that Pierce (1974) referred to as microaggressions. These microaggressions often surface as gratuitous or subconscious comments from some white folks who may even intend them as compliments. These are the type of comments that Solorzano describes as "images and words that wound," where people tell you things like, "You're not like the rest of them, you're different," or "I don't think of you as Mexican," or "You speak such good English" (1998, p. 7). Solorzano points out how these comments are considered insulting by most people of color, but whites often don't see how they can be offensive. I frequently get these types of comments in my professional life, especially after presenting a paper or giving a talk, someone will never fail to compliment me on being so articulate and speaking English without an accent. Cuahutemoc and Gloria nodded knowingly. Cuahutemoc then shared how he is "often told that I am 'a good Mexican' and it really burns me up because I feel like I've been totally colonized if they think I'm good!"

Gloria laughs and says, "I didn't know that these offenses had a name but, yes, I can see how they can be called microaggressions, which means that the more openly blatant forms might be considered 'macroaggressions.'" She shifts the subject abruptly by asking rhetorically, "so, Dr. Leon, given that students of

color are exposed to micro- and macro-aggressions in higher education, is it any wonder then that Chicana/os seek out a Chicana/o peer group, if only to preserve our sanity in this type of environment? Yes, of course *I need* to sit with, and eat with, and walk with someone like Cuahutemoc so that I can share my frustrations and he can validate them to help me stay sane (Rendon, 1992). Yes, *I need* to be a part of MEChA so that I can be with others who feel and look like me. Yes, *I need* to be with other Chicanas who will laugh with me and understand me when I reveal how much I like to dance to *Selena* in the mornings before heading off to class. Yes, *I need* to be with other Chicana/os who understand why I keep a picture of the *Virgen de Guadalupe* on my desk.<sup>11</sup> You see, my white dorm roommates just haven't understood any of this. They think I'm exotic, a bit crazy, and so different from them that they just do not know what to make of me."

I respond to Gloria that I understand why she has to have a Chicana/o peer group, and ask whether or what happens when she or Cuahutemoc have attempted to develop membership in a white student peer group. Cuahutemoc looks a bit sheepish and says, "I've never shared this with anyone before, but I actually did try a few times to hang out with some of these white mainstream groups. When I first got here, I thought it might be fun to attend one of the membership recruitment parties that were being held by a white fraternity. I figured I'd check it out and enjoy a couple of beers in the process. Well, at almost every single one of these parties, the fraternity guys who lived there went out of their way to ignore me. I couldn't even get them to make eye contact with me. I thought it might just be a hang-up with fraternities, so I decided to attend one of the first meetings of the semester of the Young Democrats student organization. Again, I got the same feeling. They had a hard time relating to me. Beginning with the president asking if he could call me "Mocky" for short since they couldn't pronounce Cuahutemoc. Their goals and mission had absolutely nothing to do with achieving political equality. They were more worried about bake sales and organizing a mixer for the local congressional candidate. Give me a break! When I finally attended my first MEChA meeting later that semester, the first issue they discussed was their ongoing volunteer tutoring program for Spanish-speaking children at the local elementary school – and, they didn't propose to change my name. They actually understood the indigenous roots and historical significance of my name!"

You are both making excellent points about the benefits of affiliating with peers of your same race through student organizations, I said, and reminded them of Jesus Trevino's (1992) study on this topic. He conducted an interesting study on the benefits of belonging to ethnic student organizations where he found enough evidence to propose the proliferation of these types of clubs and made a compelling case for providing greater institutional resources to these organizations (Trevino, 1992). But I didn't want to shift too much of the conversation toward a mechanical discussion of the benefits of ethnic student organizations. By now, we had finished our lunch and I suggested we take a little more time today and walk back toward my office together. I had a meeting in an hour, but I just didn't want to let this conversation go.

As we walked back, I asked them to say a little more about how and why it was so important for them to affiliate with a Chicana/o peer group. Was it just belonging to MEChA that was so important to them?

*The reasons and ways in which Chicana/os participate in student peer groups*

Gloria began, “No Dr. Leon, I don’t consider MEChA as my peer group. It’s just one of the student organizations to which I belong. In fact, I have never even held an office in it, though I always volunteer to organize Parents’ Night since I speak Spanish fluently and can communicate with some of the parents in Spanish. I like doing this job because I can help other students’ Spanish-speaking parents understand college life a little better, especially since most of them never went to college. Plus, I get to practice my Spanish and parents always compliment me by saying they wish their kids were as fluent as me. I also always help out the chair of the Political Action Committee, who is responsible for organizing our demonstrations and other political action activities. By the way, I have noticed that it is usually the men who always run for these elected committee chair positions, but it is the women who end up doing all of the work because the guys flake out midway through the semester. But, at the awards banquet, there they are, all of the guys, making speeches and receiving their little certificates of appreciation, acting like they did all of this work with their committees – *carajos!*”<sup>12</sup>

Like other organizations, there are some issues of homophobia, patriarchy, classism, and sexism in MEChA that we continue to struggle with. However, unlike other student groups, I am not ignored or excluded because I’m Mexican. MEChA gives me an opportunity to combat the patriarchy, sexism, and homophobia within our own communities, and it helps me meet and share my fears, accomplishments, and frustrations with others who are like me. Plus, I also think that I have a chance to develop some of the organizational and leadership skills that I’ll need after I graduate.

But, I also belong to the editorial board of the Chicana/o student newspaper *Venceremos* (We Shall Prevail). I’m actually the head editor, though everyone else does a lot of work also. It is mostly Chicanas who are involved with producing the paper and we have a great time working on it. We really get to do some serious work with this newspaper. My favorite part is when we do stories about our communities, where we illustrate all of the talent and hard work that occurs in our families. It gives a nice contrast to the constant stories that appear in the city’s newspapers that always depict Chicana/os as criminals or other social burdens. Given that the mainstream press and media do such a good job at highlighting the deficiencies in our community, our editorial board made a conscious decision to highlight our assets so that Chicana/os on this campus can feel proud and empowered! I’m really much closer to the people who work with me on this paper than I am to most of the people in MEChA. But still, I don’t think of my peer group as a student club or clubs. My peer group is made of Chicana/o students, most of whom, though not all, happen to be involved in these clubs. But don’t think that the clubs aren’t important. They help bring Chicana/os together regularly. This is very important since we seldom see each other in class given that there are so few of us on campus.”

“Wow,” Cuahutemoc says, “that was a long answer to a very short question, Gloria. But, I have to say that I agree with you somewhat. My peer group isn’t necessarily a student club, but it is made up primarily of Chicana/o and African-American students. In fact, I actually don’t hold any office or do much work with student clubs. I just kind of attend meetings and hang out with other students who belong to the clubs. I do a lot more stuff with my *homies* from my dorm floor. I chose

to live in the special theme building that had a floor dedicated to students who shared an interest in 'social justice.' Most of the students on my floor come from a working-class background. There are African-Americans and some working-class white students who really want to help make things better for everyone. I got a lot of my Chicana/o friends to agree to move into the floor and we have had a really incredible time as a result. We stay up almost every night talking about all kinds of issues related to economic, political, and racial justice in this country. My friends say that I always end up making speeches at these *charlas* (conversations), but that's only because I really like our talks. We are actually attending the National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies conference this year to be on a panel on Chicana/o college students. Luckily the conference is driving distance from here so we're going to carpool and figure out where to sleep later. But, anyway, I also think of my peer group primarily as Chicana/os students, and some African-American friends, but they aren't necessarily students from a particular club. Besides my dorm homies, I have a lot of close friends who are Chicana/o and other students of color with whom I work over at the Educational Opportunity Program tutoring center. We end up doing a lot of tutoring in statistics, a lot of times unpaid, but we really get into it."

*The ways in which the peer group empowers and nourishes chicana/os' success*

By now, we are approaching my office door and I invite them to join me at my cramped little conference table. I'm feeling a bit anxious because I see the telephone answering machine blinking with messages that I know I must reply to soon, but I don't want to interrupt our conversation stream. I return to the topic by saying, it sounds like formal and informal student organizations help to bring Chicana/o college students together who share similar values, interests, and goals, right? But while you two don't consider these organizations as your peer groups, you do consider some of the students who belong to them your peer group? After they nod in agreement, I ask whether they only hang around other Chicana/os with whom they share the same perspectives and goals?

Cuahutemoc replies first, "I think I see where you're going with this Dr. Leon. You're suggesting that we may not be challenging ourselves to think more critically about our assumptions by hanging out only with like-minded Chicana/os, right?"

Absolutely to the contrary, I replied. What you're saying may be right in a context where painful issues like racism may not be as central to your daily life, but in this type of setting, I completely appreciate the need to surround yourself with like-minded people who can offer many forms of support and validation. Where I'm going with this is to try to understand how your peer groups help you succeed, however you may define success. In other words, what does your peer group do to help you decide that it is worth returning to your sociology class the day after you have been barraged with hateful, racist comments like the ones you've shared with me today?

Gloria can barely wait for me to finish my sentence before she says, "My peer group helps me remain Chicana. It tells me that I have to be proud of who I am, that I have a long history of survival and that I am not the first or the last person who will endure this type of treatment (Garcia, 1995; Trujillo, 1998). It tells me that others before me have worked very hard to make sure that this university opened

its doors to me. And, it reminds me that I am not here to feel good, but I am here to make sure that I develop the insights and skills needed by my community. This is how I succeed, and no other peer group on campus can help me succeed like this.”

I remind Gloria that she has just articulated the CRT and LatCrit tenet proposing that examinations of the social conditions of people of color must be framed within a context that includes their sociohistorical experiences.

Cuahutemoc gives an approving nod and adds, “My peer group does exactly the same for me, but I think that there are other students of color, besides Chicana/os, in my peer group who help me the way you’ve just stated, Gloria. Again, my African-American homies help me just as much as my Chicana/o homies to remain focused on the goal of graduating without losing my cultural integrity (Deyhle, 1995). They do this primarily by modeling everyone’s hard work and determination to finish and move on to careers where we can help our families and communities.”

You’re both pointing to the importance of a peer group characteristic that influenced the academic achievement and success of an older cohort of Chicana/o college graduates in Gandara’s study (1995). Among other very important findings, her investigation of the educational mobility of low-income Chicana/o college graduates revealed that their involvement in ethnic and academic organizations conveyed a very important message to succeed and do well to benefit their community. In your cases, you’re telling me that ethnic student organizations provide the infrastructure from which you draw your peer group, but one of the outcomes appears to be the same for you: the message to do well in order to benefit your community.

Gloria responds, “I haven’t read Gandara’s study, Dr. Leon, so I don’t know if this also existed among her older generation of Chicana/o college graduates, but, one of the things I’ve noticed with my peers is that everyone seems to be involved with volunteer work these days. We all have jobs where we work at least 20 hours per week just to have enough money to pay for some of our school expenses. We all take a full load of classes because we want to be able to graduate within the average six-year window for this campus. Yet, almost everyone also does some volunteer work. A lot of us volunteer at least 10 hours a week at the La Familia Community Center translating for the newly arrived Spanish-speaking families and helping them get settled, or at Westside Elementary School as tutors. And this isn’t even counted as a Service Learning activity by the campus because, as I’ve been told, the ‘volunteer sites weren’t selected by the university,’ so we have to do additional Service Learning work before we graduate. Either way, don’t ask me how people find the time to do volunteer work in our communities, let alone our other family stuff, especially for those of us whose families are nearby.”

*Central cultural practices, beliefs, and norms of Chicana/o peer groups*

Gloria, I say, you bring up an interesting point about your families. Gandara (1995) points out in her study that in earlier educational research, Mexican families were often depicted as a burden for college students. Their lack of familiarity with college life and expectations, their insistence on maintaining physically close contact with their children, and their expectation that daughters not leave the home to pursue a college education were traditionally considered to be some of the

family influences that impeded Chicana/os from obtaining a college degree. While these perceptions have been largely refuted by empirical research (Aguirre & Martinez, 1993; Astin & Burciaga, 1981; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Olivas, 1986; Valencia & Solorzano, 1997), Delgado Bernal's (2001) study of Chicana college students' *mestiza*<sup>13</sup> consciousness suggests that these deficit-based beliefs may still be prevalent in higher education.

In her typically straightforward manner, Gloria responds, "I have no doubt that white college administrators may still believe these myths, but as you pointed out earlier, this is an example of another unsupported, deficit-based, and racist belief about people of color. What I can tell you from my experience is that my initial motivation to go to college comes from my family and I would have dropped out a long time ago if my family hadn't provided me with the emotional support I needed to stay in college (Delgado Bernal, 2001). Granted, they can't support me financially; they can hardly pay their own bills let alone help me out. In fact, when I can, I send my younger sister Laura, who's still in high school, a \$10 or \$20 bill when I write to her. I know that my parents can't help her and her part-time job doesn't pay very much. But, I would never trade the support they have given me for financial support. True, my mom and dad were very nervous when I told them that I wanted to come to this college that was a four-hour drive from home. They couldn't understand why I wouldn't go to the local community college. But, when I explained to them the differences between a four-year and a two-year college, they reluctantly agreed that I was making a good choice. Either way, it is very hard for me to miss out on family events, but my family is really good in explaining to everyone that I can't attend because I am away at school. I need my family and they help me a lot. I guess I must be similar to the Latina/o students in Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler's (1996) study whose adjustment to college was enhanced as a result of having a strong family relationship."

Cuahutemoc makes an interesting analogy between his family and his peer group. "I think that my homies are an extension of my family. My family is much closer to campus than Gloria's, but I also can't see them as often as I want to or they'd like me to. So, in a strange way, my peer group seems to have taken on some of the characteristics of my family. For example, we admonish each other when we have to, but we also encourage, support, and provide *consejos* (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994) to each other routinely. When I call my mom or dad and tell them about what Jacinto or Monica said or did after I got a low grade on an exam, they seem gratified that there's someone here to play the disciplinarian dad or mom role. Like my family back home, the group also allows me to be myself, culturally. I mean, it is OK for me to speak 'Chicana/o Spanish or Spanglish' with them rather than Spanish, and they're OK with me going to church on Sunday. I mean, they don't give me this trip about being religious, because I'm really not. I'm more of a cultural Catholic (Medina, 1998). But, just like my family, they don't hassle me about this. You know what I mean?"

You both are very clear, I answer. In fact, for next week, let's discuss Delgado Bernal's (2001) article on pedagogies of the home and the *mestiza* consciousness of Chicana college students. I think you will find your experiences validated by the Chicana college students in her study. When you read it, please focus on the way in which she reconceptualizes perceived "deficiencies" among Mexicana/o or Chicana/o families and redefines them as cultural assets for Chicana/o college students.

I realized that I had 30 minutes left before my next meeting, and had to hurry to make one last point before bringing closure to our discussion. Listen, I said, you both described the importance of having a Chicana/o peer group and belonging to Chicana/o-led student organizations. I completely understand the significance of this type of affiliation and involvement, but I want to make sure that in your zeal to describe the many benefits of these experiences, you are not ignoring some important contradictions that exist within our communities and culture.

Gloria, you earlier described the homophobia, patriarchy, classism, and sexism that exist in MEChA, and you correctly noted that it is not unlike what you might find within other organizations. While you may have a greater opportunity within MEChA to combat these forms of oppression, it's very important to remember that they too marginalize members of your own communities. This type of marginalization and oppression within your own communities may feel different because Chicana/os lack systematic, structural, and societal power in this country, but you have to remember that it is still painful and counterproductive to achieving greater equity. While I completely understand the need for you as Chicana/o college students to feel empowered and utilize your cultural assets to navigate around the many racialized barriers erected by higher education, it's important to remember that there are also many contradictions within our own Chicana/o-Mexicana/o communities that need to be addressed. We are still very far from Aztlán.<sup>14</sup>

Cuahutemoc, you described how your peer group also includes African-American students, for example. You benefit from affiliating with others who, though not necessarily of your same race or ethnicity, do share with you cultural beliefs, norms, and practices that are mutually beneficial in your social justice struggles, right? I think that this is exactly what we need to be doing. Indeed, I would extend the LatCrit goal of forming a progressive coalitional Latina/o pan-ethnicity to include a coalitional multiracial antisubordination project. But, either way, what I'm trying to say here is that we all need to keep a critical perspective about practices and beliefs within our own communities that contribute to our own oppression.

Gloria and Cuahutemoc nodded in agreement, but didn't say anything, so I stood up and said, I hope you found our conversation today as helpful and insightful as I did. We didn't have a chance to review this week's readings, but I think that we made some pretty good connections between your experiences and the application of a CRT and LatCrit lens.

As Gloria and Cuahutemoc began to reach for their backpacks, I made one last comment hoping to reinforce the need to think about possibilities for hope and transformation. Listen, I said, at times you both may feel quite isolated and marginalized, but you have to try to remember that there is nothing wrong with you, your culture, or your reality. You live in a society and go to school in an environment that operates in contradictory ways, by both oppressing and marginalizing you while offering you the potential for empowerment and emancipation. Try to maintain your focus on your resiliency and agency in helping to bring about social justice and direct improvements in the conditions of our communities (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solorzano & Villalpando, 1998), and you may find your world here a bit more manageable. They nodded, thanked me, and walked out quietly.

As I sat there alone, reflecting on the last hour and a half, I was overcome by mixed emotions. I felt a terrible sense of disappointment, but an exciting feeling of

hope. I was disappointed in myself for not having had the type of critical cultural and social consciousness as a college student that Cuahutemoc and Gloria have. I seemed to have focused so much of my time trying to acquire the career skills that I could use for the benefit of my community, that I neglected doing much work on developing this type of critical insight. It took me a lot of painful and difficult intellectual, psychological, and emotional work to begin my process of decolonization (Acuna, 1988; Barrera, 1979). On days like today, I wish I had had an earlier start on this process. Cuahutemoc and Gloria are well on their way down this difficult path. However, I'm also feeling hopeful perhaps for the same reasons. That is, we have students like Gloria and Cuahutemoc who I know will make incredibly valuable contributions to our communities. I'm glad I agreed to sponsor this independent study. . . .

This counterstory should not be interpreted as an essentialized portrayal of Chicanas' and/or Chicanos' racial/ethnic identity. As the frames of CRT and LatCrit propose, race/ethnicity are a central construct in this counterstory, but these Chicana and Chicano racial/ethnic identities and related cultural practices, norms, and beliefs represent a composite of one set of experiences and dimensions of identities. Not all Chicana/o college students and professors share the type of racial/ethnic identities or experiences presented here as a composite. Indeed, as this CRT/LatCrit counterstory illustrates, their racial/ethnic identities intersect with other dimensions of their culture, including their language, gender, and class, which often combine to create multiple forms of subordination (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Valdes, 1996).

### Discussion

Using the defining elements of CRT and LatCrit, I offered the counterstory in this article to inform these three questions.

1. How do Chicana/os interpret the reasons and ways in which they participate in their Chicana/o student peer group?
2. How does the peer group empower and nourish Chicana/o students' success?
3. What are the central cultural practices, beliefs, and norms of the peer group?

The counterstory illustrates the process by which a Chicana/o peer group helps Chicana/o college students mitigate the isolation, marginalization, and racism they face in higher education, and presents some of the central cultural resources of a Chicana/o peer group that empower and nourish the success of Chicana/o college students.

*How do Chicana/os interpret the reasons and ways in which they participate in their Chicana/o student peer group?*

In the counterstory, perhaps the major reason that Gloria and Cuahutemoc participated in their Chicana/o student peer group was to maintain a *critical*

*cultural consciousness*. The counterstory shows the importance of having a consciousness about Chicana/o cultural identity that is positive, empowering, and grounded in an awareness of the influence of oppressive racist ideologies and social structures in U.S. society. For Gloria and Cuahutemoc, this consciousness was reinforced and nourished by their peer group. Their critical cultural consciousness helped them to better understand their conditions as racialized participants in higher education. A CRT and LatCrit lens shows how it helped them see the centrality of race and racism in higher education, and how universities are alleged to subscribe to a system of racial neutrality and color-blindness that in practice advantages whites over Chicana/os and other people of color. For example, Gloria and Cuahutemoc's peer group reinforced their strong individual sense of critical cultural identity that helped them understand the racist assumptions that undergird the racial balkanization myth, and aided in their rejection of the related proposition that affiliating with students of their same race and culture would be detrimental to their post-college success. The counterstory implies that others who lack this critical sense of cultural identity might be more easily persuaded of purported deficiencies in their culture and convinced of the merits in the type of assumptions that support the racial balkanization debate. Thus for Chicana/os and for other students of color, it is important to develop a *critical* cultural consciousness, rather than just a strong cultural identity.

Gloria and Cuahutemoc's critical cultural consciousness also reaffirmed for them the value of their cultural practices, beliefs, and norms as tools in their struggle for success and equity in higher education. They articulated the importance of maintaining cultural beliefs and norms to help them succeed in such an oppressive and contradictory environment. For example, their practice of "cultural Catholicism," which represents a spiritual belief more than a religious practice (Medina, 1998), enabled them to maintain a visible and tangible relationship with other Mexicana/os and Chicana/os in the local church. Similarly, the belief in the nurturing and empowering guidance of the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, or *Tonantzin* for indigenous Mexicano/as, represents and provides a *spiritual* force in the struggle for social justice, much the same way it did during the Chicana/o Movement of the 1960s and for centuries before in Mexico (Castillo, 1996). Indeed, the concept of spirituality emerged in the counterstory as a cultural belief that nourished their commitment to achieve equality and justice for their communities.

*How does the peer group empower and nourish Chicana/o students' success?*

Gloria and Cuahutemoc's participation in their peer group helped them maintain their strong commitment to their Chicana/o communities. Their peers shared in their commitment to improving the social conditions of other Chicana/os and, thus, together they nourished and nurtured this mutual goal for each other. For example, to provide tangible contributions to their communities, they participated in student organizations that strove to improve the educational conditions for Chicana/os (through tutoring activities) and promoted a more positive depiction of Chicana/o cultural norms and practices (through the student newspaper).

However, while perhaps less immediate and direct, their goal for obtaining a college education provides the best example of how the peer group empowers and nourishes Chicana/o students. The counterstory illustrates how the principal motivation for the students (and indeed for the professor) to survive and graduate from college stemmed from their goal to develop the skills that are needed by their communities. Unlike the increasingly hedonistic goals and motivations identified by majority white college students for pursuing a college degree (Dey, Astin, & Korn, 1991; Sax, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, 2000), Chicana/o college students indicate more altruistic, other-oriented goals (Villalpando, 1996). Indeed, Gloria and Cuahutemoc very clearly indicated that, if it were not for the needs of their communities, they might have dropped out of their college environment very early on. This is a theme that has appeared in previous studies of Chicana/o college students and graduates (Gandara, 1995; Delgado Bernal, 2001), and is explained by the CRT and LatCrit tenet that calls for a social justice praxis to eliminate all forms of racial, gender, language, and class subordination (Matsuda, 1996).

*What are the central cultural practices, beliefs, and norms of the peer group?*

The counternarrative was designed to highlight several of the central cultural practices, beliefs, and norms of the peer group that function as empowering and nourishing cultural resources for Chicana/o students. One of the more important norms focuses on the peer group's roles that adopt characteristics of the students' families of origin. Cuahutemoc and Gloria described the significance of the peer group's support, nurturing, and understanding – or admonishment – just like they received at home. This norm helped them cope with the isolation and marginalization they experienced in higher education.

One of the peer group's important nurturing practices revolves around the use of language. Cuahutemoc explained the importance of being able to communicate in Spanglish, Spanish, and in Chicana/o Spanish with his peers, without feeling the stigma of being considered a foreigner or an outsider (Anzaldúa, 1987). The use of Spanglish and Chicana/o Spanish allowed him to express himself through cultural nuances and representations that often have a symbolic and real significance for Chicana/os.

Perhaps the most important belief of the peer group for Cuahutemoc and Gloria focused on the need to persist in college for altruistic reasons that benefit the community. While their critical cultural consciousness certainly served as a foundation for this commitment to their communities, the peer group nourished this commitment through the value it placed on meeting the needs of their communities.

### **Conclusion**

The data that emerged from the three questions I posed in this analysis revealed several important issues and themes through the counterstory. The main themes are:

- the need to maintain a strong critical Chicana/o cultural consciousness;
- students' dependence on spirituality;

- students' strong commitment to their Chicana/o communities;
- influence of language on students' lives; and
- the influence of the family.

These themes became cultural resources and practices for the students in this counterstory. They resemble the cultural assets that Delgado Bernal (2001) found in her study of Chicana/o college students, and are also similar to the characteristics that Gandara's (1995) Chicana/o college graduates identified as key elements of their success. A CRT and LatCrit lens allowed for the emergence of these cultural resources in this analysis by centering the experiential knowledge of Chicana/o college students as a source of strength.

As Dr. Leon explained in the counterstory, it is important not to romanticize but to problematize these cultural resources, particularly by pointing to their often contradictory nature, as they exist in Chicana/o–Mexicana/o communities.

The first phase of this study found that the Chicana/o peer group had a positive influence on Chicana/o college graduates' development of socially conscious values, pursuit of careers in service of their community, and their involvement in community service activities after college. In this article, I have focused on how Chicana/o peer groups influence these outcomes, analyzing this process through a CRT and LatCrit lens and counternarrative methodology, and framing the analysis within the racialized context of higher education. I have illustrated the importance of utilizing race-oriented epistemologies that account for the racist and white supremacist ideologies that frame and promote deficit-based beliefs about students of color in higher education.

Our white supremacist society emphasizes assimilation to white, European-American values, norms, and practices. In the lives of Chicana/o college students, claiming and maintaining a critical Chicana/o identity grounded in their cultural beliefs, values, norms, and language, becomes an issue of endurance, resilience, and self-preservation.

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### Notes

1. *Students of color* are persons of African-American, Mexican-American/Chicano/Latino, Asian-American, or American Indian descent.

2. *Chicanas* and *Chicanos* are female and male persons of Mexican-origin living in the United States, regardless of immigration or generation status. These identities are also used synonymously with Mexican American, though they carry a different sociohistorical and geopolitical dimension that this paper does not address. Chicano/as are the largest of all Latino/a subgroups, comprising approximately 65% of the total Latino/a population (Aguirre & Martinez, 1993).

3. For a detailed operational definition of socially conscious values, the types of careers pursued in service of the community, and the types of community service activities, see Villalpando (1996).

4. For a more comprehensive discussion of the first phase of the study and a detailed discussion of the method and analytical design, see Villalpando (1996).

5. *Latinas and Latinos* include people of Mexican, Central American, South American, Cuban, and Puerto Rican origin, regardless of immigration or generation status.

6. For example, CRT and LatCrit enable us to analyze patterns of racial exclusion and discrimination against college students that date back to the founding of Harvard College in 1636 (Brubacher & Rudy, 1976), and remain until today. While de jure racial discrimination may no longer exist overtly in the U.S. higher education systems, CRT and LatCrit help us see patterns of racial exclusion that continue to exist in a de facto state today through anti-affirmative action policies and practices. For insightful perspectives on patterns of racial exclusion and discrimination of college students of color, see Acuna (1998), Smith, Altbach, and Lomotey (2002), and Zweigenhalf and Domhoff (1991).

7. The presentation of research involving people of color often carries the risk of misinterpretation and misuse. Deyhle (1998), for example, described how her work with the Navajo Nation was "colonized" by the white educational establishment to further its purposes. Similar risks come from the use of counterstories in CRT and LatCrit, as composite characters may be caricatured by critics of these methods, or may be used to reinforce mainstream stereotypes. While I realize that the counterstory that I present in this article might potentially be misconstrued as an example of why Chicana/o and Latina/o students are not "model minorities" who adapt to white norms in higher education (McWhorter, 2000), counterstories are an essential aspect of CRT and LatCrit's emphasis on centering the experience-based knowledge and insights of people of color. Eliminating counterstories as a method would, in fact, silence these voices and limit the ability to provide counter-perspectives to majoritarian views of the world.

8. Gloria Martinez first emerged from the research and experiences of Solorzano and Villalpando (1998) as a composite character of Chicana college students. Her composite character has been further developed by Delgado Bernal (1999), Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001), and Solorzano and Yosso (2000) to reflect a broader and deeper conception of Chicana college students and graduates.

9. Some of the text in this counterstory uses words and expressions in Spanglish, Spanish, or a combination of both. Gloria Anzaldua (1987) proposes that Chicana/os speak eight different Spanish and English languages, with regional, political, and ideological variations. She defines *Spanglish* as a *Tex-Mex* or *Pochismo* or *anglicized* language that has words that are distorted by English. A *Spanglish* speaker can switch back and forth from Spanish to English in the same sentence or in the same word. She defines Chicano/a Spanish as a "border tongue" . . . "for people who are neither Spanish or live in a country where Spanish is the first language; for people who live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are not anglo; for people who cannot identify with either standard Spanish or standard English. . . Chicana/o Spanish sprang out of Chicana/os' need to identify ourselves as a distinct people. We needed a language in which we could communicate with ourselves, a secret language" (p. 55).

10. MEChA, or Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan, is an organization founded by Chicano/a college students in the early 1970s that today has chapters in colleges and high school across the U.S. MEChA promotes the empowerment of Chicana/o students and the community through principles of self-determination and empowerment.

11. For an insightful discussion of the cultural role and spiritual influence that the Virgen de Guadalupe plays in the lives of Chicana/o college students see Castillo (1996) and Delgado Bernal (2001).

12. This form of leadership exhibited by Chicanas was addressed in a study conducted by Delgado Bernal (1998b). In her interviews of Chicanas who were involved as leaders in the 1968 East Los Angeles Blowouts, Delgado Bernal's study revealed that these women repeatedly refused to characterize their work as leadership, in contrast with the men who often may have had much more minor roles in this important Chicana/o social movement, yet frequently depicted themselves as leaders. Delgado Bernal's study reveals how Chicanas frequently assume leadership roles and tasks, but seldom describe their work as leadership.

13. Delgado Bernal (2001) provides the literal translation of a *mestiza* as a woman of mixed ancestry, especially of Native American, European, and African backgrounds but adopts the more complex definition offered by Gloria Anzaldua (1987) which identifies a *mestiza* as a new Chicana consciousness that straddles cultures, races, languages, nations, sexualities, and spiritualities. Delgado Bernal proposes that the *mestiza* identity is a dual identity that is located at the crossroads of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and patriarchy found in the dominant society and in Chicana/o communities.

14. Aztlan is the mythical place of origin of the Aztec peoples. In the origin myths of the Aztecs, they emerged originally from the bowels of the earth and settled in Aztlan, from which they subsequently undertook a migration southward in search of a sign that would indicate that they should settle once more. This myth coincides with the history of the Aztecs who migrated from present-day northwestern Mexico into the central plateau around the end of 1000 AD. The exact physical location of Aztlan is unknown, other than it must have been located near estuaries or on the coast of northwestern Mexico. In Chicano/a folklore, Aztlan is often appropriated as the name for that portion of Mexico that was

taken over by the United States after the Mexican-American War of 1846, in the belief that this greater area represents the point of parting of the Aztec migrations (<http://www.azteca.net/aztec/aztlan.html>).

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