

Pathways of Activity: Lessons from Dominican College Students

by

Monika L. Son

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Developmental Psychology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

2013

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Date

Suzanne C. Ouellette, Ph.D., Chair of Examining Committee

Date

Maureen O' Connor, Ph.D., Executive Officer

Supervisory Committee

Joe Glick, Ph.D.

Daisuke Akiba, Ph.D.

Bonita London, Ph.D.

Wendy Lutrell, Ph.D.

The City University of New York

Abstract

By

Monika L.Son

Adviser: Professor Suzanne Ouellette

High attrition rates among Latino students have long been identified as a major problem in college. Few attempts have been made to understand the normative developmental experiences among this population. This study, based on a study of lives, a narrative approach, examines the experiences of urban Dominican-American college students. Their strategies for effectively navigating a wide variety of contexts (e.g., school, work, family, and neighborhood) are analyzed, and implications for their educational efforts are examined within a developmental framework. Gender disparities and immigrant processes are also explored.

Two part interviews were completed with eleven participants. The first interview was semi-structured and the second was open-ended. Participants were also asked to collect images that represented success. Analysis of the data focused on gathering the following: 1) identifying ‘master ‘cultural narratives of Dominican immigrant experiences, especially those relating to school 2) highlighting the reproduction of culture and identity within the narratives 3) emphasizing and revealing strategies and choices that participants were making to gain success

and 4) drawing attention to the immigrant experience and its salience in the psychological and developmental processes of this group of college students.

The results showed that daily contexts in men's and women's lives appeared to be gendering educational experiences and opportunities for successful school outcomes. Both male and female participants cited challenges about staying in school with roles being influenced by the current social and cultural-historical context. Men's experience was uniquely challenging; their definition of success was contextualized within a framework that offered limited and negative meanings of masculinity.

Women's definition of success focused on the search for independence and the desire to have a family. Education was a means of access to these goals. They experienced protection and support within their contexts. As immigrants, all students experienced a consistent negotiation of "self" and identity that led to transformative behaviors in themselves and their contexts.

The current research aspires to contribute to understanding the complexity of psychological processes in immigrant groups living in the United States—beyond Dominicans and other Latinos. Of salience, it implies that institutional practices may contribute to the disengagement of young men of color.

Acknowledgements

Writing this dissertation has been an incredible journey for me. It was exciting, time consuming, frustrating, and emotionally and intellectually rewarding all at once. I could not have done it without the support of an incredible team of faculty advisors, family, friends and colleagues. This work is as much mine as it is theirs.

First, I would like to thank Suzanne Ouellette, who is probably the person who has been most inside my head other than myself. Suzanne, from the moment I first sat in a class with you, I knew I would learn what I needed. You have always been an inspiration to me; your humility, integrity and passion for your work is how I aspire to be in the world. I am most grateful for your commitment to my development as your student and psychologist. It has been a long road and you have never judged me. You respected my life, honored my process and encouraged me to find my own voice, no matter how long it took. Having you as my advisor and teacher has been one of the best gifts of graduate school.

Secondly I would like to thank Joe Glick for all his love and support. Joe, you are brilliant! The conversations we shared have always challenged me to think beyond. You always insisted on my own brilliance, always seeing what I was before I could even accept it. Like Suzanne, you have always encouraged me to find my voice. You have helped me become a better scholar, more confident and most of all, truly appreciative of the way in which I see the world.

The third member of my committee, Daisuke Akiba has supported me from our very first meeting. Daisuke, your energy and enthusiasm for my work, helped me keep writing. Always making connections where and when I could not, you helped me see the psychological value to my research. Thank you for always encouraging me to put my work “out there” and for helping me think creatively about future opportunities.

I would like to express a special thank you to my outside readers Bonita London and Wendy Luttrell. Bonita, I reached out to you on a hunch after meeting you only once. As a woman of color and a working mother, your support and guidance in my work has been very valuable. It has been a pleasure to work with you ; I know that I will always be able to reach out. Wendy, you have challenged my scholarly pursuits in a very specific way. Your presence on my committee has helped me think beyond the work of psychology and expand my questions into other disciplinary realms. Thank you..

Another group of people I am grateful for are my cohort of Developmental Students. From our Statistics study groups to studying for our second examinations; I know I would not have made it without your presence. Thank you for listening to my complaints, for making me laugh, for listening to my research ideas and for the camaraderie throughout the years. You all have been a gift! Special thank you to Cristina and Jaime for their continued friendship.

I would also like to thank my colleagues at John Jay College Percy Ellis SEEK Sutton Program. Thank you to my Chairs and Directors , Dr. Scheveletta Alford and Dr, Nancy Velazquez- Torres for granting me the time to finish my studies. Thank you to my wonderful staff of counselors for taking on my students in my absence. A special thank you to Dr. Cheryl Franks, who is my own private cheerleader and Dr. Robert Delucia whose mentorship began

almost a decade ago; I could always turn to both of you when I felt like a Ph.D was not for me. To my wonderful friends, sisters and family, Dr. Erica King-Toler and Virginia –Diaz Mendoza, I love you , you are amazing.

Lastly, I would like to thank my beautiful family. To my two dear boys, Nicolas and Jonathan, who were born though this crazy journey that is called writing a dissertation! Raising you has made this work more meaningful and enjoyable. I adore you. Thank you to my incredible husband, who is an amazing father, who has supported all my dreams, listened to my fears, and quietly encouraged me to keep going, even in difficult times. I love you; you are such a gift to me! I also thank my father, Dr. Luis Echavarria and my mother, Nelly Echavarria whose love of learning inspired me to continue my educational goals and that serving others is one of life's best rewards. Daddy and Mommy, this has been your greatest legacy to me. Thank you to my twin sister Ericka and brother –in –law Martin, for always believing in me and my dreams. One last thank you is for my extended family, Jeannette, Alina and Easter for their love and positive energy throughout the years. You ladies always saw the light at the end of the tunnel before I could!

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

“Every human being changes through time, but not as much as I have changed here.” This statement about students, who are immigrants, has resonated with me long before this project. As a second generation immigrant myself, I have been a keen observer of change through the shifting dynamics of culture, language, and family roles within my own family system. My curiosity always centered on the ways in which living in two cultures could change or lead to different outcomes of the “self.”

When I began seventh grade, my sister and I were the top students in our cohort. Our teacher, an Irish woman, seemed committed to “picking” on my sister and I. She would call on us excessively to answer questions that were beyond our comprehension. She would ask us about “Hispanics” and why “they” were not on the same socioeconomic level as other Americans. Finally she prohibited her niece, my friend and fellow peer, to be friends with my sister and me. My seventh grade teacher was eventually removed from the classroom, but the incident was life changing. At age twelve I was forced to see that my “Dominican” identity carried certain meanings, and that those meanings somehow entitled others to treat me differently. Furthermore, my “Dominican” identity seemed to predict a lifetime of outcomes already decided for me in this country. My parents and I were especially concerned with my school life. Did being Dominican have the opportunity to “define” what kind of academic experiences and outcomes I could have? How would these perceptions affect my sense of self and the goals I had set out for myself? These early academic experiences further motivated my questions about cultural differences and the self.

Identifying The Problem

Fast forward twenty years and the same questions have been posed in my work as a researcher and mental health practitioner. One of my primary tasks as a counselor and administrator is to assess why students are not graduating and to create interventions that enable students to complete their degrees, in a timely and academically rewarding manner. In my ten years of tenure at one of the four year colleges of the City University of New York (CUNY), one of the most worrisome graduation rates has been in college students of Latino descent (Latino Data Report 2010-2011). Most of the Latino students at my institution of employment are of Dominican descent. The gap in college achievement between second generation Dominican women and men has risen substantially. In the year 2010, the Educational Attainment Rates for domestic born (born in the United States) males living in New York City was 16.9 % as opposed to domestic born females (32.9%) (Latino Data Report, October 2010, p.5). At first glance this piece of data is not all that unique (such gaps occur in the other four largest Latino nationalities living in New York City). However, if one looks across the nationalities of the domestic born males and females versus the foreign born, (those born in their ethnic country of origin), foreign born Dominican males and females have almost the same rate of college attainment (10.9% versus 10.8%) (p.31). The fact that there is such a gap in college attainment in U.S. born men and women, and no difference in men and women born in the Dominican Republic, suggests that something occurs in the school experiences of U.S. born Dominican male students hinders college degree attainment.

Historical Framework of Race and Identity in Dominicans

Why Dominicans are marginalized.

While issues of race, skin color and ethnic identity are salient for Dominicans, they do not historically exist in the dichotomy of white vs. black that culturally exists for many Americans, (Bailey, 2000; Kitayama 2001; Son, 2006). Many Dominicans share African (Sub-Saharan) and European ancestry and may be racially categorized by others as black based on the darkness of their complexion and/or the phenotypic shape of their features and hair texture (Torres-Saillant, 2000). Regardless of this physical description many first generation immigrants will associate “black” or “negro/moreno” with being Haitian, a category often despised, given the tumultuous history between the Dominican Republic and Haiti (p. 129). Others, as in the case of many second generation Dominican immigrants, may ethnically define themselves as black; particularly those who reside with African Americans and *look* African American and ascribe to similar modes of language styles, dress styles and social experiences (Kasinitz, 2004; Bailey, 2000). However, even in these cases, language (the ability to speak Spanish) affords another mode, sometimes the preferred mode of identifying as “Spanish” or “Latino” (Bailey, 2000, p. 159).

There is a wide body of literature that acknowledges the inequities of social and economic power and how these cultural structures impact the institutional experience of young men attending school (Lopez, 2010; Kasinitz et al., 2004; Bailey, 2008; Lopez, 2004; Levitt & Waters, 2006; Suarez-Orozco, 2001). They highlight the limitations of poverty and of racism and how school systems treat members of different ethnic groups in distinct ways. For example, in New York City, structural discrimination pools native born Puerto Ricans, native

born Blacks and Dominicans (first and second generation) into low-level performing schools. These groups also reported being treated with “indifference and hostility” (Kasinitz et al., 2004, p. 112). As in their native born peers of color, marginalization often accompanies opportunities for criminal behavior, school truancy, poverty, and limited access to social and cultural capital. Given the overall limitation on these young people’s lives, they are said to not only live marginalized from mainstream society, but also to have developed marginalized identities (Deaux, 2006). Do Dominican young people who develop marginalized identities continue to engage in marginalized activities such as those mentioned above, particularly not finishing school? The research would suggest that they do. Yet in my experience, I have had students who have experienced many types of obstacles, including poverty, single parenthood, and periods of separation from their families who do graduate. What accounts for these students’ gains in success, in their capacity to change their life circumstances? Can we use “identity” to explain such a transformation? What then is “identity”?

Why Dominicans are transnational.

Living in today’s world is a multicultural venture. In addition to being multi-racial and multi-lingual, people are connected by global mediums of communication, such as the Internet and the media. These mediums of communication surpass even the most marginalized of communities. Yes, even in the most impoverished neighborhoods of New York City, individuals communicate via email, texting, and social networking sites such as Facebook . For young Dominicans, both first generation and those born in the U.S., access to mass communication facilitates a connection to members of the Dominican community back in the Dominican Republic. Border “less” lines of communication enables folks to create and maintain

border “less” identities (Kasinitz, 2004; Levitt & Waters; 2006). In other words, even if one is living in the United States, one can still identify strongly with their Dominican ties. For this reason, recent studies have found many second generation youths to have transnational identities (Lopez, 2003; Levitt & Waters, 2006; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez- Orozco, 2001). Individuals with transnational identities can be described as being socially, culturally and politically involved in both their U.S. context and that of their native or parent’s native country (Levitt & Waters, 2006). Dominicans who are transnational may frequently send remittances back to the Dominican Republic (D.R.), speak Spanish fluently, engage in Dominican politics (i.e. voting in elections which is possible in NYC) as well as travel frequently to the D.R. Yet as with other facets of identity, transnationalism can vary contextually. For example, high periods of transnationalism (meaning that the degree of transnationalism shifts) can be found among second generation adolescents of Caribbean descent living in New York City. Given that adolescence tends to be time for identity exploration, many Caribbean youths, who tend to experience racialized and marginalized identities due to their blackness, seek out transnational identities to explore favorable or supportive possible ways of being in the world (p. 66). After this period of exploration, a young person may resume to a “non” transnational identity until a particular life event requires them to revisit more dual ways of living. For example, many adult children of Dominicans may suddenly become more involved with traveling and sending remittances if their parents have retired and returned to live in the D.R. Again the term identity can be difficult to isolate here. If a transnational identity can shift throughout the lifespan, what is then shifting? Is it the individual? His context? The mode of communication? Clearly, any and all of these factors can change at any given moment the intricate connection and collaboration that occurs between

The person and society cannot be reduced to either “in the head” or “in the world.”

Narrative research taps into the psychological processes that reflect how individuals sort, learn and create their identities to make sense of their experiences in the world (Josselson, 2002). By studying individual’s life stories, one can examine the integration of social-cultural meaning, repertoires, and behavior that lead to specific outcomes and ways of being in the world. The next section explores the ways in which narrative research has been to analyze complex human practices, such as the development of identity and its integration across different social, cultural and historical contexts.

Narratives and the Study of Identity

As recent immigrants, Dominicans living in New York City contribute to constructing pathways of upwardly mobility. Their history in the United States reveals particular opportunities to learn about how cultural contexts interact with historical and social structures of power. For example, in the Dominican community, the historical policies of immigration in the United States have provided different opportunities for recent immigrants as opposed to those who arrived in the late 1960s (i.e. being able to participate in presidential elections from the U.S.) (Moya Pons, 1995; Hernandez & Rivera-Batiz, 2003). Additionally, structures of power and social mobility introduce various levels of not just success but of ways of identifying (both collectively and individually as an immigrant (Deaux, 2006). Thus, the narratives that people tell of themselves will also reflect these contextual changes in their lives. Factors that will also contribute to people’s narratives will be reasons for migrating, the community that one is entering within the host country (both the dominant culture and the immediate one surrounding your neighborhood), whether one is male or female, one’s phenotypic appearance (how you appear racially), and one’s use of language (Spanish or English). These factors, which are set in

place according to the given cultural, historical context, function as a type of model that individuals take cues from (i.e. how do Dominican college students know they are at risk for dropping out?). Although these cues may not be experienced on a conscious level by the individual, they become part of what Hammack (2008) refers to as the content or ideological aspect of identity.

Content.

By *ideological*, I am not referring to political movements (although that certainly can be included), rather to what Hammack (2008) refers to as the “abstract system of beliefs that develops within an individual, through a discursive engagement” with one’s particular cultural context (p. 231). This system of beliefs or values serves as a link between self and society; a way of configuring shared representations, such as historical narratives of a group or culture (i.e. cultural meanings of success) into one’s own story (Torres-Saillant, 2000). Ideology is also innately cognitive as it involves appropriating value laden symbols within the language of one’s given context (Gregg, 2007.) For example, the noted Broadway show “In the Heights” provides a range of these ‘symbolic representations’ for generations of Dominican immigrants who live in New York, especially the ones who live in Washington Heights. In fact, one would have to be a Dominican from Washington Heights or at least speak Spanish to understand why the main protagonist’s name, Usnavy (taken from US Navy) could be hysterically funny for a Dominican audience. A group of students whom I took on a field trip to see the show, made the psychological connection. When we discussed the show in class, many of them referenced his name and the creativity that immigrant parents living in Washington Heights often have in giving their offspring names of very successful Americans (i.e. Jesus Bill Clinton Alvarez, Jefferson Diaz, Hilary Santana to name a few). More importantly, not only are these ‘successful’

Americans, but ones who hold a certain amount of power. Thus, name giving in this context suggests that ideological representations and sustaining narratives may 1) help the individual integrate and understand herself with relation to her context, and 2) serve to reproduce the cultural messages of the current context within an already existing framework of beliefs and values (Hammack, 2008, p. 230).

Structure.

For individuals, cultural and social representations only become meaningful through the development of their *own* personal narratives. In other words, ideology might define the basic content of identity, but narrative (the act of telling one's story) provides the structure through which a psychological understanding of identity develops. Telling a story about the meaning of success, structures in a psychological "integrative function" between the individual and context (p. 232). The individual must sort through, analyze and integrate her understanding of her context with her experience. Why is this concept important to this dissertation? For Dominican college students, who are second generation immigrants, integrating stories about success and self becomes a much more dialectic exercise among various worlds; a process of constant negotiations between narratives of self, one's culture of origin and the narratives of the larger host society that can change throughout the course of one's life (Deaux, 2006). This is especially relevant in narratives of success for immigrants and their children (Akiba & Garcia Coll, 2004). For first and second generation immigrants who may have a different experience of the 'American' context, narratives of success may conflict with those of their parents and previous generations. There is no research documenting this process for students who are first and second generation Dominican immigrants. Some data, such as McAdams (2006) identified themes of redemption as a master narrative for young Americans. According to McAdams (2006), these

narratives trace back to the “historical experiences” of their earlier European ancestors “in the colonial and postcolonial eras of American history” (p. 7). Although these data do not reflect waves of recent immigrant groups, their stories reveal how ideologies of ‘second chances’ and ‘being able to turn your life around with hard work’ can survive across generations. Would the same be true for children of Dominican immigrants whose parents arrived within the past ten, fifteen, twenty years facing issues of poverty and racial discrimination? Exploring immigrant Dominican college students in the midst of trying to attain upward mobility is bound to yield some answers to this question. Furthermore, their narratives could reveal how these stories change over time within the individual and a given historical period.

Activity.

Human activity can be defined psychologically or cognitively as *cultural*, because it requires using specific tools and artifacts (i.e. language, books, technology, institutions of learning) in collaboration with others (Stetsensko & Arieivitch, 2004). Human activity is always a social act: one performed with or in reference to another. On a very basic level, students who enter the walls of an undergraduate CUNY college cannot really be *students* until they learn how to use the CUNY Portal/Blackboard Internet for necessary actions such as registration, paying tuition, receiving Financial Aid and emails or checking grades. The only way to engage in such activities is to collaborate with others (i.e. providing social security numbers or other information to college staff and other students who have successfully mastered ‘the system’). In fact, data on Latino college retention notes that students who complete their degrees are more socially committed to their institution of learning (Jalomo, 1995). In these collaborations with others, students not only develop strategies of “how tos” (i.e. pick a good professor, write an A paper,

avoid the traffic in the main staircase), but their identities as students are transformed into a type of student, successful or unsuccessful, by the actions they take (Stetsensko & Arieivitch, 2004.)

Stetsensko & Arieivitch (2004) also extend the construct of identity and self to agency the ability to produce and reproduce changes in the larger, social order or structure (p.493). Agency can be a complicated concept for college students who are trying to become upwardly mobile by getting a degree. Roberts and Rosenwald (2001) demonstrate how narratives of students who are the first in their families to attend can be limited by their surrounding context and find that they do not have the sufficient support needed to fully experience the ability to change their lives (p. 100). This study found that first generation college students who were being purposeful about their academic choices often perceived their choices as having painful and isolating psychological consequences. Due to “value clashes and communication difficulties” students often made deliberate choices to reveal their “student identities,” which in turn created strains in family relations (p. 99). One student, Lisa, describes her frustration at not being able to hold such conversations, despite her family’s general satisfaction about her academic opportunity, “My mom is very supportive, but I don’t know if she is necessarily interested...when I would try to tell her something about what I was doing, she would start to talk about something else or get this glazed look in her eye” (p. 99). Lisa, who received similar if not more dismissive responses from her father (i.e. are you learning anything that is going to help you in the real world?), eventually decided never to share that “side” of herself with her parents. Henry, another participant, also experienced “getting picked on” and having to resort to concealing his “student” identity from his father and his father’s co-workers, when they called him ‘eschew’ for an entire day after he used the word in conversation. Finally, like Lisa, Mary lost any form of connection to her parents, “I learned very early on that I couldn’t discuss school; the stuff I would like to

talk about, my mother can't. There's like this vast gulf between us. It's never been able to be crossed" (p.102). Thus, while changes to identity can be transformative to both self and a larger social scale, agency can sometimes be constrained given the social structural realities that can hinder the "power individuals have to effect social change" (Gjerde, 2004; Hammack, 2008). The next section will examine some of these social, historical and cultural constraints.

Historical Framework on Immigration and School Success

U.S. College Context and Processes.

Today, a substantial portion of immigrants are youth (Teranishi et al., 2011). While lack of a reliable data source on immigrant students attending college continues to be a problem, some data report that "youth ages seventeen to twenty four made up nearly 25 percent of the total immigrants in the 2007 census" (Teranishi et al., 2011, p 157.). This number is expected to increase in the decades to come. One of the problems with finding accurate data on immigrant ("foreign-born, attending college as an immigrant, and intending to remain in the United States) students is that the information typically gets confounded with data on international ("foreign – born, attending college with a student visa, and intending to return to their country of origin") students (p.155). The two have distinct needs and characteristics and it is the prior, which will be a concern for this dissertation project.

Immigrant students have varying levels of "academic preparation" and obstacles (p.155). Many immigrant students do not have the necessary English language competence to excel in postsecondary institutions. Consistent with the literature on language development, Teranishi et al. (2011) argue that language skills are contingent when the student arrived to the U.S. (p.156). For example, students who were born here or arrived and "entered the U.S. educational system at

an early age” can be fluent by the time they finish high school. Among these students, it is important to remember that many will be the first in their family to attend college. Some may also be undocumented. In comparison, students who arrive at the age of thirteen or older and enter the educational system at this age, “often attend schools that overlook and under serve them.” Furthermore, if these students were not educated in their native countries or in ways that are different from what the US school system demands and expects, this group of immigrants may experience all around academic difficulties and serious language impediments. Finally, students who arrive after they have completed secondary education (high school) in their countries, may have the least English language proficiency. They too, may confront challenges with documentation and “be unfamiliar with U.S. educational customs.” The authors suggest that while the challenges among the three groups are quite distinct, researchers who manage national and institutional data do little to sort through and distinguish their needs (Teranishi et al, 2011). Indisputably, the data show that overall college enrollment for Latino immigrants is among the lowest and that little is known about the different physical, psychological and social needs/experiences of these students that could be addressed on an institutional and national level.

Some immigrants’ responses to being racialized may be to identify with their parents’ or (their own) national identity of their country of origin (Waters, 1996). Thus, identifying as “Haitian, or “Haitian-American;” instead of “Black,” seemed to buffer the psychological trauma of racism and discrimination in youth’s perception of academic ability in school. Garcia Coll & Szlachta (2005) cite the school context as the most critical arena for the reproduction of racism, including racial and social stratification. According to her research, immigrant children (as well as children of color) are exposed to what she refers to as three major derivatives of social stratification in the United States: social position, race, and segregation. It “is the unique

interplay of the three major derivatives of social stratification: social position, race and segregation that create the unique conditions confronted by “outsider” children and it is these non-shared experiences with mainstream populations that define the unique pathways of development for children of immigrants (p. 82). In addition, she found that children from families and neighborhoods that suffer from economic disadvantage (those in urban areas) are continually plagued with disadvantage along the educational pipeline. For example, children who are economically disadvantaged often attend institutions with inadequate resources (insufficient guidance counseling, larger classrooms, less media/technology, availability of certain courses (i.e. Regents or Advanced Placement in High School) that may assist in furthering educational goals (Akiba & Garcia Coll, 2004). Therefore, when thinking about immigrants (i.e. first and second generation urban Dominicans living in NYC) in the educational continuum, social position (economic disadvantage) becomes a necessary lens through which to conceptualize the academic context.

Like other immigrants of color, young Dominicans often are overrepresented by the term “economically disadvantaged.” While this categorical description might be helpful in documenting the experiences of Dominicans as a collective group; for example, social class has been linked to migration motives, change in gender roles, and occupational and residential opportunities, it cannot explain the variations of behavior particularly that occur among academic experiences (i.e. why are more women attending and completing college than men) (Hernandez, 2002). Defaulting to “economic disadvantage” does not enhance psychological understanding of how individuals maintain and negotiate such processes in the context of being an immigrant. It does, however, place contextual considerations of why Dominican urban college students might struggle with their academic goals.

Social Constructions of Gender and Race.

Lopez (2003) notes the significance of race and the reproduction of race/gender stratification in the academic socialization of Dominican and West-Indian high school students. Her research found that difference in gender roles among immigrants coming from the Caribbean, may speak more to the types of daily contexts inhabited by the individual (i.e. school or neighborhood). These contexts foster specific ways of treating boys and girls based on their race. For example, in an urban high school of New York City where 90% of the students are second generation Dominican, Lopez (2002) observed that gendering (assigning a specific attribute to males and females) affected educational outlooks; that is, whether or not students wanted to remain in school. Gendering had negative consequences, particularly for young men. Incidents such as the manhandling of male students by security, change in nonverbal demeanor by faculty (teachers appearing to be physically threatened) and disciplinary admonitions (i.e. no hats allowed for men but for women it was a fashion statement) created a discursive disconnect among male students and school. When asked about what kind of man or woman they hoped to be out of high school, the young men bragged about preferring to hang out in the street or work, while the young women spoke about not letting ‘guys screw up’ their lives by getting in the way of school.

Two Dominican Success Stories

Regardless of social-cultural obstacles that continue to marginalize Dominicans, some individuals have been able to transcend life in the “ghettoized” areas of the City, and reap the rewards of upward mobility here in the United States as well as in the Dominican Republic. One of the most celebrated examples is Dr. Leonel Fernandez, President of three non-consecutive terms of the Dominican Republic (1996-2000, 2004-2008, 2008-2012) who emigrated to the

United States at the age of 12. Raised in Washington Heights, Dr. Fernandez, spent much of his adolescence and early adulthood in New York. He traveled back to the Dominican Republic to obtain his Juris Doctorate and soon began a political career. The year 1996 marked the beginning of his first term as President of the Dominican Republic. One of Fernandez's legacy has been increasing the Dominican Republic's participation in international forums and developing means of technology and transit via the construction of new highways and tunnels with the aid of foreign investments (www.topics.nytimes.com/people/leonel_fernandez).

Another example is the novelist and professor of creative writing at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Junot Diaz (www.goodreads.com). After being reunited with his father and other siblings at the age six, he was raised in an impoverished area of New Jersey. As a child, Diaz was known to walk miles to borrow books from his library. In 1995, he earned an MFA from Cornell University. He won the Pulitzer Prize in 2008 for his novel *The Brief and Wonderful Life of Oscar Wao* and is also a known activist in the Dominican community. It took Diaz almost seven years to complete it. He has also published another novel, *Drown*, a collection of short stories and has written extensively for the *New Yorker*. One of the central themes of his writing is the duality of the immigrant life in the United States.

Research Questions

I offer the examples of President Leonel Fernandez and Junot Diaz to illustrate two things: 1) that success stories are possible for Dominican youth and 2) to begin thinking about the contextual, day to day activities immigrants engage in. Embarking on an impossible presidential campaign and taking seven years to write an award winning novel are pretty extraordinary activities. Our average Dominican "Joe" may not ever be a president or seminal author.

Nonetheless, average Dominicans like all immigrants, by virtue of being immigrants or the children of immigrants are unique to their population (Kasinitz, 2004). The act of leaving behind all that is familiar, to risk losing it all, including your own children is a self-selected process. That is to say, there is something different about the person who chooses to “make the journey to New York City; he or she, has overcome extraordinary obstacles to change his or her lot in life” (p. 353). Here, lies an interesting point of query when thinking about Dominican college students and success; might there be something behind what people are actually “doing” on a day to day basis that informs the research about what kinds of outcomes are possible for Dominican youth? Might there be something in the “doing” that can explain why some Dominicans are achieving their goals, and why some are not? What can we learn from them? Recent studies of immigration continue to note emerging patterns of activity with more and more examples resembling the lives of these men noted above (Lopez, 2003). This dissertation attempts to explore these queries by asking the following questions:

How do these students explain their successes?

What does success mean to them?

What are they doing to obtain success or reach their academic/personal/career/life goals?

How do students’ stories/perceptions/experiences of success shed light on the relationship between culture, identity, and development?

What narratives are guiding these relationships?

How does being an immigrant impact these narratives and what do they reveal about human development?

Chapter II

Methods

This chapter clarifies the approach to my data collection, interpretation and analyses. I will first describe the sampling strategy. I will then discuss the interview techniques and provide more details about the process. Then, I will reflect on the researcher's stance. Finally, I will describe the strategies used in the data analysis.

Sampling Strategy

Originally, to participate in the study one had to be of Dominican heritage and born in the United States. However, this criterion was questionable, when after a pilot interview with a student who was born in the Dominican Republic, raised important issues that had not surfaced with the other participants. Upon review of the literature, I discovered that experiential distinctions among first and second generation immigrants in educational contexts was cited and the criteria was changed to include both first and second generation Dominican students. For example, perception of racism or discrimination may be salient but lack of proficiency in English is not (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Secondly participants needed to have at least 90 credits because having 90 credits ensures that participants are college juniors and more likely to complete their degrees (Institutional Data, 2009). Lastly, participants had to be between the ages of 18- 24, since students who are older than 24 tend to have spent time in the workforce, doing a specific task, which can change one's attitude about college (i.e. I need a degree because I need a better mobility in my current job).

The bulk of the recruitment was done via campus bulletin boards and TV monitors and snowball sampling. The latter was quite useful, given my rapport with students on campus as a

faculty member. Although students who had been enrolled in my classes did not participate in the study, they helped spread the word about my dissertation about ‘Dominican students.’ Out of the eleven participants recruited, four were recruited in this fashion, three were referred by faculty members, and the rest responded to my advertisements. Given that I described the study as ‘I’d like to hear about your success as a student.’ I left it up to the participants to self-identify as “successful” students. Four students had a B-GPA (2.7, 2.6, 2.9, 2.7) the rest had 3.0 and above.

Participants were recruited via flyer, television announcements and word of mouth throughout the college campus. Announcements were posted on campus televisions via the campus Information Technology office. The flyer read as follows:

I am a graduate student at the CUNY Graduate Center studying how Dominican College students define success. If you are working on getting your college degree, have at least 90 credits, are between the ages of 18 and 24, and were born in the United States I would like to hear about where YOU learned about what it means to be successful. Please contact mle3244@yahoo.com or 917-806-6191 for more information. The study will take place on campus and will take about one to two hours.

You will receive a \$10 gift card for your time.

Interview Techniques

Once an initial screening interview was established via individual phone calls, the participants attended the first interview session. Three interviews were conducted entirely in Spanish, five were conducted in English only, and the remaining three, a combination of Spanish and English. The students who spoke only Spanish came to the United States at the age of thirteen. Among the five participants who spoke only in English, two arrived at the age of thirteen. The remaining three were born in the United States.

The collection of data was originally designed to take place over the course of three interviews. However, getting participants to return after the first interview proved quite difficult. The time lapse was often weeks at times; one participant came only twice and failed to come to the third interview. Hence, after completing the three-interview format for my first three participants, I opted to complete the interviews in two ninety-minute sessions. Although scheduling was challenging because most of the participants were working and going to school, all students had two interview sessions.

The interviews took place in my campus office behind closed doors. Participants were explained the nature of the study, and then were asked to sign an informed consent form that requested permission for audio-taping. All participants agreed to be audio-taped. After this, they filled out a brief demographic form that asked questions about their parents' educational status, how many credits they had, what language they spoke at home, their current grade point average, and how they would define their ethnic background.

First interview.

After filling out this form, participants were asked to share their views about success, beginning with a prompt about how they or their parents had come to New York. The purpose of this question was two-fold: 1) to help participants reflect on why their parents or them, had come to New York and 2) to explore whether there was a general theme or plot of what motivated these participants' journeys. I began the interview by saying,

Being born to parents who are Dominican immigrants and being around friends and family who are also Dominican but born here, I always hear stories about how our parents came to New York. Did you hear stories about why your family came to New York? Can you tell me one?

All students had a story to share about how and why their parents arrived in New York. Those who did not accompany their parents and came to New York in their teenage years, talked about what it was like to be “left behind” and rejoin with parents at a later age. These sections of the story were sometimes very detailed; others were not. In order to probe further when participants did not readily disclose their experiences, I guided them by asking the following,

My parents said they came here to join the rest of the family. What about yours?

This question typically yielded a more detailed response and purposeful reflection of what they had heard about New York, and what they “were supposed to find in the United States.”

The next segment of this interview evoked self-reflection about whether the stories they had heard about New York still held meaning in their current lives and explored the extent to which these meanings served any purpose in reaching their current goals.

Do you ever think about the stories when you think about your life and what you want to do? What's the same for you when you think about the stories? Is there anything different? Do you think your family found what they were looking for?

After reflecting on their responses, participants tended to arrive at the topic of college, which was their current focus on their life trajectories. Thus, in the next part of the interview I would move on to the next group of questions, which invited them to talk about their day to day college experiences,

Tell me about your college experience. What has it been like for you? (Was it easy, difficult?)

How would you describe yourself as a student? What makes you want to stick around?

How do you get through it (school)?

What was your experience like as a Dominican student? What are some forms of discrimination that Dominican college students face in college?

What were some experiences discrimination in the classroom or within the school? Please describe. What made think you were discriminated against?

Is the discrimination against Dominicans the same or different from African Americans? More or less severe?

What's the most important thing for success?

You seem to be doing well in school and getting ahead and a lot of Dominicans are not.

Why do you think you are?

Images of Success Exercise

At the end of the first interview, students were instructed in writing to take or gather five photos of items that represented “what success is to you.” At this time they were given a disposable camera, which would be returned at the second interview in order for me to develop the photographs. However, this would require a third interview; a detail I chose to leave out due to participant attendance. As a result, only two participants used the disposable cameras. The remaining nine chose one or both of the following methods to gather photographs: 1) uploaded personal photographs; or 2) downloaded ‘public’ photos off the Internet. These photographs were then sent by them to my personal email before the second interview.

Second interview.

The first part of the second interview consisted of reviewing the photographs taken and sent by participants. We would discuss what the picture represented and why the participant chose that particular image to represent success.

Ok, let’s take a look at your pictures. I’d like to go through each one and ask you why you chose that picture and what it means to you. What does it say about success? What does it say about you? How would I or people who know you well be able to tell you took this picture?

The next part of the interview was structured as a follow up interview to provide clarity about: 1) comments that were very general (e.g., when I was in high school I was lazy I would say “*What do you mean by lazy, can you give me an example, like maybe you didn’t go to class?*”); and 2) to allow the participant to elaborate on something a question, thought or explanation that they felt was significant in their understanding of success (e.g., *Is there something, anything that we discussed today or the last time that you feel I did not understand about you, or that you*

would like to talk about further?). Most participants were happy to continue to build on their academic goals, career goals, even life goals (i.e. when they were going to get married, start a family). On one occasion I had to probe. I asked, “*What are your goals after college? Do you see yourself continuing on the same path you are now? What would your future self look like? Will that person be successful?*”

Analytical Strategies

One of the aspirations of this dissertation was the desire to illustrate the variation and depth of the immigrant experience. I was interested in captivating the complexity of the immigrant’s stories by drawing upon examples, descriptions and interpretations of life. Working from the notion that success was a defining motivator in these students’ histories, I anticipated that their stories would draw deeply from the cultural realm of their Dominican backgrounds. I also expected to hear about their social experiences in school, as most identified education as the being the ultimate equalizer. Thus, I approached the data with specific thematic goals in mind: 1) to identify ‘master ‘cultural narratives of Dominican immigrant experiences, especially those relating to school 2) to highlight the reproduction of culture and identity within the narratives 3) to emphasize and reveal strategies and choices that participants were making to gain success and 4) draw attention to the immigrant experience and its salience in the psychological and developmental processes of this group of college students.

Given these goals, it was important to establish both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory driven) strategies (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first step entailed reading and listening to the transcripts and audio recordings several times. With each participant, I sketched out the recurring themes or stories related to being a Dominican immigrant throughout the interview and

jotted them down in a notebook. In this initial phase, some of these first themes were related to “living the American Dream,” “honoring their families’ ‘sacrifices,” and “forging a new way of being (either for self or for their family) in the United States.” However these themes scratched at the surface of these students’ lives, and rather than being descriptive I also saw that their stories presented an opportunity to examine the psychological and social-cultural domain of these descriptions. I utilized Chase (2003) as a guide in these efforts Chase (2003) asks the researcher to pose the following questions: 1) what is the person doing or communicating especially if it is different from what he or she is saying, 2) how does the interaction between you and the interviewee facilitate or hinder his or her ideas or story 3) what do you think is particularly important in this passage and 4) what social factors (e.g. social structures, social processes help you understand what is going on (p. 92).

Using this guide allowed me to keep a balance between simply describing verbatim I had heard over versus interpreting what was actually said. In other words, I could question these stories within a framework that used psychological literature and theory as an analytical lens without disrupting the integrity of the narrator’s perceived experience. It is from this paradigm that I came to see the initial mapping of themes as deeper constructions of gender and culture. I discovered that there were two distinct narratives: 1) a men’s narrative and 2) a women’s narrative. Men’s stories highlighted the lack of support they experienced in their search of success and in the burden that becoming “one of the handfuls of success” represented as Dominican men. Women’s stories, while also focused on achievement and upward mobility, often centered around “making themselves better” in the context of supportive networks, such as family and school. Chase (2003) also provided a guide from which to explore immigrant experiences based on time of stay in the United States. First generation students’ themes

organized themselves around the promise of new opportunities, and an imposed change of self, and the challenges of not speaking English well. While second generation students narratives focused on questioning their cultural identities, maintaining or mastering Spanish and deciding on a career path.

Researcher's Stance

To acknowledge the presence of a researcher is one of the most important steps in qualitative data analysis (Josselson, 2009). As a second generation Dominican Latina, I have certainly influenced the manner in which participants have told their stories. One important feedback I received was that students were suspicious of faculty wanting to study “them.” Although the students who responded to my advertisement were self-selected, and thus more likely to be interested in research activities, they still disclosed that once they saw me in person, they felt more at ease being interviewed by a fellow Latina. In other words, there was a discerning sense that their experiences are not typically research matter for academics.

To check that I myself was not under the sole influence or proprietor of academic elitism, I constantly revisited these two questions: 1) why am I doing this type of work and 2) how did I contribute to the interview questions theory and findings? I discovered that given the privilege of a doctoral student, I have indeed created and designated this work as important based on my intellectual knowledge, but I also use that knowledge to question what I believe to be missing in the field of psychology and education. Moreover, as a second generation Dominican immigrant, who has reflected upon ideas about success and struggle in her own life, it would be foolish of me to dismiss that I am still trying to grasp at my own aspirations.

My presence as an interviewer also played a role in the data I acquire. For example, I believe that being a successful Dominican woman may have elicited the kinds of stories I heard from the women I interviewed. Women were prone to discuss their struggles, their fears and strategic insights with me. They confided in me and sought my feedback as they embarked on their own career paths.

With the men, the experience was disparate. The men appeared indifferent or apathetic to my questions, especially when it became clear that I could not speak to what being a “man” must be like in the way that I could about being a woman. I sometimes felt as if I were a sexist or exercising my “female” privilege when I probed about academic or personal challenges. In many moments I often wondered “what if I had been a man” doing this interview.

Male or not, I recognize that even as a Dominican, I am different from many of the participants in this study. My parents, both highly educated in the Dominican Republic (my father a psychiatrist, my mother, an early childhood teacher) structured my life around educational achievement and were always very supportive of my educational goals, even when it required economic sacrifice on their behalf. Thus in many respects, I do not know what it means to struggle; at least not in the way I have seen many of my students endure difficulty and obstacles in their lives. My background remained my secret and students participating in this study were not aware of this aspect of my background. They saw what most students who walk through my office see and stare at: a Latina with some degrees on her wall. Some have shared that the fact that I am Latina and Dominican is at times baffling. My degrees are from a private university, I have a picture of my Korean husband and our two children on my desk, psychology books on my shelves, a small Japanese Zen garden on one of my cabinets and a collection of global artworks and sculptures that I have collected in my personal travels. Some students saw

me as someone who “*made it.*” When they discovered I was Dominican, they assumed we shared similar experiences.

Throughout the interviews, these assumptions were beneficial as students felt more comfortable about disclosing particular stories and experiences to someone who shared their same background. On the other hand, such assumptions tended to yield responses that were sometimes vague. For example, one participant took for granted that I knew exactly what he/she was referring to when she said, “You know how Dominican parents are.” Another participant reacted to my “success” with disbelief. She classified me as an “exception,” “You must be the anomaly, because most Dominicans don’t have the degrees you have.” These insights were useful in critically thinking about each of these students’ stories in light of their personal histories as well as the social-cultural contexts surrounding their lives.

CHAPTER III

Results

This research found that: 1) men's definition of success is contextualized within a framework that offers limited and or negative meanings of masculinity or what it means to be a successful man, 2) women's definition of success draws from the desire to be independent and the wish maintaining structures of support, the search for independence, and the desire to have a family and it is contextualized within a protective and supportive network 3) participants engage both with and in their social contexts, self and identity are reenacted and transformed, producing a change in themselves or in the world around them.

Demographics and Tables

The following section provides a demographic profile of the students who participated in the study. The purpose of this section is to provide a general description of the participants as a group. Although the participants were all Dominican, there was some variation within the group, especially by gender. Most of the differences were in parental education attainment, their family structure, and whom men and women identified as the primary caregiver. The tables are divided by gender. Tables (1.2 and 1.2) illustrate both men's and women's grade point average, their current age, their generational status as an immigrant and the age at the time of migration, and the language in which their interview was conducted. The students were all either born in the Dominican Republic (D.R.) or born to parents who emigrated from the D.R. Thus, in their process of development, there is a back and forth integration of two cultures: one American and one Dominican. At the same time, these twenty year-olds, who are at the verge of young adulthood, are still trying to explore their identities (Fuligni & Hardway, 2004). From day to day, there are social interactions and negotiations of self in context (e.g. family, school, work) that promote or inhibit an integrated identity. For example, through the use of mediated cultural tools

such as language, Dominican students who could master both Spanish and English, were able to sustain more integrated identities. Being bilingual appeared to affect the quality of their social networks of support as well as add to their psychological well-being.

On the other hand, in the culturally mediated setting of the American classroom, students who spoke Spanish better, often struggled academically and were often the victims of racial micro-aggressions, such as being accused of plagiarism when writing ability did not match up to speaking ability. In social contexts, students who spoke English better were often estranged from their cultural identity as well as other Dominican and Latino students. These students faced rejection from White peers as well as from their Dominican ones. Some even identified ethnically and racially with their African-American peers. Students who were bilingual felt more connected to their Dominican cultural identity as well as to their American identity. Furthermore, having access to speaking Spanish decreased the alienating marginalization that students of color sometimes feel in college. To conclude, students who were successful in achieving a balance of self and identity across their lived contexts experienced a type of transformation or internal change.

Pseudonym	G.P.A.	Generation	Current Age	Age at Immigration	Interview Language
Freddy	3.0	first	18	13	English
Rafael	2.9	first	20	13	Spanish
Ariel	3.85	first	21	14	English
Luis	3	second	22	U.S. born	English
Franklin	2.7	second	22	U.S. born	English

Table 1.2 - Women's Grade Point Average, Generation, Current Age and Age at Immigration					
Pseudonym	G.P.A./ Major	Generation	Current Age	Age at Immigration	Interview Language
Maggie	2.9	second	20	U.S. born	English
Rina	3.1	second	20	U.S born	English
Elizabeth	3.92	second	22	US born	English
Gladys	3.9	first	22	12	Spanish, some English
Wanda	3.4	first	21	6	English
Ana	2.7	first	19	13	Spanish

Tables 1.3. and 1.5 focus on men's and women's family structures. At first glance, the information in the tables do not appear very different between the genders. For example, parents' educational attainment was typically limited to high school for both men and wom For most of these students, they were indeed the first in their families to attend college.

Table 1.3 and 1.6 shows how many siblings men and women had. Relationships with siblings tended to be positive except for two first generation participants who were separated from their siblings due to immigration. Although this separation was not described entirely as negative, Gladys and Anna noted that due to the immigration process, they experienced psychological distance from their brother and sisters.

Upon studying the columns labeled "Family Structure," there are some distinctions. Most of the men (four out of five) come from single mother headed households, while most of the women (five out of six) come from two parent households. These differences warrant some

explanation and suggest further analysis. In reaching academic goals men reported a sense of feeling unsupported, while women discussed the support that was readily available to them. In light of the family structure, this finding seems rational. With mothers out in the workforce, men were not privileged to the presence of an adult at home to help with homework or give advice about career and other developmental tasks. Furthermore, being raised by a single mother contributed to a greater sense of obligation of being a provider. Men also disclosed that wanting to be a good student was challenging, particularly when being a “dropout” was a common phenomenon among men in their communities. Rather than a focus on power and money, the men in the group seemed to struggle with finding meaning in their lives. Many of them voiced wanting to “stop being treated like a baby,” but were often unable to put into words why young Dominican men often get “sidetracked” from their goals. They often offered words like “lazy” to describe why young men dropped out of college or were conflicted about college being a pathway to success. At large, the young men from the sample who were figuring out what they wanted out of life lacked social and cultural resources to explore avenues of interest that were not necessarily available to the men in their immediate cultural contexts.

Although women did disclose that college was challenging, unlike the men, women did not identify “dropping” out as an issue that afflicts women in general. Women presented a sense of empowerment, hope, and confidence in their abilities to transform their lives. All of them embraced education as the means to do so and prioritized their opportunities to be in school, even in face of personal challenges, such as being a single mother. Unlike the men, these women had support within their immediate families and networks outside their homes to provide resources, knowledge, and guidance. Of particular importance was the support provided by both or one of their parents in their ambitions for pursuing college.

Another interesting variation was in how participants chose to culturally identify themselves (Table 1.7). Most of the first generation participants identified as Dominican. Among the second generation students, the responses were more diverse (Dominican, Dominican American, Hispanic and Latino). Second generation immigrants tend to use both ethnic and pan-ethnic identities to describe their cultural heritage (Kasinitz et al., 2004). Some may also use race to describe their cultural membership, particularly if their phenotype (skin color and hair texture) lends itself to belonging under categories that have been constructed within the American descriptions of culture (Bailey, 2000). One participant, Maggie, described her identity as Dominican on paper (i.e. on the demographic questionnaire), but as Black in her narratives.

Table 1.3 Men's Parental Education Attainment and Family Structure			
Pseudonym	Mother's Educations	Father's Education	Family Structure
Freddy	High School	College	Mother & Father Divorced
Rafael	Jr. High School	College	Single Mother
Ariel	Some College	High School	Mother & Step Father
Luis	High School	High School	Single Mother/Widow
Franklin	Some High School	Unknown	Single Mother

Table 1.4 – Men’s Childhood caregiver and siblings		
Pseudonym	childhood caregiver	Siblings
Freddy	mother	younger brother
Rafael	aunt and mother	twin brothers whom he has never met
Ariel	grandparents	only child
Luis	mother and father	older sister
Franklin	mother	older sister

Table 1.5 Women’s Parental Education Attainment and Family Structure			
Pseudonym	Mother's Educations	Father's Education	Family Structure
Maggie	Some High School	Unknown	Single Mother
Rina	High School	Jr. High School	Mother & Father Married
Elizabeth	High School	Some College	Mother & Father Married
Gladys	Some Jr. High School	High School	Mother & Step Father
Wanda	College	High School	Mother & Father Married
Anna	High School	Middle School	Mother & Father Married

Table 1.6 – Women’s Childhood caregiver and siblings		
Pseudonym	childhood caregiver	siblings
Maggie	mother	three older brothers
Rina	mother and father	older brother
Elizabeth	mother and father	younger sister
Gladys	grandparents	older brother
Wanda	mother and father	younger sister, older sister
Anna	grandparents	younger sister, older sister

Table 1.7 Cultural Identification	
Pseudonym	Cultural Identification
Freddy	Different
Franklin	Dominican
Rafael	Dominican
Ariel	Dominican
Luis	Hispanic
Rina	Dominican-American
Elizabeth	Hispanic
Gladys	Dominican
Wanda	Hispanic
Anna	Hispanic/Latino
Maggie	Dominican

Mens' Narratives

We're just lazy.

When asked to speculate about why the college completion rates for men were half of that for women (18% vs. 36%) both men and women gave responses that centered on “guys are just lazy” or “guys are just not motivated.” I asked participants to clarify their understandings of the expression lazy and I found that much of the time “lazy” was the default expression given to describe some very common features of young college students: “being undecided” or “lacking maturity;” two states of being that are not necessarily restricted to young men only but often are synonymous with cultural expressions like “girls mature faster than boys.” Examine Rina’s response about her brother’s college experience,

Like let’s say, he didn’t know what he wanted like what he wanted to major in and he didn’t know what career he wanted to do, but I already knew what I wanted to do. I already knew what I was focused on. So like I learned that from him and my brother -- ‘cause he was on the baseball team, so he was like -- he slacked off and stuff so I tried to be more focused. I didn’t want to do - - like I didn’t want to do everything that would drive my attention from college. He didn’t work and go to college, and I work and go to college too. So, I just try to do things differently.

Rina’s older brother, who studied business in college, decided to join NYPD upon graduation. Rina claims that he “spent a lot of time fooling around” in college and did not bother to explore the real purpose of obtaining a bachelor’s degree. As she claims above, she did not want to make the same mistakes. She also describes that he did not know “what major he wanted to study or what career he wanted to enter, whereas, I did.” The fact that Rina’s brother

was undecided as a college student is not uncommon for many young people, both men and women, yet it clearly is of significance in Rina's life. She prides herself on being goal-oriented as she says, "I wanted to learn from his mistakes because I wanted to make my parents more proud, so I tried to do it better." When I asked, "What prevented your brother from getting it right? I guess he just wasn't serious enough." Not "being serious enough" was also shared by Wanda

Wanda and I discussed whether the boys she knew in high school continued to pursue their education. She claimed she could not recall whether or not they ever applied to college. She recalls boys "being challenged" to finish high school, although getting through high school was particularly challenging for "all of us;" men and women.

Well, one thing that I know they needed, like school was kind of pushed back for them, some guys like got someone pregnant. So they're like, "Okay, I can't really go to school anymore. I need to provide." And they were just not serious. Everything was a joke to them, so they wouldn't take school seriously or anything seriously. So that's what I can think about them.

Wanda's comments raise two important points about young men: 1) it is assumed that the desire for young men to provide comes from young men "not taking school seriously," and 2) that if the role of provider is prioritized, school is not. This point suggests that there may be an underlying assumption about gender roles and that men are held accountable to for certain tasks (providing rather than studying). What Wanda and Rina, and others take for granted, it seems, is that "not being serious" is attributed to a sex difference; that men are this way given their biology.

However, what is most notable was that women were not the only ones who attributed "not being serious" as a masculine trait; men also shared the same assumptions.

We don't know what we want.

Franklin's point is informative of many young men who may not be the "ideal student." The desire and ability to "get As" is one marker of academic success, but as we see in Franklin, "just wanting to learn" may be another. This may be why,

I purposely don't do the things I need to do to get where I need to go. I know I'm lazy, it's self-damaging. But I'm a dude. It just feels like pressure, to me, to us. I wish I had a light bulb moment, where I could know this is the decision I need to make. But I feel like I'm not ready to make a decision. For now school is a safety zone.

Again, there is an assumption that "laziness" is self-manifested; that somehow not prioritizing "A" grades or being an "ideal student" is a "dude" thing. Lopez (2003) argues that this kind of behavior is not at all unusual for young men of color. "Gendering" laziness as male attribute is often part of the institutional micro-aggressions that these young men experience in school settings. Just like having to be "frisked" at the school entrance or being asked to remove "your baseball hat," when girls in the classroom can sport theirs, men of color are either "threatening" or "lazy and not serious about school" (p. 83).

In the context of day to day life, racist incidents such as these require some level of psychological immunity for survival (Cross, W. E., 1995; Cross, W. E., 1991). For Black people socialized in the United States, the degree to which one can be immune to racist behavior correlates with the degree to which one identifies as Black. The more immersed one is in his blackness, the more rejecting one is of anything or anyone that represents the dominant "white" culture, including aspects of the self that may be embraced by the dominant culture. The more integrated one's blackness is across other salient aspects of self (e.g. a love of school), the more one can effectively block out damaging incidents that reject blackness, while holding on to things that are beneficial to the self as a whole.

Based on this theory, the ability to integrate one's racial or ethnic identity into other aspects of "manhood" is an important developmental task for men of color, including the ones who participated in this study. Although these young men did not define themselves as Black, they 1) identified as Dominican, Hispanic or Latino and 2) were aware that "Dominican" was not white. Each of these young men accepted the idea that living in the United States would automatically carry the burden of experiencing racism. Yet those who were most upset about living in a racist society, continued to struggle with articulating what kind of man is the *Dominican* man.

The process of defining one's manhood becomes even more difficult when the institutional setting in which different possibilities could be explored already categorize these men as "underperforming" (Lopez, 2003). For example, although most of these young men were currently experiencing academic success, all of them described high school in a negative way. "I would cut class, hang out with slackers." I was barely passing. Another young man shares, "they actually kicked me out, and told me I did not have enough credits to graduate. Cutting class or dropping out in this context can be perceived as a psychological confrontation: a "facing of the [white] Man" of some sort (Cross, 1991, p. 212). The young man confronts rejection from the school setting (Caucasian teachers and administrators who have already labeled him as "not smart enough" or "at risk" by actively avoiding these settings. One could argue that young men's choice to not prioritize school is just that an individual choice that is encouraged by his school's institutional structure. However, for the young men in the sample positive school decisions did matter, "I didn't like school until my teacher put me in the smart class, because she said you're different: you're a smart kid. I don't want you to be around them (the other class)." Luis is now a Dean's List student and is getting ready to graduate from college. In the world outside of school,

these men faced similar struggles defining manhood. The next section will address these challenges at length.

I don't know how to be a man.

“If you are a man, you know what to do.” Yet the men in the group were not always certain of how to achieve their goals. Most did not do well in high school and were at the brink of dropping out; some had to attend alternative high schools due to expulsion. A change or refocus occurred, when they were awakened to the realization that college could become a platform for success. Freddy describes this realization as he talks about a picture of a college graduation. “Graduation represents fulfilling those moments that show I have taken what I really wanted for myself in order to succeed. I could say it's a good start to my life, so if you don't do the basics, you won't be on the next level. This will get me to the next level.”

In general, the men in the sample talked very little about others supporting any of their developmental goals, whether personal, academic or financial. This may be due to who is and who is not in the home (Kasinitz, 2004). All but one of the participants was raised by a single mother; fathers had either divorced the mother or had never been involved as a parent or partner. As a result the mother was designated to provide all the roles relevant to sustaining their child, instead of it being a shared responsibility. One of these roles was of provider, and all of the men had mothers who worked full-time (see table 1.3).

Like the mothers of many first generation Dominican youth, and the young men in the sample, Rafael's mother emigrated to the U.S. when he was a young child. During those years, Rafael lived with his grandmother. His mother would wire money, and his father, who never

married his mother and seldom visited, also provided financial support. Things changed when Rafael turned eighteen. My father said,

Ya yo no tengo que ver contigo, ya eres un hombre. Y.. supongo que mi papa sabe que yo estoy en la Universidad. En los siete años que estoy aquí, me ha llamado una vez. Yo lo llame despues y me toco un numero equivocado. El tambien era diferente alla/ I don't need to look after you anymore, you are now a man...and I suppose my father knows I'm in college. I really don't know. In the seven years that I have been here [in the U.S], he has called me once. I called him back and the number had been changed. He was also different back there [in DR].

At eighteen, in his father's eyes, Rafael was a man. He could support himself, make a living and begin his life; this is what is assumed in Dominican culture. The fact that Rafael lives with his mother, who financially supports him, places additional pressure on what a "man" is supposed to do. As he states, "It's hard to do what I want." Although he "*l'admiro mucho/* admires her greatly," I don't want to work so hard I want to go to school." On the other hand, just as a parent would worry about their child's happiness, he worries about his mother,

No se si ella esta contenta... lo unico que se es que no termino de estudiar y siempre quiso, pero para mi ha logrado mucha cosa-me saco adelante y por eso la quiero ayudar pero no me voy a meter en una depression/ I don't know if she is happy. The only thing I know is that she did not finish school and always wanted to, but for me she has achieved a lot. She succeeded in giving me a better life and for that I want to help her, but I will not go into a depression.

Rafael is faced with a dilemma: does he choose to work and help his mother or does he prioritize school over improving the economic situation in his household? Given that the Dominican immigrant community continues to remain one of the poorest in the city, many of these participants are faced with this dilemma (Kasinitz, 2004). Lopez (2003) argues that young Dominican men are often absolved of the "adult responsibilities imposed on their female

counterparts,” and suggests that the lack of imposition may foster indifference or indecision when it comes to “evaluating choices about marriage, education and career” (p. 132).

Rafael cannot escape the responsibility to work, he understands that his mother has and continues to sacrifice a lot for his well-being. He applies for jobs, but cannot seem to find one that meets his expectations; something that he likes to do, rather than a job to make money. He explains his frustrations below,

Por ejemplo a mi me dieron un trabajo en el Body Shop.. y le comente a mi primo, ‘cono, 5 clases en cuales me quiero dedicar y ahora tener que hacer algo que no me gusta (vender)! y de una vez se me rompio la mente. El me dice, pero tu eres el hombre mas raro, te dan trabajo, y se te mete una depression! No lo cogi!/For example, I was offered a job at the Body Shop and I told my cousin. Five classes of which I want to concentrate on and now I have to do something I don’t like (sales)! And right away, my mind was broken into worry..My cousin says to me, you are the strangest guy- they give you a job and you get depressed! I didn’t take it! (the job).

Rafael never took that job or any other job, except at an afterschool program where he worked as a tutor when he was not attending class. Although the job did not pay well, he enjoyed helping his tutees and it did not interfere with school.

I want more than a paycheck.

Luis was the only student who distinctly discussed the importance of material wealth. The images of success he included were of a Mercedes Benz, \$100 dollar bills and a penthouse. Luis expressed wanting “to make in the hundred thousands,”

This is a Mercedes S class 600... what I see executives get driven in...A hundred plus is like my ideal salary, that’s what big wig’s make. I see success like a big executive working in a big high rise office. When asked where he thought images like these came from, he replied, “You see this in... maybe in the media, in the movies. You don’t see successful people working in a dingy office. Usually, you see them in a big high rise building in a huge office or something.

Luis is also the only one that connected a specific income to success, “Although \$45,000 may be his starting salary as an NYPD,” he “realistically, at least by the time I’m in my mid-30’s, would like to make over \$100,000”. Luis was also the only one who seemed much attached to cultural representations of wealth. He and his mother, who owned her own cleaning service, cleaned offices in the Financial District down on Wall Street. Luis referenced metaphors of “businessmen and business culture” each time he introduced the topic of personal success,

These pictures are taken around where I work. It's like a financial company. This is their rooftop deck and I guess one of the executive's cars. I associate like people in that work environment like in that profession, they're wealthy. They have a lot of money like businessmen that's like where most of the money is. So I associate that with success also. The car....This is like the Mercedes S600. I associate that with success because that's basically what executives get driven in like that or things like that, an expensive car.

Although material wealth was also a priority for the remaining male participants these four young men shared that they sometimes felt like "outcasts," because they wanted something more than a paycheck. “I don’t want any money. But I want a certain status from which I would be able to change stuff and then help people like, like the Dominicans and Latinos ... that is why I’m shooting for something big.” Ariel, who characterized himself as “very ambitious” had a 3.9 grade point average and was preparing to take his LSAT (Law School Admission Test). In his “Images of Success” exercise he included photos of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, two of his idols, “Che and Fidel worked for the people and that is what I want my life’s work to be, to work for the people to work for DR.” For Ariel, helping others is the essence of “being successful or being smart, being thoughtful, being really intelligent because -- it’s ...you know, helping people and that’s what’s important and for me it’s like, how many people I’m able to touch and that’s what I do want to do.”

Rafael also does not prioritize making money into his picture of success. “*Para mi el exito es lograr lo que tu quieres/ For me success is to achieve what you desire.*” Though some of his images were of wealthy people (Michael Jackson, Aventura , a bachata music band, and James Cameron, the film director), their success was marked by their abilities to “*echar pa’ lante y ser conocido por la capacidad de cambiar su ambiente artistico aunque se les hizo dificil* - push forward with their goals and be known for their abilities to transform their particular artistic environment, even when it got difficult.” Although, we did not go into depth about each of these artists, Rafael admires the “against all odds” situations that these artists faced, while trying to “*dejar su herencia en el mundo*, leave their mark or legacy in the world.” For example, Michael Jackson as the first black pop singer who became “*conocido por el mundo entero*, known all over the world,” James Cameron success with the film, Avatar, which he “*tuvo la vision antes de tener la tecnologia necesaria/ had the vision before the necessary technology* and Aventura, who “*hizo que bachata se convirtiera en algo mundial/ globalized bachata music.*” Like these individuals, Rafael who “*me crie en un barrio donde habia much delinquencia/ who was raised in a neighborhood in which there was lots of crime*, aspires to “*cambiar la delinquencia porque me hace sentir bien cuando hago lo correcto/ change crime because it makes me feel good when I do things according to the law.*” Not surprisingly, he aspires to be a police officer because that is what he finds to be personally fulfilling,

Como cada quien, yo disfruto de lo que quiera hacer, por ejemplo cuando sea policia , voy a trabajar nueve, once horas, y lo voy a disfrutar porque es lo que me gusta pero. Si yo trabajara en una factoria me tiro de un puente. A mi me gusta trabajar por lo que yo quiero solamente.

Like most people, I enjoy what I like to do, for example, when I become a police officer, I may have to work nine, eleven hour days, and I am going to enjoy it. But if I had to work in a factory, I would jump off a bridge. I like to work but only in what I want: what I like.

I don't want to be like my dad.

As Franklin describes a picture of a family of four (husband, wife and two children) he states “This was the hardest one to come up with, cuz, I don’t see it now, but I mean eventually... I would like to settle down, raise a family, be able to have children; it’s something I would, you know, consider successful.” No other young man from the group was so candid about his desire to have a family and at the same time, his reservations. Unlike the other men who mentioned “having a family” in the same matter of fact manner as a “house or car,” Franklin gave raising children more thought. “Raise them right, you know...work on me and my issues...work on me, so I have my things together and organized as well as my wife before the kids. I find it like irresponsible to just like have a kid.” Franklin’s honesty is evidence that young, twenty-something year old Dominican males can be thoughtful and responsible about child rearing and relationships; even if their own fathers were not. Although I do not want to discount the impact that growing up without a father in the home, I also do not want to make it the central focus of Franklin’s life or young men like him, which were most of the men in the sample. As he shares,

I’m not going to be like him [my dad]. If it has impacted me, my mother and my father not being together, that I have issues with intimacy and relationships, I don’t know. It just doesn’t work, it might just be something with me. I mean even when he was there, he wasn’t really there and when he was it was not good. I just want to be the best person for my kids.

Unlike Franklin, Freddy’s father was physically present. Yet, he feels emotionally estranged to him; he cannot connect with him. To Freddy, his father is far from an ideal role model,

I don't want my life to be like him. He made it to this country and that's a great step, but he has not accomplished anything that different. He is a good father but his life is like a marble, he is there but there is nothing that I can see moving in him. I know he works, but he doesn't really have anything to share with me. He's like oh, my son is grown up, let me give him some Brugal (Dominican rum).

Freddy, whose main mentors when arriving in the U.S. were his uncles, does not relate to his father and the values his father finds meaningful. Unlike his father, he perceives his uncles as having progressed to another level other than "businessman". His uncles finished their college education in the United States and became teachers, while his father (their brother) worked as a parking attendant and cab driver. Although Freddy shares that his father has been able to maintain a certain quality of life back in the Dominican Republic, he owns a home and two cars, Freddy feels like "he doesn't really have anything to share with me other than some rum." His sense of manhood entails more than drinking with other men. The model of masculinity that his father offers is not one Freddy feels particularly connected to; more importantly, it may be one that is unfamiliar to Freddy's father.

I don't need to be a perfect student.

Franklin's main concern is "doing something that you don't want to do with any intention of getting out of it." Often feeling like "he's under pressure and that he "just needs to get out and is tired of being babysat," he wonders if school is right for him.

I don't see anything coming out of certain things like a high school diploma or a college degree. I mean I always knew I didn't want to lead a dead end life. But unfortunately for me I don't know any other way to go about becoming successful but to be in school. If there was another way, maybe I wouldn't be here.

I was surprised by Franklin's response. Although he did not strike me as the most academically driven student, he was bright, open and very insightful. He gave me an example of what he describes as his "laziness,"

For example, I have a paper due tomorrow. I have until 3:30. You can hand it after Spring Break, but the penalty will be a letter grade. I'm seriously thinking about it to hang out. The thing is I never considered the successful person the one who gets the As, the grade doesn't concern me as much, as far as where I want to go with it. I'm not trying to go to medical school or law school. I just want to learn a lot. But I'm not the ideal student for most professors, raising my hand, sharing my comments.

Franklin's point is informative of many young men who may not be the "ideal student." Where the desire and ability to "get As" is a common marker of academic success, as we see in Franklin, "just wanting to learn" may be one marker that we must think about, "I purposely don't do the things I need to do to get where I need to go. I know I'm lazy, it's self-damaging. It just feels like pressure. I wish I had a light bulb moment where I could know, this is the decision I need to make. But I feel like I'm not ready to make a decision. For now school is a safety zone." Lopez (2003) argues that this kind of behavior is not at all unusual. For men of color, institutional settings may not be supportive of the ways men of color create meaning in their lives, particularly of their masculinity. The underlying cultural assumptions may overvalue "good" grades, high test scores and other traditional means of assessing and predicting student's success. Unfortunately, they have done little to address Franklin's biggest fear: "My biggest fear would be to instantly get stuck in a situation and not have any options." Franklin and his peers, like many urban young men of color who come to higher education are seeking other options beyond what they have seen in their communities. Yet, these men and their academic setting seem to be talking past each other, each one not understanding what is most meaningful in their

respective worlds. Their female counterparts have had a different experience. We will examine their narratives in the next section.

Women's Narratives

I don't need a man.

Young women wanted to focus on becoming independent and on sustaining a career and a family. These developmental goals reflect what has also been found in studies of young white women attending college (Josselson, 1996.) They wanted to be in a position where they did not have to depend on anyone financially and could still contribute to and raise a family. In order to have these things, these women believed that a college education was key. While both genders spoke of education as a key to success, women were fiercely convinced that having a degree would make a substantial difference in their lives as well as in the lives of all women. With this conviction, they were able to finish school and convince those around them that education was indeed a valuable tool for female success. Wanda shares,

...for women to like really making money, even though it will be less than men, education is necessary. I know that my competition is in a man's world, as people say, and the only way that I will be even able to compete is with my education. Like to let them know, this is what I have against you. My education is what will make them pick me versus someone who doesn't have the education.

Wanda, who graduated summa cum laude in Sociology shortly after our interview, often described herself as a "go getter." As the middle child of three girls and the first to graduate from college, her older sister enrolled but took some time off to get married and raise a baby. She was very proud of her accomplishments, "I'll be first in my family, in my immediate family to graduate with a four-year college degree, something that I'm really proud of because I'm not the

first child. I'm the middle child. I think that my success is the reason why my sisters will be successful now. My older sister just enrolled for the Fall." Wanda views her ability to complete a degree with pride, but her biggest accomplishment is the effect that it has had on her sisters. They will now be able to follow in her footsteps.

I can do what I want not what I should.

Like Wanda, Rina argues that a college degree can be empowering, not because of the financial rewards, but because of the ability to break free from stereotypes. She further maintains that while it empowers her, it also empowers young women like her,

I guess like there's a stereotype of females in Dominican families that they have to be housewives and they have to stay home and take care of their kids. And I'm guessing by women going to college its proving it (stereotype) wrong, that they can do what men do or maybe even better. And I guess just by them going to college is proving society in general wrong that Dominican women are smarter or even better than men, and they could do what men could do better. So, I guess that's what drives them-me, to go to college and break away from that stereotype.

Rina's occupational aspirations are themselves a break from the "traditional Dominican housewife." Although her initial interest in attending a college which specializes in Criminal Justice was to enter the field as a prosecutor, she opted to join the Federal Marshals. At first, this choice was not well-received by her father, who supported her law school aspirations and her older brother's career as a New York City Police Officer. "He doesn't want me to be a police officer 'cause I'm a girl. He thinks it's dangerous but I don't know in the end, I guess he saw how serious I was about it."

Maggie, a young single mother of one, also views her education as a powerful tool for ending stereotypes of herself and other young Latinas,

I got pregnant in high school, and the whole statistics about pregnant women never finishing high school, I didn't want to be one of those. I didn't want to be part of the statistics and of other women. And I guess we females want to do better for ourselves, and especially when we come to school and hear about the hardship females went through back in the day, either they're African-Americans, Hispanics, people like us. And it's like we just don't want to be a part of that oppression, women want to be independent. We don't want the need to depend on anyone and especially a man because we do not want to feel controlled.

The most important woman in Maggie's life is her three year old daughter, and the goals she has for her child are part of a life outside her East Harlem Projects,

When I had her [my daughter] I totally wanted to get away from them [my family and neighbors]. There was like constantly fighting every day in the house, on the block, cops coming to the house, to the block, too much alcohol in my house. I didn't want my daughter to visualize all those things. It is just terrible. It would have brought her down and then she'll probably be growing up like. You know, I could do this because, you know, I see it in my household, in my neighborhood. I can't have that. She is going to high school. She is going to college. She is getting out of here.

With no role models in her immediate context, Maggie is decided to be the woman she wants her daughter to be and her first step is going to college. Other women have found empowerment in becoming committed to their true passions; an option not always available to young single mothers like Maggie.

I could not have done this without help.

As an aspiring writer and poet, Gladys's photos were perhaps the most metaphorical. "Es una foto de un ave grande y un ave pequeña, se esta sosteniendo de la grande ...y van volando juntos, so es como llegar a tu meta no se con la ayuda de tu 'network'/' a picture a big bird and a smaller bird, the smaller one supported by the bigger on (on his back)...they are flying together, so it's like reaching your goals with the help of a network." Gladys attributes success as something that cannot be accomplished alone. Raised by a caregiving network that included her grandmother,

aunts and uncles, she is “muy agradecida/ very grateful” for this “gran momento/great moment” of graduation. To an image of an upward staircase, which she explains as “toda escalera que va subiendo significa exito/ stairs that go up always indicate success” as how “I see my life unfolding.” Her greatest goal, to “agrandecer mi conocimiento y tener lo en mis manos/ enlarge my knowledge and hold it in my hands, represented by an image of the world sustained in someone’s hands,” defines her vision for growth, both personally and academically,

Yo quisiera tener una vision global, una mente abierta, porque eso es lo que nos lleva a la puerta hacia el exito. Una mente amplia, se te hace mas facil (vivir en el mundo) cuando puedes entender la sociedad donde uno vive./ I would like to have a global vision, an open mind, because it’s what brings you towards the door of success. An ample mind, it makes it easier to live in the world, if you can understand the society in which you live in.

Gladys also feels a strong conviction for education, because it enables her to tap into her passions. Her mother, who left Gladys and her brother in the care of their maternal grandmother, when she arrived in New York, has worked long and hard in the restaurant business. Gladys recalls feeling her mother’s absence, because she was always working, “Mami nunca ha sacado tiempo ni para mi ni para mis cosas, siempre estaba trabajando” *Mummy has never taken the time neither for me nor my stuff, she was always working...* Gladys is confident that her life will not be like her mother’s “*aunque se ha sacrificado para que yo lo tenga todo, yo digo wow cuando yo tenga mi familia, no voy a querer sacrificarme tanto para que ellos lo tengan todo*” although she (my mom) has sacrificed everything so that I could have everything, I think wow, when I have my own family; I don’t want to sacrifice so much so that they could have everything.” She recognizes the financial difference having a degree can make “why not go to school for 10 years and earn after that what you would make after working 20,” like my mom.” Yet, an education represents more than just upward mobility,

Si uno ve la vida solo con lentes economicos, uno se conforme con poco, pero con el conocimiento, nunca desaparece, mas que ser rica me llena, lo que tu tienes aqui es lo unico que no te pueden quitar. If you view life from financial glasses only, you settle for little, but with knowledge, it never disappears, more than being rich, it fulfills me, what you have in here (your head), no one could ever take from you.

An education represents a very personal sense of “fulfillment,” of something that enriches Gladys’s life like nothing else, not even financial prosperity. So much so that she plans to pursue a doctorate in English Literature and become a college professor, “I don’t picture myself outside of school, I feel drawn to it.”

Another young woman, Elizabeth, understands that it is “her duty to go to school and do better and that without the support of her parents, she would be unable to move forward with her goals as a second generation immigrant, she talks of herself as a,

Pioneer who is laying down the Garcia (her family name) groundwork” for future generations and the strong obligation to do well I feel like a major motivation for me is my parents in a way. Like I want to succeed, but I feel like I need to succeed. Because they put in that effort. You know, maybe like -- almost -- I thought about it as a luxury that some people might have if like their parents or something are established here, generations and generations have been here, that they can in a way slack off. I don’t know. It’s like I feel like sometimes that I don’t have the luxury of being able to slack off. Because I feel like I’m still working on what they’re working on. You know, like they started off without education. And now, I can have an education so I need to like push it forward for them. If I have children, then they have a little more of that luxury ‘cause then they will be I guess third generation immigrant.

Elizabeth acknowledges that the opportunity to become educated also carries a strong sense of responsibility. She is “pushing it forward” not just for her parents, but her younger sister and her future children. Out of all the participants, mostly women included pictures of their own family members, or of family. For these young ladies, there is an acknowledgement that college was only possible with the sacrifices of their parents. Rina, who includes a picture of her mother says, “They don’t regret coming here. They saw it as the best thing even though it was a sacrifice...

‘cause they gave us -- I guess the outcome of them coming here for us and seeing us graduate, without them, especially my mom, I wouldn’t be successful.” Gladys cites the significance of her father pinning her at an honor student society dinner, Elizabeth acknowledges that the opportunity to become educated also carries a strong sense of responsibility. She is “pushing it forward” not just for her parents, but her younger sister and her future children. Out of all the participants, mostly women included pictures of their own family members, or of family. For these young ladies, there is an acknowledgement that college was only possible with the sacrifices of their parents. Rina, who includes a picture of her mother says, “They don’t regret coming here. They saw it as the best thing even though it was a sacrifice... ‘cause they gave us -- I guess the outcome of them coming here for us and seeing us graduate, without them, especially my mom, I wouldn’t be successful.” Gladys cites the significance of her father pinning her at an honor student society dinner,

The picture, my father took it, we were supposed to bring someone to pin you, y fue un velorio, estabamos llorando. El en si, es mi padastro, yo lo elegi a el, porque las imagenes que tengo de alguien empujando me es el. El se sentaba conmigo a ser la tarea. Mami, no saca tiempo, El siempre me ha apoyado/ and it was like a funeral wake, we were all crying from emotion! You see, he is my stepfather and I chose him, because of all the images I have of someone pushing me, it has always been him. He would sit down with me and help me with homework. Mami would not make the time. He has always supported me.

Although she does not cry when she shares this story with me, I could feel the love and gratitude she has for her stepfather. She even shares a picture with me on her cell phone and says, “Nos parecemos, no... (we look alike, no), even though he is not my biological dad.

CHAPTER IV

Life Sketches

Performances and Practices of Dominican Students

Findings for this section will be illustrated through the use of life sketches. It is divided into two sections. Each section draws and spans through the lives of individual participants. The sections are divided by 1) performances/practices and 2) transformations. My hope was to present a developmental perspective on each life. While the interviews represent a snapshot of the life, it does little to reflect the psychological processes that have occurred through time. These young people are actors of their own lives. They are active participants, playing out the roles they wish to become. I focus on the process of performing first, because it highlights the day to day changes these young people had to negotiate and execute in order to navigate their academic contexts, and ultimately graduate. The process of performing yields a particular outcome, a transformation that changes who they are and how they perceive the world.

The life sketches will introduce the reader to the people whose life-stories have guided my study of identity and success. They highlight important information about cultural background, family structure, significant events, immigration history and educational goals and experience. Each profile serves as an attempt to bring the reader into considering social, cultural and historical constructs including social stratifications as being “at the core, rather than at the periphery” of each life (Garcia Coll et al., 1996, p. 1892). With each life, one can begin to build an understanding as to how these factors might impact each young person’s development of identity and story of success. The sketches depict the themes that emerged within their narratives, and how they have used identity practices to perform or “act out” success in their lives. Their names have been changed and identifying information has not been included.

While these life sketches are in part descriptive, they primarily provide an opportunity to engage in a case by case analysis of a life within a culturally and socially co-created context. In this way, it is not a description of the person and the variables that may affect success but of person-in-context, a way of linking an individual life story “to a cultural and historical narrative

of a particular group;” that is Dominican students who are first and second generation immigrants (Hammack, 2008, p. 232). I begin by introducing each participant individually, providing a brief history that includes basic background information, and key themes that emerged within her or his interview.

Lastly, some life sketches may contain more detailed information than others. I believe this quality of the work may reflect the nature of the work: dealing with human lives. Not everyone is ready to reflect on their lives; others have never been taught how to do so. Some participants were able to talk at length about themselves. It was as if someone had finally given them an opportunity to share all this important information about who they were. Others were faced with these kinds of questions for the first time and the process of sharing their stories may have been unfamiliar. One student was not very process-oriented at all, and it required using some much guided instructions on elaborating and providing further reflection (i.e. tell me more about how did that make you feel). There was also the question of reliability and whether everything that was mentioned in the narratives reflected the actual events that had occurred. Given that my role as a mental health practitioner was known to students since the interviews took place in my office, I experienced some parts of the interview as a type of counseling session, and had to determine which parts to include in my data analysis. One of the male participants felt the need to disclose all his interpersonal and personal difficulties. On my first readings of these transcripts, it seemed as if there were many different themes that were linked to my research questions. However, after deeper analysis, I discovered that they were probably linked to some type of personality condition or illness. Either way, I hope that the reader appreciates the knowledge and depth of the human experience.

Freddy arrived to the United States when he was twelve, when his father petitioned his visa. In the Dominican Republic, he lived with his mother and younger brother. When he arrived to New York, he was taken under his uncles' wings who are school teachers for the New York City Board of Education. He currently has a 3.0 GPA and is majoring in Political Science.

Maggie is a second generation Dominican immigrant. She identifies as African-American and Dominican, and cannot speak Spanish. When she was sixteen, Maggie became pregnant. She was able to graduate on time by taking night classes and attending summer school. Although Maggie struggles in college, she has managed to maintain a 2.9 GPA.

Rafael came from a very poor rural area in the Dominican Republic. His mother traveled to New York in search of work opportunities. He was raised by his grandparents until his mother was able to obtain a visa for him. Although Rafael met his father when he was young boy, their relationship is estranged. Rafael was very close to one of his high school teachers, Ydanis Rodriguez, who is currently serving as a Councilman for New York City. Although Rafael is studying to be a police officer, he is very passionate about film. In his social circle he is known as "el filosofo (philosopher)" for his wisdom. He attributes his lower GPA to taking general required classes as opposed to courses towards his major of study.

Rina was the only participant who attended a private Catholic high school in the city. She is very close to her parents whom she attributes much of her success. With their support, she feels very confident in pursuing her academic and professional goals. In her sophomore year she studied abroad in Italy and France. In her junior year she ran for Student Body President. Rina maintained a GPA of 3.1 throughout college and was on the Dean's List.

Gladys has been a Dean's List student, since her freshman year. After graduation, she will be pursuing doctoral studies in English and Literature. Her goal is to become a college professor. Before coming to the US at the age of twelve, she was raised by her grandmother in a small rural area outside the capital city. Although it is not in the near future, Gladys wishes to return to the Dominican Republic to serve young people in some way.

Luis was born in New York. His father, who was thirty years older than his mother, died when Luis was ten. Luis was a student at risk in junior high school, until his English teacher saw his potential as a student. This teacher would later help him apply to college. In college, Luis became an honors student. His main goal upon graduation is to secure a well-paying career in criminal justice.

Anna is the middle of her two sisters. Her older sister came to New York with Ana's mother and father. Anna and her youngest sister were raised by their maternal grandparents. Since she arrived at sixteen, Anna continues to struggle with English. She has managed to maintain a B in most of her classes by attending tutoring on a regular basis. Although school has been challenging, she loves college.

Ariel has a 3.9 GPA. He defines himself as very ambitious and very articulate. Coming from a poor background in the Dominican Republic, Ariel is extremely proud of his achievements. Additionally, he is very proud of being Dominican. Upon completing a law school degree in the U.S., he plans on returning to the DR and work in politics. His goal is to reform government and work for social justice. Ariel still mourns the death of his grandfather, who was murdered by corrupt police officials, because he would not sell the little land that they owned.

Elizabeth is the only participant who attended a private college. She is also the first in her family to attend college. Although she is planning to pursue a Master's degree in Social Psychology at Columbia University, Elizabeth still feels undecided about what to do with her life. Often feeling estranged from her ethnic identity and culture, she has recently become interested in studying bicultural identity and immigration. This is the main reason she chose to participate in my study.

Wanda is graduating with a summa cum laude. The middle of her sisters, she prides herself on being the first to graduate from college. Her most enjoyable moments in college were her study abroad trips to Barcelona and Buenos Aires. Although she was not born in the United States, living abroad made her realize how much Spanish she had forgotten. She considers herself Dominican, but is often upset at the anti-Blackness that is present among her family. A detail that is particularly troubling, given that her father is phenotypically Black.

Franklin is named after a U.S. president. Raised by a single mother, he is very close to his sister, who is ten years his senior. Franklin has struggled with school all his life, and is wondering whether or not college is right for him. He loves that college offers him options as well as a place to learn new things and people; yet, he does not necessarily equate success with straight As. Franklin's biggest fear is that he will be settling for something he does not really want just for the sake of saying he has it. At the age of twenty one, he has yet to have dated a woman longer than a month.

Social Practices In a Mediated Context.

Social practices are not carried out in isolation, rather within cultural, historical and social contexts (Stetsensko & Arieivitch, 2004). These practices are passed down from one generation

to another, as other forms of inherited social capital and messages of how “to behave” in the world are also passed down in this manner. Even without the shared history of their non-immigrant counterparts, young adults who are immigrants are keen to the idea that certain practices are performed in a given context; even in contexts where they as individuals are not necessarily valued or embraced. For example, many of the participants cited the school context as one that did not always value who they were. Some quickly became adept to repeating only those practices which yielded positive outcomes (e.g. speaking more English than Spanish). This realization often came at a price as repeated performances sometimes left the performer unable to distinguish himself/herself from his/her context. This chapter examines the psychological impact of this process.

How to “play” a Dominican in a Predominantly White College.

In our first interview, I was immediately struck by Elizabeth’s lack of knowledge about her parents’ migration story. She placed their arrival to New York sometimes in 1985, because she had been born in 1988 and assumed that her parents had not been in the country that long. She also was unaware of the fact that her mom had come to the country undocumented. Her response to not knowing the “story” was “I don’t really ask about things... I won’t talk to my family.” She even makes a joke about it; “Like what did you cook? I don’t even ask that, I just eat!” At first, Elizabeth’s explanation seemed perfectly appropriate to me; after all, in my ten year tenure of counseling twenty one year olds, parents tend to fall on the bottom of the “friend’s” list. I even saw glimpses of my college self in this warm, reflective, articulate young woman. For example, she talked about growing up on Staten Island, where her parents were “the only brown people on the block.” I certainly could empathize that growing up in Chelsea, Manhattan, where the only brown people in my apartment building were my family and the custodial staff. She also spoke

of her love of indie rock, an aesthetic pleasure which often left others asking, “Are you sure you’re Dominican?” However, as our interview continued and I found myself speculating about what Elizabeth might be hiding from me; there was just something about her story that did not sync. In her narrative, what Elizabeth terms as the “white, Hispanic girl, like white on the inside, kind of thing,” seemed to coat the layers of identity and experience that she had come to know as her life.

During her education at a small private, liberal arts college in the suburbs of New Jersey, Elizabeth had never really embarked on social experiences outside of her college campus, except on family trips to the Dominican Republic. At the time of our interview, Elizabeth described being curious about her background and dual exclusion (where one can be excluded both by the majority and his/her reference group) as a spark that had developed out of her psychology senior seminar class in Bicultural identity. Her own experiences at college had never left her feeling excluded-except when she was around other Latinos/Hispanics. She talked about “I’m trying to embrace the fact that I’m Hispanic maybe, because I am older and ...the research I’m interested in.” However, other than these handfuls of instances, Elizabeth’s college experience was quite typical of a student who lives on campus—daily activities revolved around campus life: attending class, working on campus, and participating in social activities on campus. The only difference between her and her mostly white peers was her background (being born to immigrant parents), and what she felt was her obligation or “not having the luxury to not succeed,”

I want to succeed but I feel I need to succeed. Because they [my parents] put in the effort. I thought about it as a luxury that some people might have if like their parents or something are established here, generations and generations have been here, that they can in a way slack off.

Outside of this urgency to become successful, Elizabeth sees herself as being very integrated into college life. For one, “I’m in the culture of my school. I’m part of the College Union Board (student activities), I just feel like I am a student and I interact a lot with other students and faculty. I know about the school. I just don’t go to class and stay in my room.” Secondly, although her college is not very diverse, Elizabeth who spent her high school years living in Staten island, claims that “all of my friends were white [back then] and now they are” all white or half-white.” In fact, given her consistent ethnic social circle, she “sometimes [I] forget that I’m not white.” I asked her to describe what “forgetting “was like to which she responded the following,

E: I’m like always seen as the white Hispanic girl.

Me: Do people tell you that?

E: Yeah. Like they joke around about how Hispanic I am and they’re like, wait, but you’re not really, you know. You don’t even speak Spanish.

Me: Do you know what that means? Like when they say that to you?

E: Like, I guess from their point of view is that they don’t see me with Hispanic people. If they saw me hanging around with Hispanic friends or something, then I’d be more Hispanic. Yeah that’s where I think it stems from that I forget that I’m not white sometimes. Like in high school, we (me and my white friends) would be in the car and one of them would say something about Hispanic people or black people and then afterwards they would say ‘it’s ok, we’re all white here.’ And they would forget for some reason that I wasn’t white. I do speak Spanish, but only to my parents. I guess I don’t like to, because I have an accent. But now, I feel like I’m more aware of it (that I am not white). Now that I’m trying to embrace my non-whiteness, I’m more aware that I’m not.

In order to feel like she is successful, Elizabeth wants to travel, have a flexible schedule and enjoy her occupational and career endeavors. Through certain occupational roles in college, (i.e. event planning for Student Activities), Elizabeth became aware of how enjoyable even the most stressful of details could be, when one is passionate about the work they are involved in.

She has accepted admission to graduate school (Masters in Social Psychology), although she has no real sense of what she will do with her degree. Her parents have instructed her to consider working full-time and going to school part time, so that she can begin to have some kind of meaningful income. Elizabeth is unsure of what to do, one of her mentors tells her to forget about working for now and pursue a doctorate, which will be more marketable in the long run. However, Elizabeth is not certain she is ready to make such a commitment at twenty-two. The problem is that Elizabeth has no real 'model' to model her life after. She has not related to her parents since childhood; perhaps, her interest in embracing her "Hispanic-ness" is an effort to embrace some kind of 'model' for which to refer back to as she makes life impacting decisions. This probably speaks to many students whose parents are not college educated, but for Elizabeth, as a second generation immigrant, it is yet another layer of uncertainty and pressure (I don't have the luxury to not succeed) to get it right. Perhaps in having white friends, she considered the possibility of being like those friends (i.e. they are American and their parents went to college, they seem to have figured it out.) However, now that she sees how people like her (Latina, female, and dark-skinned) are viewed in the world, she experiences the discomfort of feeling both the 'discriminator' (you're one of us) and the 'discriminated.'

She reflects upon this as she considers white men not wanting to date her,

So for the longest time, I've really just been attracted to white guys. And now it's kind of like shifting where I like white guys, but it doesn't seem probable. I don't know. It just seems like it would be harder for me to find a white person to date. Because it's narrowed down to not just the single white guys, who are straight, but those who also like ethnic girls. What are the chances of that? You know what I mean? It's kind of like there's of a pool of people to date, it kind of like narrows down with all those things and one of those categories is that they have to either not care about the ethnicity of the girl, like they don't have to be white or they have to like be into Hispanic girls or something like that. (laughter). Yeah, that's where I think it stems from, and then I forget I'm not white sometimes. I feel like I'm more aware of it now. I probably was aware of it when I was younger, but I

feel like I can -- now that I'm trying to embrace my non-whiteness, I'm more aware that I'm not white kind of thing. Like in high school -- I probably said this before, but in high school, I had two white best friends. We would be in the car and one of them would say something about Hispanic people or black people or something and then she would after that say, "Oh, it's okay, we're all white here. Oh, wait..." And they would forget for some reason that I wasn't white. And that kind of threw me like, wait a minute, I'm obviously like not white. But it was -- I feel it was more from the way that I acted that they didn't associate me with the other people, like Hispanic people or black people of the school.

Elizabeth's story is unique to the other students. She is the only one who did not attend college at one of the City University of New York campuses; her small private college in New Jersey was predominantly white. Yet her process draws attention to how racial/ethnic identity can differ and develop based on social contexts and limitations. When we first began our interview, Elizabeth talked mostly about how much she really did not know about her family's migration history and more importantly, she did not even care about it. She shared how she felt like she would not fit in in an all Dominican context, "if I went to school here [John Jay], they would know I was an outsider, I can't even dance." She is not at the point where she over idealizes Whites (Preencounter), yet she has come to understand that although she may associate with Whites, many Whites will perceive her as inferior (someone they cannot even date and bring home to their families) (Helms, 1990). This realization is profound for Elizabeth, and although we laughed about it, it was a disappointing revelation of early adulthood. I experienced her as being confused about other aspects of herself, including the career path she wanted to follow.

I feared that the psychological impact this revelation resulted in would keep her from moving forward and integrating a more cohesive, multifaceted view of herself. However, she strongly identified with me and the work that I do with predominantly students of color. A year after our

interview, we met for coffee and discussed career options and directions. I assisted her in finding a job where she could work with mostly Latinos, ironically in a psycho-educational capacity. She did very well.

How to belong when you know you don't.

“Just because you've made it, doesn't mean you belong.” Luis, a man of few words, explains,

I've made friends with people that work down there (Wall Street), and we went to a place like in the Meatpacking District. I felt I was out of place there, because I don't know. It was like the people there were like -- you could just tell like they were in a different and just being around those people is like -- it makes me uncomfortable for some reason. I don't know. But you feel like you don't belong there... like the way they dress, the way they carry themselves. There's something different. They were wearing casual clothes like a button up, jeans, shoes. I was wearing the same things but I don't know. I still felt like out of place. They're more casual, just talking and stuff like that. Even when you go to parties people who have money, they don't really party like people who don't have money. When you go to a party where people do have money, you usually see them like just socializing and talking. When you go to a party where people don't have money, you see them drinking, dancing, having fun. So it's kind of different. Maybe I would have felt more comfortable, if they weren't all white people.

I found this passage to be quite telling about the manner in which wealth creates real and perceived boundaries around race and social class among people of color. Although he himself could not put a finger on what exactly “makes me feel out of place,” he comments on “he would have been more comfortable if they weren't all white people.” Luis expresses what many individuals who are marginalized by urban poverty often experience. In cities like New York, where impoverished neighborhoods are often isolated from not only wealthy neighborhoods, but also from Caucasians, race and class lines often become blurred into one (Kasinitz, 2004). In other words, if you are of a certain color, you are also of a certain social class. Yet, the two are different. Americans have a tendency of categorizing under race, so everything appears “racialized,” even when it is not (p.10.) By focusing on race and the racial identity of those we

study, we tend to miss other social aspects of their selves such as class and gender (Lopez, 2003). From a point of analysis, unraveling these social dimensions of people helps researchers draw conclusions about the repercussions that conditions like poverty may have on how people develop and live their lives.

I should note, however that from Luis's experience and the participants in my study, "It's just real life." Degree or not, he is aware that "Dominicans with a comparatively high level of African ancestry, face discrimination in public spaces, work spaces, and institutional spaces" such as school and housing (Kasinitz, 2004, p. 363).

Our culture has been favoring white people over colored people. I mean it is a fact that we have struggled more than white people, but you can't let that hold you down, like you're going to just give up like that? You've got to at least try.

How to gain opportunities, even when you are an immigrant.

For Rafael, there was a quiet awareness that while certain opportunities are possible, certain markers of success: power, prestige, wealth and status did not belong in the hands of individuals who resembled him (i.e. a person of color, an immigrant). He states,

Aqui me he dado cuenta de tantas cosas, uno se da cuenta de las diferentes caras de la realidad...por ejemplo que haiga un puesto de Supreme Court Justice, y hay miles de blanquitos que aplicen por el trabajo, blanquitos que han ido a las mejores universidades y que tienen dinero y algunos Dominicanos, digamos que aplicen tambien, van a coger el blanquito que fue a una Universidad de prestigio, no el Dominicano que fue a BCC o CUNY!

Here I have come to learn many things... one realizes the many different faces of reality. For example, let's say there is a position for a Supreme Court Justice and there are thousands of 'white people' who apply for the job, white people who attended the best universities, and who have money; and let's say that there are some Dominicans who also apply, there's going to take the white person who went to a prestigious college not the 'Dominican' who went to BCC or CUNY!

Rafael, who is happy to be in the United States, also understands that *having* the opportunity to apply to a Supreme Court Justice appointment and actually *receiving* the position may not be a challenge for people like him. I asked him why he thought he may not be appointed as a Supreme Court Justice, “*Es una buena pregunta, porque los Dominicanos no aplicamos por puestos asi, no se...yo digo porque no hay nadie que se parece a nosotros...quisas ahora con Obama (se rie)*”/ It’s a good question, why don’t Dominicans, why don’t we apply for positions like that (Supreme Court Justice). I say because there is no one that looks like us... maybe now with Obama (he laughs). In his continued reflection, this student justifies Dominican disengagement from the practice of applying for prestigious political appointment by stating “because there is no one that looks like us.” Rafael’s comment brings us to an important point about the importance of role models for young people of color. In his wise insight, he recognizes that while Obama’s presidency marks a victory and promise of possibility for many young people of color, it can potentially change the narrative of the American nation as a whole. The presence of just one man can ultimately transform the personal narratives of these young people. “Maybe now with Obama” marks the transformation of an obscure wish or desire, an imagined story (that a little black/brown boy could someday be the President), into a reality.

How not speaking Spanish made me African-American.

The ability to speak Spanish is very salient to the Dominican community, as well as other Latino immigrants living in the United States (Kasinitz, 2004; Bailey, 2005). For those who are fluent, speaking Spanish provides a connection to the community at large and sense of being rooted within the larger American context as a member of a particular group. If identity is mediated by language, when the capacity to communicate in Spanish is weakened, either because it is not taught or supported by the immigrant’s immediate context, connections to reference

group ethnic identity (i.e. Dominican) may be threatened or lost. In some cases, individuals may even identify with members of ethnic groups that share their immediate social context (Kasinitz, 2004). This phenomenon is quite common between African-Americans and Puerto-Ricans, and most recently second generation Dominicans. Maggie, who was raised in the East Harlem projects, identifies as African American, Black,

I never classify myself as Dominican or Hispanic. I'm an African-American and I will stick to that through everything. I know in all reality I'm Hispanic, and when I have to fill out forms, I would put down Hispanic or Dominican. But no, I never considered myself one of them. I never thought of myself really as a Hispanic and I don't speak Spanish. So I don't speak Spanish, so I don't feel like I'm part of them. I understand it, but I don't communicate with them as much. I grew up with a lot of Blacks. I've been around Hispanics but more with the African-Americans. So I just classified myself as an African-American.

How struggling to write challenged the definition of success.

Difficulty learning English was an academic setback for many students; even for students who were motivated to do well in their studies. Anna's narrative captures this struggle for herself and the group,

... por el Ingles, especialmente, los que venimos de Santo Domingo, nos limitamos por el Ingles, le tenemos miedo.. Mi propia experiencia fue bien difícil, porque si tenia que hacer un papel, primero lo hicia en Espanol, y un poquito de Ingles, pero no, dique tres hojas en Ingles! Y con tantos requisitos, que tiene que tener APA style y sin explicarme lo que era nada de eso! Como que seas son las cosas que hacen que uno se hecha pa' tras... como que uno no puede echar para lante. In terms of English, especially those of us who come from Santo Domingo (DR), we limit ourselves because of English (not knowing it), we are afraid of it. My own experience was very difficult, because if I had to write a paper, first I would do it in Spanish, and a little in English, but not like three whole pages! And then with all these requirements, like that it had to be APA style... and then not even explain to me any of that! These things... these are the kinds of things that keep you [moving] back. It's as if you can't move forward [progress, do something to success].

To “echar pa'lante or “echar para adelante” or “to do something to success” is a Latin-American expression (used widely in the Dominican Republic) that describes a collective

discourse of success. Latinos typically use the expression to describe Latinos as a “successful people who never stop working and trying to come up with something new that takes them closer to achieving their goals” (forum.wordreference.com/showthread.php?t=1105874). Furthermore, it is an expression that stipulates agency; you *have to do* something to change your situation. The fact that the student uses it an expression of power to express the sentiment of powerlessness, is symbolic of how hopeless she feels. If she cannot write English well, she will never be successful here. Drawing on a cultural expression that symbolizes success, Ana’s narratives gives us a glimpse of how she views her “self “in reference to the world around her. She describes the expectations of not being able to write well as “no puedo echar pa’lante,” literally “not being able to do anything successfully” (i.e. to be a success) and references it as the reason for why students (like her) do not continue in college. For someone to include herself in a larger narrative of people who “echar pa’lante,” imagine the disappointment of walking into a context (coming to school) where day after day, your ability to feel that you can succeed is taken away by the very activities you are required to engage in (i.e. writing papers).

Ellos no entiendien, no entendien...cuando ven todas las faltas ortograficas es porque yo no se, como que creen que es otra cosa y se hace dificil. Yo iba al Writing Center, y ponian una cara. Y uno se siente mal, so uno no va./ They don’t understand, don’t understand...when they see all those grammatical errors, they like to believe it’s something else, and it becomes difficult [to go]. I used to go to the Writing Center and they would make such a face... so I don’t go anymore.

Given the shame and lack of empathy she experienced from the writing tutors, Ana stopped attending the Writing center for almost an entire academic year. Although she knew tutoring would greatly improve her academic performance, she decided to rely on her own strategies until she took Speech 101. When the professor noticed her profound anxiety to public speaking, he scheduled an appointment with her. Upon speaking to her, he quickly realized that what she needed was tutoring (not anxiety medication). He referred her to another tutoring center and

suggested she read only in English until her speaking and writing competence improved. At the time of our interview, Ana was in the second semester of her junior year; she had a 3.2 GPA. She was still struggling to “overcome her shyness about having an accent,” but she was feeling more supported and knowledgeable about where to obtain “helpful” resources that would support her efforts to “echar para adelante.”

How to behave in school when you are being singled out.

Students elicited the most negative reactions when they practiced their Dominican identities in the school contexts. Such negativity was often masked by a special interest on behalf of the teacher, “She [the teacher] recognized that there was something different about me” or “that he [the teacher] thought I was different from the other kids,” and “I was favored by the teacher.” Unfortunately, the ability to do well and stand out from peers was at times met with attacks on other aspects of their identity. All of the participants confessed to experiencing some type of discrimination inside the classroom and school contexts. The incidents noted included both subtle and blatant cases of discrimination. For Rafael it was, “You speak differently than you write.” For Wanda, her professor questioned, “Did you really write this?” In Anna’s case they asked, “Did anyone help you write this [paper]?” For Ariel, “Are you sure you’re Dominican, you’re so smart” as well as the following statement. “A public college will definitely take you and make you feel more at home, smaller private colleges might be a challenge for students from your background,” when he considered transferring from a public university to a private one.

Other forms of discrimination involved using the student as the cultural “ambassador” for all Dominicans (i.e. non- Dominican peers asking why Dominican men like to “dress up” and act like “Latin Casanovas”) and being told by Latino peers that “you’re not really Dominican

because you don't speak Spanish). Participants were painfully aware that while they were lucky enough to receive an educator's attention, many of their Dominican peers were not. According to Lopez (2003) "intent or not, formal and informal institutional practices within school 'race' students" (p. 41). Luis shares, "they just think that I'm like smart and that they're (my friends) stupid because my English is good and I don't cut (school), but I knew it wasn't right...it didn't feel right." Furthermore, even with positive attention in the form of being told "you should apply to college" or told "you have a bright future ahead of you," most students did not receive preferential treatment from their all White teachers (Harper, 2012, p.12).

Only two students reported being singled out by a teacher who was from the same cultural background. The students, Gladys and Rafael, attended the Gregorio Lupron High School for Science and Mathematics in Washington Heights. Their teacher, one of the school's founding fathers, Ydanis Rodriguez, is now City Councilman for District 10. The high school which was designed to educate recently arrived immigrants in New York City is well-known for its mission to help students become better human beings so they can help others" (www.insideschools.org/high/browse/school/260). Both students were pushed by Ydanis to "*estudiar obligado*/ study with focus, no excuses". As two of his most disciplined students, they were assigned as mentors to newly arrived first generation freshman. The opportunity to act in the capacity of "teaching someone else the ropes", inspired a sense of competence and ability to aspire for a life that had never been offered to them. For Gladys and Rafael, performing in the school context as mentors marked the beginning of a new phase of transformation in their lives; the ability to create new social practices in their daily lives. The next chapter will highlight stories like Gladys's, in which the "act" of performing certain behaviors, roles or tasks, paves forth transformation in these students' social-cultural contexts.

Transformative Practices of Dominican Immigrant Students

The act of “performing” certain practices in order to adapt to their non-Dominican contexts left participants feeling, transformed, as if they had become different people. In many cases, this transformation was positive experience.

Becoming the “role” you play.

Gladys has been a Deans List student since her freshman year. After graduation, she will be pursuing doctoral studies in English and Literature. Her goal is to become a college professor. Before coming to the US at the age of twelve, she was raised by her grandmother in a small rural area outside the capital city. Although it is not in the near future, Gladys wishes to return to the Dominican Republic to serve young people in some way.

Moving from one country to another requires some level of adaptation for the new immigrant (Deaux, 2006). Some individuals resist the process of adapting to something new; others are able to roll more easily with the changes. Gladys has been able to go with the process. She bears no ill thoughts or anger about being the last member to rejoin the family in New York. She relives the story in a matter of fact, affirmative, manner “*Esta es mi historia, muy chistosa, no?* This is MY story (history), quite funny, no?” It was one of the first things that impressed me about her ability to find humor, meaning and self-understanding in life’s circumstances.

“*Siempre creia que tenia un nivel de madurez alto, yo entendia*, I have always believed that I was very mature for my age, I understood,” she responded when asked about whether she understood why her mother had come to the United States. Gladys was able to grasp that while her mother’s leaving was difficult for all parties involved, it was an economic opportunity to

provide her and her brother with more, even if it caused her to “creci sin mama y sin papa” *grow up without any mom or dad.*

Loss of innocence.

Even so, Gladys marks her arrival to New York as the true “loss of innocence,” “Aqui uno pierde la inocencia mas rapido...cuando yo llege a los 12 anos, ya mi mama me dejaba las llaves de la casa.” *Here one loses one’s innocence at a faster rate... when I was 12; my mother was already leaving me the house keys.* Gladys, who had been raised in a small rural village, was reared by her grandmother to uphold traditional gender roles. By the age of seven, she was washing dishes and by the age of 10 she was expected to learn how to cook. Although girls this age are not expected to learn such things in American culture, Gladys claims that there was certain predictability in knowing that you had to perform to fulfill a certain “*patron de vida*” model of living life. “*Los valores y costumbres son muy distinto, hay una etapa para la ninez por ejemplo, aqui no, Alla dependiendo de donde uno crece, es tu mentalidad. Aqui es mucho mas de mente abierta.*” Values and customs are much more defined; there is a stage for childhood, for example. Over there, everything (the way you see and understand life) depends literally on where you grow up (what town), here, it’s a lot more open-minded.

Awareness of an internal change.

This distinction between her hometown and her arrival to the U.S. became more poignant given that she arrived at the onset of adolescence. According to Gladys, the change in environment was not just physical, but an internalized process that began as soon as she landed here,

Yo creo que es la etapa mas dificil en llegar a este pais, la adolescencia, porque es cuando uno de verdad esta desarrollando su identidad. Y que te espongan a un ambiente totalmente distinto a lo que tu creias que era el mundo te va cambiar definitivamente. Es algo que va impactar tu vida y te va cambiar por completo. Es la ley de la sobrevivencia, si tu realmente quieres sobrevivir y quieres sacar algo de la comunidad donde estas viviendo, tienes que adaptarte.

I believe that arriving to this country in the stage of adolescence is the most difficult, because it is at this time that one is truly beginning to develop their own identities... And that you are exposed to an environment that is completely different from the way in which you believed the world to be, that has to change you for certain. It is something that will impact your life and will change you completely. It's survival of the fittest. If you really want to survive and obtain something from the community in which you are living, you have to adapt.

She shares how before arriving to New York, she was a quiet, respectful girl; the way that her grandmother had raised her to be... "*era tranquilita.*" However, when she got to New York, she realized that being loud was what would set you apart from the rest " pero "*cuando llege aqui,*

Por lo menos pretender... yo veia que todas las chicas hablaban asi de fuerte y me dije entonces para que te respeten hay que hablar asi .. habeces tu haces un papel que no es lo que tu eres por dentro pero que la sociedad te obliga a que tu presente esa imagen para tu poder sobrevivir ... no queremos que nos rechacen y por eso uno se mete tanto en un personaje que uno termina cambiando.

When I got here I had to at least pretend. I would see that girls would talk loud and I said to myself, oh, that's what gets you respect, then I have to talk like that... Sometimes you just play the part of someone who isn't the real you on the inside, society obligates us to present a certain image in order to survive and we don't want to be rejected so we invest so much into the 'character' we are playing, that we end up changing.

Gladys describes that she like all immigrants has finally become the character she has been acting like, "*Uno se mete en un personaje que finalmente termina cambiando su forma de ser/* one gets into character so often that one finally ends up changing their way of being."

How finding safety created a newfound respect for the law.

Ariel has a 3.9 GPA. He defines himself as very ambitious and very articulate. Coming from a poor background in the Dominican Republic, Ariel is extremely proud of his achievements.

Additionally, he is very proud of being Dominican. Upon completing a law school degree in the U.S., he plans on returning to the DR and working in politics. His goal is to reform government and work for social justice. Ariel still mourns the death of his grandfather, who was murdered by corrupt police officials, because he would not sell the little land that they owned.

For Ariel, the ability to creating safety for himself and his family has restored his faith in the power of the law. In the Dominican Republic, “people have no respect for the law and what it is supposed to do for the people.” He vividly recounts a story of how his grandfather’s house was destroyed by greedy government officials, because he refused to sell the officials the deed to the property,

The corruption there is just like rampant, and so they [the police] paid a few people, gave them money to dress in police clothes and then they went to my house. They took my family away from the house. They totally destroyed the house. They paid people to destroy the house. They just smashed it to the ground. They killed the chickens -- they killed everything that we had --the farm-They cut every single crop that we were growing and they threw it away. And then we left -- we were left -- We were left on the streets without any money.

Ariel admires the American outlook on justice and has become motivated to “use the law for what it’s meant to do, to help people. Here, people respect the rule of the law. They respect property and what others have. I want to be a part of that.” Ariel was preparing for his LSAT (Law School Admission Test) at the time of our interview.

How learning to use the system created a better student.

According to Teranishi et al. (2011), many immigrant students, particularly those who arrived at the age of thirteen or more, are often placed in schools that “overlook and underserve” their unique needs (p.15). Wanda was one of these students. While Wanda recalls having the

support of teachers who encouraged her to apply to the City University of New York (CUNY) schools, she immediately felt underprepared when she arrived to college from her zone high school in EVC Bushwick for Public Safety in Bushwick, Brooklyn,

In terms of writing, I wasn't really a good writer and high school didn't really push me, like we were all starting like essays and things but it was like in class essays, and I would get most of the help from the teachers. So when I came here, we had to take the placement exam. I failed it.

The placement exam or the (CAT) CUNY Assessment Exam is an alternative route for admission for incoming freshman. Only students who 1) score 480 or above on the verbal part of the SAT, 2) score 20 or above on the ACT, and 3) score 75 or above on the English Language Arts Regents are considered writing proficient. All other students must take the (CAT) in writing. (www.cuny.edu/academics/testing/cuny-assessment-tests.html). Wanda, whose high school average was an 84, did not score 480 on her SAT and did not have a Regents diploma. The average GPA for admission at Hunter College was 88.6, thus she was admitted into Hunter College under the SEEK (Search for Elevation, Education and Knowledge)¹ program, an access program that provides students with financial aid and support services, such as tutoring and counseling (www.hunter.cuny.edu/ugprospects/getting-in/Applying). Under the guidance of the SEEK program, she was able to pass the writing placement exam after the two failed attempts and one semester of remedial coursework in English. So SEEK said,

"We have program here that you might want to take during the summer, and will give you an opportunity to pass it the second time." So I did that. I was like, "Yes, I got it." I'm learning how to write. I took it a second time and I failed it again and I'm like, "Oh, my God!" Like my writing is really not that bad! I started thinking back. I was angry! I'm like, high school didn't really prepare me. Before, the system screwed me. But now I used it to help me.

¹ The SEEK Program was renamed the Percy Ellis Sutton Program under Governor Patterson in the Fall of 2010

After that experience, Wanda attended tutoring for every writing assignment she had. She “used” the SEEK Tutoring Office to become a better writer. She defined herself as “determined” and a “go-getter;” she wanted to succeed. Perhaps, she felt inclined to make up for being “robbed...”

I realized my high school was not so good...I was deprived of a good education, I wish I could have.. I don't know if I needed to push myself or if I just needed tough work in high school, I definitely feel deprived and I think it relates to where I went to high school. I went to high school in Bushwick and Bushwick is not really considered a good area. If I had gone to a school like Brooklyn Tech, maybe I wouldn't be struggling 'til now... like right now in my senior year. It takes me days to write an essay... sometimes I feel kind of robbed...

College can be hard for many students who come from immigrant backgrounds given the barriers of English and the likelihood that they attended schools, which underserved them. Overcoming inadequate academic preparation and achieving English proficiency can leave the students feeling deficient, ashamed, and hopeless. From the participants who were enrolled in a writing remedial course, it took hundreds of hours of class work, and one-on-one tutoring to pass the CAT exam and to ultimately become a better writer. Wanda and other students like her took advantage of the help that was offered to them from the institutions they attended.

How becoming an “unstatistic” created options.

For Maggie, a primary performance for herself and others is to not be a ‘statistic.’ Maggie recalls, “I got pregnant in high school, and the whole statistics about pregnant women never finishing high school, I didn't want to be one of those. I didn't want to be part of the statistics.” Teen pregnancy part of the day to day ‘normalcy’ of living in Maggie’s community of Spanish Harlem, was not part of Maggie’s vision for the future. Her decision to finish high school and complete her degree was in part, a choice supported by her school counselor and other

administrative staff, who were rooting for her success as well as her own ‘drive not to give up.’ The ultimate decision to perform unlike her peers, however, was wishing to not become her mother. *“Even my mom said, you know you can’t be like me, You don’t want to live poor, you’re going to have a child and you got to make money for your child. You need to show her-be a good role model.”* In her decision not to be like her mother or a statistic, Maggie transformed not only her identity, but the life possibilities that were available to her and her child.

One’s identification with an ‘other’ that is not in alignment with one’s self-perception, can be just as foundational to the psyche, especially when there is no “other” *like me* to use as a frame of reference (Gregg, 2007, p 20). Maggie refuses to be a statistic-an unwed, single, poor, “female of color,” (as she says), “I grew up in the hood, my mother is an alcoholic, cops come to my house every day because of all the fighting and everybody around me... they just don’t know anything else.” Maggie was very clear about not wanting this ‘other’ life. When she was accepted to college, a window of opportunity was made available to continue “acting,”

John Jay accepted me, I was like so excited that was the breakthrough right there. Once I saw they accepted ME, I said, Oh my gosh! I can’t mess up now. Like I love school! I was dying to come to this school since like, I don’t know... 8th grade, and here I was!

Maggie’s acceptance into college was no ordinary acceptance. It was the beginning of identifying with that “other” (someone different from the people she had been raised around), who she aspired to be like.

Getting into John Jay, was part of you know, being a part of –being out of the norm like, just taking out what I was already in to see a new environment, socialize with different people, people who aren’t insane.

Chapter V

Discussion

Using narrative methods as means of exploring identity through tapping into students' stories of success provided an opportunity to look deeply at the contextual factors surrounding these young people's lives. Like other cultural analyses of young people's lives, this dissertation revealed gendered and raced accounts of real and perceived barriers in day to day life (Harper, 2012; Gregg, 2007; Lopez, 2003).

Students' stories of success- their achievements, their obstacles, suggest that the women's stories were quite different from the men. Women's stories were rich with a sense of empowerment and of hope. Men's stories focused on the ongoing struggle to find meaning in their lives. Those that were able to figure out what was important, what they wanted out of life, often found it difficult to keep or find avenues of support and possibility. Furthermore, when they talked about men not liking school or dropping out, they repeatedly referenced the term "lazy," when describing their own challenges to stay academically motivated or men in general.

For example, Franklin shared, "I was kicked out of high school, laziness I guess, I could have done the work" or Luis, "I always passed my classes in high school with a C, I was lazy," and Ariel, "I don't know why guys drop out. I'm a guy. The only thing I can think of is that we are just lazy. The females in the sample also used the term "lazy," to refer to male students' disinterest with school or lack of motivation.

Taking a step back from the individual students' stories, a cultural analysis requires that one examines the term laziness not just as a personality trait, but as a reflection of institutional practices and the way in which boys of color are categorized or defined. Some authors have written about how the school system has failed our boys (Harper, 2012; Lopez, 2003). Through institutional practices that 'race' gender; discriminating boys and men on the basis of being a

“Latino man” of “Black man,” boys continue to be marginalized rather than engaged in learning contexts. There is little research that focuses on the academic achievements of men of color, especially those who have managed to succeed despite the discrimination in predominantly white academic worlds (Harper, 2011). In a nationwide report entitled, *Black Male Student Success in Higher Education*, Harper (2011) highlights the continuing prevalence of studying men of color from a deficit perspective. In his qualitative report of 219 young black college males, he cites the most significant finding as “no one ever even bothered to ask me how I did it” (p. 6). Lopez (2003) argues that unlike women, men do not necessarily cultivate a “critical consciousness” of having to think about “assuming full responsibility for the well-being of their families” (p. 140). This is of cultural significance in the Dominican diaspora, where “feminist legacies of strong foremothers, including mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers” belong to the cultural-historical narratives woven into Dominican womanhood (p. 140). All but one of the first generation students in this sample were left in the care of grandmothers, while their mothers traveled to New York in search of work. Such actions, as seen from the women’s narratives about education being key, contribute to the motivation and confidence these women have in embarking on their own personal endeavors.

The same may not be true for the male students in the sample given that all except for Freddy, all were raised by single mothers. As has been found in other studies about the academic experiences of men of color, the men in this sample were often burdened with figuring out what the next step would be in their lives as they continued to leave behind many of their peers in high dropout rates, unemployment and ultimately incarceration (Harper, 2012; Davis 2002). Does this imply that men of color who come from single mother headed households are destined to a life of negative outcomes and challenges? Not necessarily. One reason may be that these men

may just have been subject to early life experiences that were different from the women in the sample. These men did not really share how their mothers had become single parents; in many cases they did not even know why their fathers had left. In other words, some of the challenges they may have experienced as men may have been a combination of the real absence of a father, but also the assumptions that may have been made (which should be noted are also socially constructed) of why their fathers had left. For individuals, what is perceived may sometimes be experienced as more real than what has actually happened. In the end, the dissolution of family bonds and structures can be painful for any child, and the degree of pain was not measured in this study.

The second reason is these men are not passive agents in their lives. Again a focus on activity, what the individual is doing, shifts the conceptual understanding of the problem of lack of engagement in Dominican male students. Furthermore, a focus on the self as a leading activity implies that humans always have the capacity to transform their selves and their contexts (Stetsensko & Arieviditch, 2004). Even male students, who for the most part, were not provided with paternal models found ways to exercise agency given limited cultural capital. It is not that they are helpless about their current and future success; rather their attention and energy are steered toward a wide range of foci. Schooling only represents one of the many worlds in which they live, and these males may not adhere to the conceptualization of success as ascribed by the larger culture.

The women's narratives provide another illustration of humans' capacity to change their social practices and contexts. Selves can develop that either resist or reproduce the social order of things. The migration patterns of many Dominican immigrants post 1980s, maintained that women who arrived to New York first (Kasinitz et al., 2004; Lopez, 2003). These women were

able to gain steady employment in much of the cities' service industry and were able to support their families back in the Dominican Republic. Through their abilities to become the breadwinners, a role traditionally held by the Dominican father. As women became heads of their households, the possibilities of roles changed. In turn, women could now have economic power as breadwinners and make significant decisions that would affect the rest of the family. In turn, such actions would also change role expectations in generations to come. For example, women with daughters raised their daughters to be decision makers and "luchadoras" (hard workers) (Lopez, 2003, p. 92). Some of the female students in this study were a product of such upbringing, as they fiercely sought to complete their college education no matter the challenges. I think of Gladys, Rina, and Wanda in particular; all of whom were independent, completed semesters of study abroad outside of the United States, and held part-time jobs with above 3.0 GPAs. Although Rina and Wanda's fathers shortly reunited with their wives, the responsibility of having to support a family while living in a new country, may have supported a kind of transformation in their roles as women. One of the most interesting questions that come out of this finding is to what extent is this transformation a product of gender construction or something else. As mentioned above, immigration patterns, that is women arriving to the United States without their families, was very common in the 1990s wave of Dominican migration. Paying closer attention to these patterns may reveal what lies beneath the experience of gender in ways that highlight the cultural and psychological changes to people's lives given their historical patterns of arrival.

The Importance of the Social Interaction in the Development of Academic Success, Integrated Identities and Transformative Activity.

Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), is a useful framework for thinking about Dominican college students and the varying contexts they juggle with. CHAT is concerned with social interactions that are most beneficial in terms of creating developmental strides, as well as preparing the individual for the next phase of the lifespan. These social interactions are referred to as leading activities. For urban college students who come from immigrants, mostly poor, socially marginalized communities, in addition to presenting with many obstacles (in the personal, institutional and social levels). I was interested in exploring what leading activities had helped sustain their goals for pursuing a college degree. I was working under the assumption that these young people who were either immigrants themselves or children of immigrants had been privy to hearing stories of success to explain why they were now living in the U.S. (Hernandez & Rivera Batiz, 2003). I also expected to hear about their social experiences in school as access to a college education was one of the most important motivators for migrating. Although I expected to find stories that focused on being Dominican or the salience of Dominican identity, I discovered that the participants' stories, focused on the many different ways in which these students engaged with and in their social contexts through small reenactments and changes of self. Stetsensko and Arieivitch (2004), argue that the self can be understood as a leading activity; that springboard that propels an individual to the next stage of development. Self in this context is the object leading the social interaction, the driving force that creates and executes actions. The self in this respect does not act alone; nor is it a mechanism that resides within an individual. Rather, it is a process that is experienced as a shared, "real life activity;" one that is both connected to and positioned within social practices

(p. 480). The notion of social practices in real life is key to this concept of self because it affirms that all human practices are social and cannot be experienced in isolation. That is to say, the self cannot be something that directs or guides the individual without the experience of the social world.

As is the case for the students who participated in this study, it is the social world that has allowed them to see what needed to be changed. Some scholars argue that this idea of as self as “leading” can become problematic because it has an idealistic quality and does not take into account structures of oppression, racism and poverty. For example, according to CHAT, it can be expected that an individual whose leading aspect of self creates success in his or her life has been exposed to social contexts that have co-created an ability to achieve those goals. Environments that fostered success have not been part of the participants’ lives. These young people came from neighborhoods that were overrun by poverty and crime, families that had been broken due to immigration and school systems that had left them unable to write or read at the college level. The limits to personal agency were a common obstacle for participants. As Rafael shares, “there are many faces of reality” and certain opportunities that are kept in place by the power holders: often the ones with wealth, political power and the right skin color. In their narratives, these young people shared how institutional settings continued to foster feelings of incompetence in students who are one of these power holders. For example, both Anna and Wanda who experienced “not being able to do anything successfully” due to weak writing skills, lamented the insufficient college preparation that had received in high school, “I realized my high school was not so good...I was deprived of a good education, I wish I could have. I definitely feel deprived.” Franklin discussed the idea of prioritizing “just wanting to learn” but “purposely not doing the things I need to do to get where I need to go,” even though “I know

it's self-damaging but it just feels like pressure. If there was another way of being successful, I don't know if I would be in school." However, even under these challenging circumstances and contexts, these students were able to transform their lives.

Inclusively, for many of the students' view of self need not always include aspects of one's ethnic culture. This is not to say that the students are not proud of their ethnic identity, or that they do not embrace it, (almost all of them speak with pride about their cultural identity), but that they may also seek out social practices that act as opportunities to engage in other aspects of self as salient realms of their identities. For example, Gladys shared that although she wanted to show her appreciation for her mother's hard work, she would do differently than

Latinos, we are so hard working, we do everything in our power to push our families forward, but sometimes we think that it's a bank account that is going to keep our lives full. For me, that's not what fills me. I want to be rich in here (in my mind) and not in the bank. Think about it... education, what happens, if instead of working 20 years like animals we study for 10? Our people do not see this and it is very sad to me .When I have my own family, I don't want to sacrifice my learning and my growth. We have so much to grasp that to leave this world without learning...wow that would be sad!

For Gladys, learning and growth represent both a motivation, and the part of herself that leads the interactions in which she engages. The same is true for Maggie who is committed to being a college student, even though she is struggling with raising a child and figuring out where she belongs, "I don't know what I'm supposed to be. My family always says, "Oh, stop trying to act like someone you're not. You're not that person. Stop trying to be like someone else," when in all reality you just want to change and become what you weren't." These two lives wonderfully illustrate what serves as a leading activity can be, a process that is not only transformative for the individual, but also for the contexts in which she engages. Maggie's claim, "become what you weren't" is incredible; there is more to Maggie than the girl from the projects,

the teenage single Dominican mother, these selves are not all of who she really is. There is something more to her and there is something more to all these students.

The literature would suggest that for people of color, the salience of ethnic identity is one of the most important aspects of identity and self (Phinnney, 1990; Ethier & Deaux, 1994). These stories show that such is not always the case. There is more.

In this study, the students identified images that are representative of the symbolic structures and that are necessary to be successful in *this* society (See Images of Success Appendices). Although the pictures varied, they draw on signs and symbols that are part of the cultural milieu of what it means to be successful in the United States. Pictures included a family four, luxury cars, money, celebrities, a college diploma as well as metaphorical illustrations of psychological success (e.g. happiness, ability to help others).

These symbols are not just material representations of success, rather they serve to regulate the psyche and to redirect the self as a member of society or given culture (Gregg, 2007). For example, the attainment of a college degree remains a powerful symbol of achievement in today's young adults (Fulgini, 2004). However, competing with the desire for higher education are cultural expectations of what it means to be successful living in the United States. These expectations are fostered both within the context of living in a city like New York, and within the context of being an immigrant. For many immigrants, economic opportunity and upward mobility is the reason for coming here. The real and perceived desire for income, are impossible to escape. As one participant describes, "I don't have the luxury to not succeed. I have to lay down the Garcia (her family name) groundwork." The challenge for these young people is not just about economic success; it is about finding meaning. Material wealth and assets represent a

small fraction of what is important to *their* success. So, what do these young people do? “When young people struggle to fit themselves to their culture, it turns into a struggle to create a culture that fits them” (Gregg, 2009, p. 22). The decision to finding happiness or meaning in life outside of a career is a deliberate one; these young men and women are looking to contribute something that has not yet been done in their families or in their communities. They want to be people who can change things, do something different. This is why people who recognize their potential teachers, counselors, tutors, mentors are so significant; especially, for the young men.

Once again the social context is of importance in individuals who are juggling different contexts and different worlds or cultures (e.g. black/non-black or Dominican/American) simultaneously. Considering that the concept of self develops out of how one is perceived and experienced in the social interaction, consideration of the cultural context in which these interactions occur is valid in understanding these students’ experiences (Hammack, 2008). Like Cross et al., (2002) who stresses the importance of social interaction or encounter in the emerging stage of Black identity, these young men encounter the idea of what it means to be a successful male of color in their academic contexts. In the lives of these young men, the social interaction of participating in the American schooling system is one of the main interactions where the discussion of “not being good enough for school” takes place. If the social interaction is way of recognizing the self in context, and the only “other” selves that are accessible are negative, we can then understand why men used negative words such as “lazy” to talk about themselves or other men. To refer to their selves as “lazy” implies that on a psychological level, some negative internalization of self has occurred. It is through inner speech that personal identity is constructed and through social speech that identity is reformulated” (Hammack, 2008, p. 231).

For the students of color, particularly Black and Latino men, these reformulations may negatively affect the students' perception of school as cultural places where a positive sense of manhood can be expected (Harper & Harris 2010; Cross et al., 2002). If the experience of self in school is one where failure, rejection or humiliation occurs, one can comprehend a young man's lack of interest in engaging. Fortunately, three of the young men I interviewed, experienced positive interactions at some point in their college experience. These students were chosen by the Center of English Language Support director as having excelled expectations for English Language Support (ELS) students and were assigned to work as tutors for ELS freshman. In this role, they were able to model to other Dominican immigrant students, particularly young men, positive alternatives of male success (i.e. not just baseball players and Dominican bachateros [musicians]). Through their performance as "tutors," these students not only transformed outcomes for themselves, but for other male students who could also aspire to be tutors or in positions of academic leadership. Thus, when thinking about Dominican students, especially young men, a critical analysis of engaging them include promoting social interactions that uplift the expectations of these men's abilities.

The students who participated in this study were more concerned with "what am I going to do out in the world" than "who am I going to be." According to Stetsensko and Arieivitch (2004), such a question is evidence that the self has an "endowed capacity to change social practice" (p. 491). These students' focus on the activity, "what am I going to do or what am I doing," changes the nature of social practices, social interactions, as well as identity. It implies that humans always have the agency and capacity to transform their selves and their contexts. However, not all college students are concerned with changing their worlds. Like Luis, some would be happy with a "stable job, good benefits and a nice paycheck." Some students use college a means to an

end; a way out of poverty. Unfortunately, a cultural historical activity framework also contends that social structural realities do exist. Furthermore, these realities may and do limit individual agency. These students were immigrants who had attended some of the New York Cities less resourced public schools. Some of them lived below the poverty level and were still learning to become fluent in English. All of them were aware that they were categorized as people of “color.” In the end, they understood that they did not have the privileges that other Americans might have.

Conclusion

This dissertation has implications for scholars who study retention and student success. One of the goals of this project was to emphasize the complexity of immigrant experiences in Dominican youth, and illustrate how those experiences shape outcomes for success. Another was to begin to examine the role of cultural narratives that impact these outcomes. Institutional narratives were embedded in many of the student’s stories. An important question that has arisen from this finding is: how does higher education as a cultural institution contribute to male students’ decisions to leave college? Although there have been several institutional advances in providing men of color with support (i.e. the creation of the Urban Male Initiative throughout many of the City University of New York Campuses), recent research has argued that scholars have yet to develop a better understanding of how masculinity is defined for this group (Harper, 2012).

One of the continued challenges in deconstructing masculinity is that being “gendered” and “colored” as a Latino man or a Black man is tied to the many different layers of identity that already exist. For example, it is assumed that boys and men were born knowing what it means to be a man in this society, but manhood is also socially constructed (Harper & Harris, 2010). One of the problems I experienced while recruiting young men for this study is that I could not

engage them in an academic setting. I could not connect in any meaningful way, because I had no idea what was important to them. Sadly, I had no one to ask. Further, when I asked the young men who agreed to participate, they either had trouble connecting with me or seemed to struggle with doing so. This point is not intended to generalize all men of color as individuals who are incapable of having interpersonal “connections.” Rather to raise the importance of men to men (in this case men of color to men of color) interaction. According to the literature, successfully engaging young men in college is a pervasive challenge (Harper, 2011; Harper & Harris, 2010). I believe had I been a male Dominican researcher, a rapport would have been established more effectively.

Establishing mentoring programs, where Latino faculty and administrators serve as mentors could be helpful in building a connection to these young men. To be Latino or Dominican or Black cannot be understood without first understanding what it means to be a Latino, Dominican or Black man. Scholars should approach the study of these men in the same manner gender and femininity have been examined- through critical analysis of how manhood and its meaning are constructed within raced contexts.

How do we begin to change institutional and other cultural markers of success and create alternative possibilities for urban students? Development of campus wide training for student life administrators, counselors and other student development personnel to incorporate conversations like, “how can I follow my dreams and still be a man who supports my family” into programming, advising and student activities must be a priority. Training can facilitate identifying and addressing issues that may be relevant to this population. These practices will strengthen advising, counseling, and program assessment of the needs of these students.

Finally, I would like to end on a hopeful message, that is, one that continues to embody the idea of activities that transform our world. Our young people are the future; how can we encourage and support their creative engagement and creation of their own stories and narratives of success? As a professional in higher education, we often get caught up in what we think is correct, what we ascribe learning and success to be. I hope that this work has highlighted that *all* young people have the capacity to find their own answers and own way in the world if we allow it.

Appendix

Images of Success





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