

Empowering the Self, Creating Worlds: Lesbian and Gay Latina/o College Students' Identity Negotiation in Figured Worlds

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Drawing from Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain's (1998) identity theory, this study sought to understand how six self-identified lesbian and gay Latina/o college students negotiated their sexual and ethnic identities. Participants identified two equally flawed dimensions, the hometown and college figured worlds, from which they sought an alternative de-stigmatizing space for identity negotiation. Through the senses of freedom, security, and belonging, the participants became self-empowered to create a third figured world – a space governed by their individual expectations and social norms – where their identities could coexist.

Sometimes I would just think to myself because, you know, I have never hurt anyone nor committed a crime. I have always been a good student and a role model for my family members. But I'm gay and I'm Mexican and those two just don't go together. I'm afraid to tell [my family] about this. In our world, gay sons don't exist...at least not to my mother and father. But, I have had to figure out how to deal with this. Only I can reject these identities...or combine them. - Eduardo [Participant Interview]

Homosexuality is heavily stigmatized within Mexican – and other Latino – communities (Hetrick & Martin, 1987). Individuals who develop non-heterosexual identities are often hesitant to expose their sexual orientation to their families because they

fear familial and communal stigmatization (Carrier, 1989, 1996). Due to cultural constraints, both within their families and within the greater society, lesbian, gay, and bisexual Latinas/os must learn to negotiate their ethnic and sexual identities within the social worlds they occupy.

Lesbian and gay (LG) Latinas/os experience strong pressure to hide – or downplay – their sexual identities in order to maintain the much-valued ties to their families and communities (Carrier 1989). As Hidalgo & Christensen (1977) found, the fear of rejection that lesbian Latinas experience is, at times, enough to permanently break the ties they hold with their families; they opt for distancing themselves from their home and seeking other means of support. Coming out within the Latino community could result in expulsion from familial circles, and developmental models of identity construction thus far have failed to incorporate theoretical possibilities that are sensitive to the diversity and characteristics of the Latina/o culture and of other minority groups (Fassinger, 1991; Fassinger & Miller, 1997; McCarn & Fassinger 1996). Finding the appropriate environment to investigate the nuances of identity negotiation also becomes a challenge.

Stevens (2004) states that the college environment is where sexual identity development is the most prominent and occurs alongside the development of other identities: racial, gender, and religious. This environment then becomes the optimal location to study the development of sexual and ethnic identity in

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LG Latina/o individuals. Yet, similar to their experiences within their ethnic communities, the experiences of gay and lesbian Latino students are not without their challenges in higher education.

Gonzalez (2002) observed that the ethnocentricity of predominantly white institutions does not always allow for Latina/o *cultural nourishment*, the reinforcement of students' cultural sense of self, and may lead to alienation. At times, this sense of alienation can be alleviated through peer-group cultural support (Villalpando, 2003), yet the prevalence of heterosexism and homophobia characterizing most college campuses (Fassinger, 1998) may pose a threat for LG Latina/o college students seeking culturally relevant organizations that are open to their needs as both Latinas/os and sexual minorities.

Aside from having to deal with the possible stigmatization in the college environment (Fassinger, 1998), LG Latinas/os must deal with being good sons and daughters to their families (Hetrick & Martin, 1987). These two separate worlds, their hometown and college environments, are far from perfect. In learning to accept their sexual identity, which usually conflicts with their religious and communal tradition (Hidalgo & Christensen, 1977), and working to attain a degree in higher education, LG Latinas/os must seek an alternative space free of stigmatization where they can negotiate the expectations of their hometown and the college environment and embrace the contradictions of their sexual and ethnic identities.

SEXUAL IDENTITY & MULTIPLE IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THEORIES

Identity encompasses a multitude of components, many of which tend to conflict with one another (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998). This complexity has forced identity development theorists to focus on the development of only one aspect of an

individual's identity – sexual, racial, ethnic, religious – thus disregarding the simultaneous development of multiple components of identity. From the early 1970s, scholars have sought to understand the characteristics that comprise an individual's sexual orientation (Stevens, 2004) and have attempted to isolate sexual identity by formulating models that attempt to explain linear stages of development.

Cass (1979) model of Homosexual Identity Development included six stages she described as identity confusion, comparison, tolerance, acceptance, pride, and synthesis. Her model proposed a linear trajectory through the stages and resulted in the complete integration (and disclosure) of the homosexual identity. Troiden (1979, 1988, 1989) later argued that homosexual identity development was analogous to a horizontal spiral. This conceptualization included only four discrete stages which could be progressed back and forth or up and down, but were encountered in consecutive order. D'Augeli (1994) further proposed a developmental approach that unfolded throughout one's life span. He identified six stages he termed developmental tasks, but argued that each individual has unique developmental situations and responds differently to environmental factors. Finally, studies by Fassinger (1991) and Fassinger and Miller (1996) have focused on the distinctiveness of homosexual identity development as an individual and as part of a group. Proposing four stages of development, Fassinger and Miller (1996) have continued this conceptualization of identity development as a sort of process with a set number of stages. Although these models may be helpful in better understand the general phases that LG individuals face throughout the life course, they simplify the identity process into stages and disregard the developments of multiple identity dimensions. Rhoads (1994) further suggests that stage models may become misleading for educators who may overlook the individual differences among LG students of different

cultural background with a range of lived experiences.

In 1996, Tagaki's work pointed at the need for researchers and scholars to understand the "complicated interplay and collision of different identities...[and the] perpetual uncertainty and flux governing the construction and expression of identities" (p.33). In 2004, Stevens found that gay male college students explored the intersections between their sexual orientation and other identity dimensions if they had developed a sense of empowerment about their sexual orientation. Since then, Jones & McEwen (2000), Abes & Jones (2004), and Abes, Jones & McEwen (2007) have proposed and re-conceptualized models of multiple dimensions of identity. These identity dimensions (e.g. race, class, gender, sexuality, and religion) are believed to be fluid and in constant interaction with one another around a core sense of self. The salience of each dimension, they argue, depends entirely on contextual influences (Jones & McEwen, 2000); yet, the acquisition of higher orders of consciousness (Kegan, 1994; Baxter Magolda, 2001) may allow for regulation of contextual influences through a meaning-making filter (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). I term this arrangement of identity dimensions within a particular context an individual's *identity configuration*, or the salience of various identities within a particular context and an individual's presentation of self to others within that context.

Although the work of Abes, Jones, and McEwen may serve to understand the relationship of various dimensions of identity within a particular context, it does not explore the process that occurs when two social worlds intersect and force individuals into identity negotiation. Lesbian and gay Latina/o college students hold different *identity configurations* within their hometown and college environments. In other words, the salience of their various identity dimensions is different in each of these contexts because they are held accountable for how they are known within that

context (e.g. within the context of their family they are the good/bad son/daughter, older/younger brother/sister, etc.). I turn to Holland et al.'s (1998) contextual identity theory to best situate the interaction of the hometown and the college environments and to explore the ways through which LG Latina/o college students reconstruct their positional identities within each environment without damaging their core sense of self.

FRAMEWORK: FIGURED WORLDS & IDENTITY CONTEXTS

No individual exemplifies what it means to be a Latina/o, a lesbian or a gay male, or a LG Latina/o college student. Neither can we come to think that a single theoretical stage model will ever be able to capture the nuances of an individual's complex identity work. Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain (1998) reject stage theories of identity development and instead suggest that individuals have agency through which they can interact with their own identity formation. This manipulation of identity components, they argue, differs for every individual, and most identity work takes place within figured worlds, in a space of authoring, and without a set of stages or rules to follow.

Holland et al. (1998) present four contexts of identity. Unlike linear identity development models, these identity contexts – figured worlds, positionality, space of authoring, and making worlds – were developed in an attempt to conceptualize alternative formulations of identity grounded in practice, activity theories, and fieldwork and away from extant identity theories. The result is what they termed "identities in practice," constructs that could be described by reference to several contexts of activity; elements that I will use to ground my analysis.

The first context emphasizes a person's own understanding of the world that surrounds him/her, a *figured world*. These figured worlds are frames of meaning in which interpretations

of human actions are negotiated. Holland et al. (1998) define a figured world as a:

socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts and particular outcomes are valued over others. Each is a simplified world populated by a set of agents (in the world of romance: attractive women, boyfriends, lovers) who engage in a limited range of meaningful acts or change of state (flirting with, falling in love with, dumping, having sex with) as moved by a specific set of forces (attractiveness, love, lust). (p. 52)

These figured worlds further include individual interpretations and imaginations that mediate a person's behavior and inform their outlook, and they become embodied over time and through continual participation.

The second identity context is our *positionality*, or positional identity, within a figured world. Holland et al. (1998) explain that thinking, speaking, gesturing, and cultural exchanges are forms of social, as well as, cultural work. When we take part in these social activities we place ourselves – and are consequently placed – in social fields in degrees of relation to identifiable others. Positionality is more than simple relativity and carries a dimension of power, status, and rank (p.271).

The *space of authoring* and *making worlds*, the third and fourth identity contexts respectively, may be best understood in junction to one another. The *space of authoring* serves as a means to write one's self into the world in a particular way, while *making worlds* refers to the development of new figured worlds by the individual made possible through the space of authoring.

In Holland et al.'s (1998) contextual identity theory the space of authoring is unique. They contend that within this space, authoring is not a choice. The space of authoring results

when a person, or collective, interacts with the normal world. "The world must be answered," they argue, "but the form of the answer is not predetermined (p. 272)." According to Holland and colleagues, authorship, then, is a matter of orchestration where individuals use their social resources to craft appropriate responses in the time and space available to them. As a kind of space of "answerability" where authoring the self is a requirement, this concept differs from that of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda 1999, 2001, 2008). According to Baxter Magolda (1999, 2001, 2008), self-authorship is not immediately available to everyone. It is achieved only through higher orders of consciousness (Kegan 1994) and "foundational" meaning making (Baxter Magolda, 1999).

Drawing from Holland et al.'s (1998) contextual identity theory, individuals – including LG Latina/o college students – belong to a set of figured worlds where they are positioned by social norms, expectations, and accountability. At the intersection of contradicting figured worlds, individuals encounter a space of authoring where they must "answer" to the conflicts of the two environments and negotiate their identities. Through the incorporation, integration, and manipulation of social resources – such as finding empowerment in Stevens (2004) study – individuals are then able to create their own figured worlds governed by their own social rules and expectations.

THE PRESENT STUDY

This study seeks to present the ways in which six self-identified lesbian and gay Latina/o college undergraduate students negotiate two dimensions of their identity – sexuality and ethnicity – at the intersection of two figured worlds: the hometown and the college environment. It is primarily concerned with exploring the elements that constitute the acquisition of the tool(s) necessary for identity

negotiation. I define identity negotiation as the ability of an individual to hold on to elements of two contradicting environments and merge them into a new figured world where they can position themselves freely and comfortably.

Of particular interest was answering the following research questions: 1) what is the impact of the hometown and college environments on self-identified Latina/o lesbian and gay undergraduates' sexual and ethnic identities?; 2) how do self-identified Latina/o lesbian and gay undergraduates manage to negotiate their sexual and ethnic identities?; and 3) are there any specific strategies/tools that Latina/o lesbian and gay undergraduates use to negotiate their sexual and ethnic identities? By studying the experiences of self-identified Latina/o LG college students, we may get a glimpse at how these individuals negotiate their sexual and ethnic identities within the intersections of their hometown and college figured worlds. Their narratives and unique experiences not only bring a voice to their communities but also enrich the depth and breadth of the academic literature.

METHOD

The study was conducted at Central University, a large, predominantly white, public institution in Central Texas. Using a snowball sampling method to locate participants (Bernard, 2002), the author outlined a set of criteria for participant screening and selection as follows: (a) all must be undergraduates at Central University; (b) all must self-identify as Latinas/os; and (c) all must self-identify as lesbian or gay. All names of people and public institutions in this study are pseudonyms used to protect the identity of the participants.

The final sample included six participants between the ages of 18 and 23. All participants reported growing up in conservative communities comprising of mostly Mexican

and Mexican-American individuals and self-identified as Mexican, although only one participant was a Mexican national. Eduardo, Isela, Sandra and Cecilia were raised in towns on the Texas-Mexico Border, a region known as the Rio Grande Valley. Mario had been raised in north Texas in the city of Amarillo and Oziel, the only Mexican citizen, had been born in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, Mexico but had moved to Houston, Texas at an early age. Although not explicitly stated in the criteria for selection, all participants were also first-generation college students and came from low-income backgrounds.

Data Collection

The first set of data collection, comprising of interviews, photographs, and written reflections, began in May and continued through July 2008 as a part of an undergraduate summer research study. In-depth audiotaped interviews lasting an average of one hour were conducted with each participant. The interviews were used to gain insight on participant's perspectives of sexual identity awareness (e.g. *can you tell me about the first time you felt attracted to the same sex? and how did you react to these attractions?*), the process of self-acceptance (e.g. *can you tell me a story of a time when you felt you were coming to terms with your sexual orientation?*), familial and communal relationships (e.g. *can you tell me about your relationship with your family? and can you tell me about your most cherished experience with someone close to you?*), and their experiences in the college environment (e.g. *can you tell me a story of a memorable experience in college that you associate with your identity? and can you tell me about your involvement with organization that cater to various elements of your identity in college?*). For the purposes of this study, the college environment is defined as Central University and Central City, the city where the university is located.

Participants were then provided with disposable cameras and asked to photograph elements of significance to their Latina/o lesbian/gay identities. No further instructions were given to allow for abstract photography sets that would capture the personality of each participant. The purpose of the photographs was to uncover themes that were important to the participants but overlooked during the interview due to the nature of the targeted questions (Streng et al., 2004).

Four of the photographs further served as prompts for written reflections. The participants were asked to see the photograph and write for ten minutes about the emotions they felt when they saw the photograph and about what they were thinking when they took it. This open-ended reflection writing allowed the participants to write about elements of interest to them, consequently producing much deeper and analytic reflections (Rhodes & Hergenrath, 2002).

The second set of data collection was conducted one year after the initial collection period. All participants were contacted and interviewed a second time via telephone by the primary investigator. The interviews targeted the same questions from the original semi-structured questionnaire, but allowed the participants to speak about any new experiences. These interviews were transcribed and analyzed together with the original transcripts from the previous year.

Data Analysis

Because thematic analysis (Tashakkori & Teddlé, 2003) involves coding all data materials, segregating data by codes, and generating themes that are supported by the coded data, it proved to be the best method for the analysis. An initial round of line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2006) was applied to the interview transcripts and photographic reflections. Codes are constructed from every line of text – whether a full sentence or not – and the process allows the research to “remain

open to the data and to see nuances in it” (Charmaz, 2006). Arriving at a list of over 2000 line-by-line codes, the author immediately began to cluster similar codes into categories to reduce the number of items resulting from this initial round of coding.

Further rearranging of the cluster codes resulted in five major categories: elements of the family and the home, a free and isolating college environment, escape and openness, self-acceptance and security in isolation, and validation and connections to others. These five categories were further analyzed individually and in conjunction to one another to identify similarities, differences, and avenues for integration in a thematic way (Charmaz, 2006).

The final round of analyses resulted in a conceptualization of the hometown and the college environment as conflicting figured worlds within the individual’s sense of self (Holland et al. 1998). An overarching theme of self-empowerment was also identified as the necessary tool for successful negotiation of the two conflicting worlds. Three subthemes – the sense of freedom, the sense of security, and the sense of belonging – were found to be the driving forces of the overarching theme of self-empowerment and were drawn from the initial categories of escape and openness, self-acceptance and security in isolation, and validation and connections to others, respectively. Although data is rich pertaining to the constraints of each environment on the sense of self, in the sections that follow the author focuses on the components of self-empowerment and how these elements result in the negotiation of conflicting figured worlds, and thus, conflicting identities.

FINDINGS

According to the participants, their hometown and college worlds collided within them. They carried the expectations and responsibilities associated with their friends and immediate and extended families from the hometown figured world, and were met with

different expectations, accountability, and cultural norms in the college figured world. At the intersection of these two figured worlds – the hometown and the college environment – the participants found themselves within a space of authoring (Holland et al., 1998). In this space of contradiction, they were forced to acquire social resources – a sense of freedom, a sense of security, and a sense of belonging – as tools for positioning their sexual and ethnic identities appropriately within the constraints of the two figured worlds.

A NEED FOR SELF-EMPOWERMENT: CONFLICTING FIGURED WORLDS

The ability to acquire empowerment was triggered by the conflicts the participants encountered within each separate figured world. For these six participants, the hometown figured world posed a somewhat hostile environment to their lesbian/gay identities. Within it they claimed that they were held accountable for being either a man or a woman, and their sexual identity constrained their ability to perform the gender role. “My parents expected me to get married and have children. That’s what women do,” explained Sandra. To be married and to have children, or “being the housewife who cleans and all that crap,” as Isela reported, were expectations and cultural norms within the hometown figured world.

The three gay participants reported that the stigma surrounding effeminate men forced them into “lowering my voice when around my uncles” (Oziel), or “walking more macho, you know, with like the chest out and stuff to appear more manly” (Mario), or “just, you know, talking about how I wanted to have this beautiful wife and kids just to please my dad” (Eduardo). Not conforming to the expectations in the hometown figured world resulted in feeling of alienations, the possibility of breaking familial and communal ties, and hostility from other members of the hometown figured world. Understanding the consequences

that could result from not living up to the expectations of this figured world, the participants maintained an *identity configuration* specific to the hometown figured world: externally they could appear to follow the norms set by the individuals within the hometown environment; internally they were aware of their sexual identities and accepted themselves for being lesbian or gay.

Central University and Central City offered a second figured world with new positionings and a multiplicity of ways to negotiate their identities. Yet, with continued experiences at Central University, the participants took notice of prevalent heterosexism. In particular, Sandra pointed to an experience with her engineering advisor. “Although I am a lesbian, it is always assumed I’m straight. ‘When are you getting married,’ my academic advisor asked me once. The questions just catch you off guard, but I suppose they are expected.” Like Sandra, other participants commented on being a part of uncomfortable situations where university officials assumed they were heterosexual. “It’s like being heterosexual until proven guilty,” Cecilia stated, “even though they all say they accept us.”

The participants also spoke about an LGBTQ center for students on campus. When asked about their involvement with the center, the participants stated that at times they did not feel particularly welcome in the center’s organizations. “It’s not that the university does not have support groups, they do...but the way they are set up, it’s like, you can’t expect to be a part of them unless you know people in them. Otherwise, you feel like an outcast,” said Mario.

The types of responses from the participants pointed to the great need for validation and support of their sense of self within the college figured world. Like with the hometown figured world, the college figured world forced the students to maintain another identity configuration. Negotiating their sexual and ethnic identities at the intersection of these two worlds was not possible without the acquisition

of tools for self-empowerment to trigger the negotiation. I identified three elements necessary to effect this negotiation at the space of authoring created by the two conflicting figured worlds. The senses of freedom, security, and belonging allowed for the manifestation of the empowerment necessary for identity negotiation – the creation of completely new figured world.

THE THREE COMPONENTS OF SELF-EMPOWERMENT

The Sense Of Freedom

For the participants, the sense of freedom was an important element of identity negotiation. On many occasions, the participants referred to open spaces and abstract elements to symbolize freedom. In a personal reflection, Isela used a photograph of the aurora borealis usually seen in Alaska. She reflects upon the photograph and writes the following:

There's just something about the beauty of the colors, the way they just float in the sky that makes me feel calm and float right along with them. Maybe a part of it is also me just wanting to be somewhere else, even though I've only seen pictures, it's someplace that I want to be at one point in my life free and away from society.

For Isela, there was a yearning for a place of “beauty” and colors and a notion of “floating in the sky” that brings her a sense of calm. Sandra also provided a photograph of the open sky and commented “the blue sky. It allows me to breathe deep and relax...openness and no limits.” For Sandra the image of a blue, cloudless sky also represents a kind of freedom. It is one that has no boundaries and no limits, one that can allow her to breathe deeply. It almost seems to imply that if not allowed to “breathe deep and relax” one may

become suffocated by the “society” that Isela points out in her own personal reflection.

The notion of freedom was not limited to feelings of openness and relaxation, but also encompassed a notion of escape. Escape was taken both literally, the action of running away, and metaphorically, such as escaping from the norms of society. Isela wrote, “My bike symbolizes the ability to run and escape from everyone and free the mind,” referring to a photograph of her bicycle – a literal approach to escape. Cecilia, on the other hand, expressed a more abstract form of escape. She reflected upon a photograph of a cross-dressed man whom she thought “should be able to be whomever [he] wants, dress however [he] wants” to escape the norms of society.

Apart from freedom as a form of openness and escape, the sense of freedom included the liberties of the college environment. These newfound freedoms and liberties were specific to Central City and Central University. During his interview, Mario stated: “This newfound freedom [the university] has given me the chance to explore not only my sexuality and my Latino identity, but simply me as a person.” Thinking retrospectively, Mario spoke about how his new world of freedom gave him the opportunity to engage in activities that he had not explored before. He admits that the freedoms of the college environment also allowed him to explore his own positional identity. Similar experiences were expressed by all of the participants.

Being free to explore myself and accept myself... just makes the stay [at the university] so much better. I feel like everything is less judgmental, they [people at the university]...see [your sexuality] as one of your qualities, a component of who you are.

Oziel identifies this new sense of freedom as an element that was not a part of his previous world. Being a part of the college environment allowed this sense of freedom to

materialize. The open-mindedness of some of the individuals at the university complemented the sense of freedom providing the participants with feelings of outside support. If they were free to explore, free to escape, and free to defy norms, they felt empowered to accept their identity and make room for the other identities. Ultimately, a free environment served to empower the participants to engage in self-exploration and further self-validate their own identities.

The Sense Of Security

The sense of security was another component of self-empowerment. A sense of security was obtained from three primary sources: the self, the people surrounding the participants, and the college environment. In other words, security was not limited to feeling safe at a certain place, but it also included internal security, or self-confidence.

Within their photographs, the participants shot unfrequented places in the university and spoke of solitude. Originally mistaking these elements for intentional isolation, a critical analysis and conversations with the participants revealed that these places were personal sanctuaries for self-nourishment. In a personal reflection, Oziel wrote, "It was all for the protection against society. Solitude has its benefits; it protects and helps you identify who you are and what you want." Similarly, Eduardo went on to describe his photograph: "I came here ...a lot... because here no one would bother me and I could get close to nature and just get peaceful with the sounds of the water. This place helped me wash my tears away when things got rough." Either for "protection against society" or "to wash tears away," these places served as an integral part of the participants lives and empowered them to deal with everyday stressors.

For Isela and Mario, books, poetry, and personal writing provided a means for both security and self-expression. Sandra and

Cecilia instead opted for self-reflection in the privacy of their own rooms.

It's not that I lock myself up in my room just for the hell of it. It's a time for me to just be with myself and to, it's like, *como bañandote en la mente* (like showering in the mind) and washing away the things that make you feel bad. *Ya que te sales del* (once you get out of the) room, you feel like with Zest, *te vuelve a la vida* (it brings you to life).

Within these self-nourishing spaces, inner conflicts became resolved and the participants' could regain a sense of self-validation. Like Sandra mentioned, it was like taking a bath and coming out refreshed and ready to face the world again. It was as if self-nourishment was a product of an imaginary figured world of relief, where the participants could let go of all emotion and embrace their inner will to face the challenges they encountered. Strong emotional connections to these self-nourishment sanctuaries seem to produce the most self-empowerment. They functioned as secure places that allowed the participants to boost their self-confidence and to find alternative avenues for dealing with everyday challenges.

Another prominent element of the sense of security was *secrecy as protection*. Most of the participants claimed to keep their sexual identities strategically invisible for protection from others.

It's difficult to expose ourselves emotionally. Having grown up in the closet to some extent, I always felt like my life was one secret after another...It's not so much that it's a personality disorder, nor have I ever felt that I'm a bad person, I just always felt like I had to keep my life a secret from everyone else, out of fear of rejection, fear of being hurt, fear of discovery...Walls and barriers are placed up so as to keep out the most important

people in our lives from the most important and heavily guarded aspects of ourselves, to keep them.

As Mario wrote in his reflection above, strategic invisibility served as a kind of self-protection. In a similar fashion, all of the participants reported having strategically hidden their sexuality from family, peers, and other individuals whom they regarded as important individuals in their lives. This ability was both a measure of security and a means for self-empowerment; successful invisibility allowed the participants to continue to live their lives without the fear of rejection from their loved ones.

The Sense Of Belonging

The last component of the participants' self-empowerment was a sense of belonging. A sense of belonging was achieved through a defined peer support system, the existence of a significant other, and of course, a continued attachment to the family. If any of these aspects failed, the participants reported having feelings of being "the fuck up or simply feeling disconnected from the rest of the world," as Mario explained. Unlike the voluntary isolation reported in the sense of security for self-nourishment, these feelings of disconnect negatively affected the participants self-confidence.

Belonging to a social group, or at least a small group of friends who understood the needs of the participants, was necessary for the six participants. In describing a photograph, Eduardo explained: "These are my trustworthy friends that I can count my trust on, you know, the ones that have been by my side and never left me alone to suffer. They are like the family I can't really have back "home" where everyone just expects me to be a certain way."

To the participants, recreating a family environment with their peers became a priority, especially when these networks served to

further validate their own sexual identities. All of the participants reported the need to create a second family that could mirror the one in their hometown figured world. The second family manifested itself in the form of a close group of friends or by constantly being in contact with a significant other. But even then, it was, by no means, a replacement. Eduardo explained:

There are certain things you just need to feel, you know, the love, the being wanted and cared for kind of stuff. My boyfriend took me out of my misery, he's my family here, but even then, I can't forget where I come from and I can't let this become a replacement for my real family, because when you are left alone, your real family is the only one left.

Even when they felt more liberated with their second family, the participants continued to hold strong bonds with their immediate families. Their familial bond surpassed the boundaries of identity, spilling in from the hometown figured world into the college figured world. In this same light, Sandra writes: "This was the place where I met many other gay people. They are always so understanding and loved me and it just always felt like my home, but I still miss my family and nothing will ever replace them. Not even this second home."

Sandra uses the word 'home' but emphasizes that it is only a 'second home' and that nothing will ever replace her true family. For all of the participants, gaining support from peers and the people that surrounded them in the college figured world was an important element of being able to assert their identities. Yet, the participants restated throughout the course of the interviews and within their personal reflections that none of these support groups was ever more important than their immediate family members and obtaining approval from them. Remaining a part of their immediate family was imperative. During his interview, Eduardo expressed:

Making my mother and father worried and depressed really hurts, so just avoiding coming out is the better way to keeping the family happy. I don't care if I have to hide who I am, you know, at least inside I am comfortable with myself, and that's all that matters to me, you know, I just want to keep them.

For the participants, having to break family ties was not an option. Like Eduardo, many preferred to sacrifice their true selves to remain a part of their families. The self-acceptance of their sexual identity was enough to them as long as their family ties were not severed. The sense of belonging, then, played an integral part in the lives of the participants, both allowing them to feel loved and validated by their families and peers – even when disclosure was different for members of each figured world. Feeling like they were a part of a larger group of individuals who cared about them and supported them – whether they were “out” or not – served as a motivating force that

empowered them to continue to persevere in both environments.

DISCUSSION

The participants were situated in the middle of the hometown figured world and the college figured world. The hometown world included their cultural values, their religion, and their customs. Because their families were an integral part of the hometown world, this world occupied a larger dimension within the participants' sense of self. The college figured world allowed them to explore and provided them with newfound freedoms and liberties. But given that many of their decisions and beliefs stemmed from elements of the hometown world, the freedoms that the college world provided occupied a smaller dimension within the participants' sense of self.

This relationship can be observed in Figure 1. The large outer circle depicts the space where all figured worlds are housed. Where Jones and McEwen (2000) conceptualized a

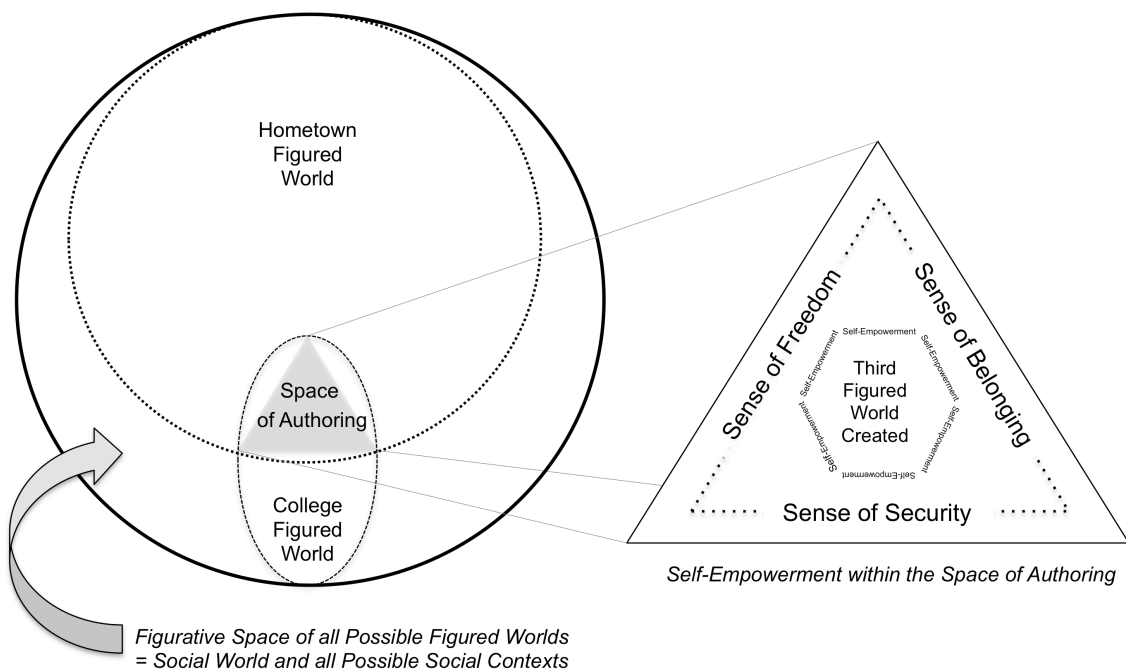


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Identity Negotiation at the Intersection of Conflicting Worlds

model of multiple identities housed within a particular context, this model shows the relationships of different contexts – figured worlds – that affect the identity configurations within them. The tight bonds that Latinas/os hold to their families, a concept known as *familismo* (Cintrón, 2000; Zambrana, 1995), remained with the participants even within the context of the college environment. To account for the heavy influences of these familial ties, the hometown figured world in Figure 1 is drawn to occupy more space than that of the college figured world.

At the intersection of these two figured worlds, the participants found themselves *living in contradiction* (Anzaldúa, 1987). Their fear of rejection and their fear of losing the ties to their families did not allow them to successfully incorporate the two conflicting worlds into one negotiated world. They were forced to use the flaws of the two worlds as motivating forces to seek an alternative space for identity negotiation. Figure 1 shows that at the intersection of the two conflicting worlds, a space of authoring is created. According to Holland et al. (1998) within this space of authoring individuals are forced to pull on available resources to make new worlds. Empowerment, this study finds, is then necessary to fuel the creation of a third figured world.

Stevens (2004) also identified a central category of empowerment in his grounded theory on multiple identities. His study showed how gay men in college found various relationships among sexual orientation and other identity dimensions only if they had a found a sense of empowerment. Stevens explains, “Finding empowerment moved men from merely accepting who they were as gay men to embracing this identity and possibility integrating this identity dimension with self as a whole” (p.198). Like in Steven’s study, the six LG Latina/o participants seemed to require an element of empowerment to alleviate the contradictions of the two figured worlds. They each drew on their available resources –

elements of freedom, belonging, and security – to allow for self-acceptance of their ethnic and sexual identities and to house these elements of self-acceptance within themselves, regardless of the influences of the figured worlds they inhabited.

Figure 1 shows that the three components of self-empowerment – freedom, security, and belonging – existed within the space of authoring. When all three components were acquired and balanced, they further formed a dimension of self-empowerment that allowed the students to alleviate the contradictions found within the space of authoring. The dimension of self-empowerment is presented in Figure 1 as an equilateral triangle supported by the sense of freedom, the sense of belonging, and the sense of security. At the center of this arrangement, a third self-created figure world flourishes.

While Stevens (2004) finds that “support networks were generated through disclosure to others” (p.194), this is not always the case for the LG Latina/os in this study. Only one of the participants was “out” to their family, yet all maintained strong support networks with their families and regarded these ties as more important than those with their friends who knew about their sexual identity. In this sense, the ability to be self-accepting was enough to facilitate the acquisition of support networks.

Brayboy (2004) emphasizes a similar finding experienced by American Indian students at an Ivy League university. He argues that a kind of strategic (in)visibility was necessary in maintaining the students’ cultural integrity, and, drawing from Carrier (1989), it can further be argued that LG Latina/o college students might use this same kind of strategic (in)visibility to display or hide their sexual identities within their hometown figured world. In the present study, the participants used strategic invisibility for both self-protection and for retaining the bonds that they held with their loved ones. This strategic (in)visibility is also evidence of the construction of an invisible

self who can manipulate the degrees of relation between various identities s/he holds.

Drawing from Holland et al.'s (1998) identity contexts *space of authoring* and *making worlds*, I argue that these six participants could not negotiate their sexual and ethnic identities within the contexts of any of the two figured worlds. The flaws that existed within each of the two worlds forced the participants to retain their positional identity within each separate context. Consequently, the participants were forced to create a third figured world where their LG Latina/o identities could exist free of stigmatization. This third figured world was situated and balanced *within* an emotional dimension composed of the senses of freedom, security, and belonging (see Figure 1). For the participants, their *true* LG Latina/o identity did not extend outside the parameters of their third figured world. Exposing their LG Latina/o identity in their hometown world could compromise the ties that the participants held with their families and communities. Exposing it within the figured world of Central University could make them vulnerable to homophobia within the college environment. This third figured world existed only to protect the participants' true identities from society. Because identity is in constant flux, it can be concluded that the positional re-authoring of the sense of self, in conjunction with the production of new figured worlds, will be a never-ending process for the participants. For negotiation, there must be creation.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO MULTIPLE IDENTITIES RESEARCH

Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) argue that identity has a multiple set of intersecting social identities that revolve around a core. When asked to present one's identity, participants tend to include the proximity of various social identities to their core and thus arrive at a snapshot of their holistic identity – what I call

an individual's identity configuration. The conceptualization I propose advances the work of Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) from analyzing an individual's identity configuration within one context to that of two potentially conflicting environments.

Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) explain that their model of multiple dimensions of identity is founded on the idea that social identities have varied degrees of saliency and that each social identity becomes closer to or farther from the core of the self, based on context. It is then of interest to examine under what conditions individuals acquire the ability to manipulate the saliency of relevant social identities and the effects of these social identities on the participants' cores. Understanding how students are able to filter external forces to then reconstruct and reposition their sense of self within a social context is of great value to social scientists and educators.

This study explores identity negotiation within the intersection of two figured worlds, or two different contexts. Within the hometown figured world LG Latina/o students are held accountable as heterosexual Latinas/os who must live up to the expectations of their cultures, families, and communities. In the hometown figured world, in order to retain valued ties to their families, LG Latinas/os reposition their sexual identity further from their core and thus create an identity configuration that is appropriate for the hometown environment. The same is true of the college figured world. In college, LG Latinas/os continuously reposition their ethnic and/or sexual identities – alongside other social identities not explored in this study – to fit in as any other student would, to maintain support networks, and to succeed in the classroom.

Where Stevens (2004) identified empowerment as a central category to exploring the relationships of various identities, I propose that self-empowerment is a tool that the agent uses to manipulate the saliency of social identities. The ability to reposition

themselves at the intersection of conflicting figured worlds results in self-acceptance of all contradictory elements of various identities – in this case embracing the contradictions of their ethnic background and their sexual orientations (Anzaldúa, 1987). I further propose that there is no negotiation, or integration, of identities. Instead, for these six LG Latina/o college students, negotiation is the creation of a self-empowered space of agency where the individual feels completely able to present himself or herself in contextually appropriate displays that do not hinder his internal sense of self. It is the ability to mask one's inner self – with all its contradictions – by creating contextually appropriate presentations (identity configurations) that live up to the norms of social others who hold the individual accountable for his identities.

CONCLUSIONS

Identity is not a static phenomenon of a person's sense of self. It is rather fluid and dynamic. The findings in this study represent the experiences of six Latina/o LG undergraduate college students and should not be used to overgeneralize to the larger Latina/o LG undergraduate student population. Instead we should use this study as a glimpse into the world of Latina/o LG students. It is most important to understand that Latina/o LG students face stigmatization both in the figured world of their hometown and in the figured world of their university. If either of these worlds were perfect, there would be no need for identity negotiation.

It is this stigmatization and the need for freedom, security, and belonging that allows these Latina/o LG college students to become self-empowered to create a third world for housing contradictory identities. Within this third world, elements of other figured worlds, the hometown and the college environment, are incorporated into a space of authoring where the students feel more “at home”. It is important that educators and student affairs

professionals resist their inclination towards the stage models of identity development. I urge them to understand that the identities of these individuals are not linear processes but complex realms of eternal flux. The third self-created figured world is also dynamic and fluid. It is thus important to pay particular attention to each individual's identity negotiation; the individual experiences of each Latina/o LG college student influence the creation of her/his third figured world.

As Evans and Levine (1990) argue, educators and college student affairs professionals must comprehend and seek to understand the multiple arrays of student identity development processes. This includes how sexuality and ethnicity intersect with each other and how these elements further impact the students they interact with on a daily basis. In a similar fashion, Jones (1990) asserts that most traditional theories do not emphasize other components of culture that are fundamental to a student and his/her well-being.

It is then, primordial to understand the impact of specific cultural elements on individual students. Educators should be cautious of stage models; they suggest a developmentally linear process and may lead to the reinforcement of stereotypes. Educators must work hard to gather as much information as possible to make an informed decision about their students' identities, their cultural backgrounds, and their negotiation of new figured worlds – new environments they may enter every day.

Social scientists, educators and student affairs professionals must continue to seek ways to continue research on these invisible populations. Willie, Reiker, Kramer, and Brown (1995) suggest that the first step in providing services to stigmatized populations, is by attempting to understand the diversity of tasks involved in the interplay of cultural, ethnic, sexual and racial identities. The time seems appropriate to pursue these issues in academia (Sanlo et al., 2002). Educators and

student affairs professionals have much to learn from LG Latina/o students in the college setting, specifically identity intersections within (1) individual environments, (2) at the intersection of two or more environments, and (3) as social presentations of the self with different people and within various contexts. By analyzing and seeking to understand the unique experiences of LG Latina/o college students, educators and student affairs professionals can take another step towards understanding an important subset of the students with whom they work.

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