

Bilingual Latinas Experiences Graduating With 4-year Degrees

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Biography

My name is Patty, and I was born in Argentina. I am the mother of two amazing college girls, whom I love. My marriage of 28 years to Ronald has been an exciting adventure that keeps getting better with the passing of time together.

My teaching career began as a young 21-year-old in Puerto Rico and gratefully continued throughout Maryland, Colorado, and Michigan. Passion for educating children from Pre-Kindergarten to eighth grade is still the motor that keeps me motivated today. For this reason, I consider myself a teacher at heart and try to stay connected to the current teaching trends I apply in the classroom.

My present position is at a small, yet remarkable, private school in Southeast Michigan. This interesting assignment includes teaching third through fifth grades to eight clever students in a multigrade setting.

One of the most exciting projects I have ever taken on was creating a K–4 Spanish curriculum, which was published by circle.adventist.org. I believe helping students to acquire a second language is important in the current global world. Therefore, I am serious about acting as a facilitator to students exposed to this task.

Several years ago, while in Colorado, I helped establish a charter school for Latino children. As a Latina, I thoroughly enjoyed creating curriculums and handbooks for the program. I also had the privilege of directing the program for 2 years of its existence. The mission was fulfilling, and the lessons that I learned from that remarkable experience helped me grow. I became more aware of the Latino community's challenges in the United States. For example, I was able to understand more about the burdens of illegal citizenship, the financial hardships Latinos endure, the inconvenience of lacking

English proficiency, and sadly, the racism Latinos undergo. Lastly, the experience motivated me to pursue a doctorate degree in bilingual and diversity education. The Latino community needs guidance to direct its academic potential, and it is my desire to be ready to empower them in pursuing their dreams.

I consider life is a beautiful, miraculous, and precious gift for many reasons. One important reason is, as a two-time cancer survivor, I understand firsthand the fragility of life. Chemotherapy, radiation, and multiple surgeries have been part of a personal journey toward gaining a deeper understanding of my life's purpose. Today, I am in remission and consider myself a blessed, resilient fighter and survivor. While living life to the fullest, I realize there is a considerable amount of knowledge to reach. Since I am still here, 6 feet above the ground, I want to share, as a person, friend, and educator, any knowledge, encouragement, and love at every opportunity I get. I cannot wait to see what the rest of my life has in store for me as I continue being a long life learner trying to make the most of every day.

Abstract

Since 2008, the high school dropout rate, which continues to be substantially higher for Latinos than their Caucasian counterparts (Wright, 2015), has decreased significantly from 32% in 2000 to 12% in 2014 (Fry, 2014). Conversely, university enrollment of Latino students has steadily increased nationwide. Statistics show that merely about 18% of Latinos in the United States have a bachelor's or higher degree according to the 2016 U.S. Census Bureau report.

I first became aware of this significant achievement gap between Latinos and the rest of the American population in my first year as a doctoral student in a bilingual education program. I instantly became curious about the explanations behind the noteworthy breach. To understand the causes, I read through scholarly literature, which provided some evidence to satisfy my curiosity. Nevertheless, I decided to find out, firsthand, about the lived experiences of Latinas living in Michigan. Consequently, the primary purpose of this qualitative research project was to describe the university experiences of six bilingual Latinas who earned 4-year degrees in universities where I currently live. It was my desire that through their stories I can share a positive perspective of what seemingly goes on in academia, yet is not usually highlighted in scholarly literature. It is not my intention to undermine the existing discriminatory status quo of racism toward Latinas in America (Murillo, 2010). I just hope an optimistic view inspires teachers and students to remember there are exceptions in the documentations regarding racism in this world.

Key words: Latinas, bilingual, lived experience, phenomenology, Michigan, LatCrit

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Education is termed the magic key. Education promises to open doors of opportunities to persons who stay in school and work hard (Zambrana & Hurtado, 2015). Why is this topic important in regard to bilingual Latinas and their experiences in higher education? It is significant because, of all the ethnicities represented in the United States, Latinos come in last in achieving university graduate statuses (Wright, 2015). Therefore, it is significantly important to share positive experiences in hopes of revealing another perspective of this phenomenon. Phenomenology seeks to reveal the mysteries of the world with courtesy, curiosity, and mindfulness (Kim, 2012). With this mental awareness, I based this project on two open-ended questions, which helped me collect meaning and insights concerning how bilingual Latinas experience university life in Michigan.

The underlying questions were two:

- What are bilingual Latinas' lived experiences like in higher education in the state of Michigan?
- What do bilingual Latinas perceive were major challenges in graduating with a 4-year university degree?

These research questions were faced with Latino critical theory and compared to scholarly literature. Latina/o critical race theory (LatCrit) stems from Critical Race Theory, which began in the mid-1970s when scholars responded to the poor progress in accepting racial diversity in university education after the civil rights movement (Brizee, 2015). LatCrit theory is more specific to the Latino population, as it places importance on investigative educational theory and practice (Zambrana, 2015). Latino Critical

Theory is concerned with the Latino pan-ethnicity (ethnic subgroups) and tackles topics frequently overlooked by critical race theorists such as language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, and identity (Torres-Capeles, 2012). This theory allows Latinos to contest the position of being relegated and empowers them to challenge the power structure.

According to LatCrit theory, research is able to potentially expose issues related to Latinas by “placing these experiences within a collective historical context” (Murillo, 2010, p. 95). Similarly, Hesse-Biber (2016) claimed critical theories, such as LatCrit, help explain how humans function within societal norms of a cultural group. In addition, LatCrit theory was used to contextualize and theoretically frame the academic experiences of each participant. LatCrit allowed participants to dismiss conventionalism and engage in meaningful conversations that I felt were genuine.

In regard to scholarly research, the literature reveals Latinas perceive professors have low expectations of them (Reyes & Rios, 2005); they are considered as over reliant on mentors (Torres-Capeles, 2012) and tend to have feelings of isolation in their university campus experiences (Zambrana & Hurtado, 2015). Researchers have also claimed that the main hurdles for bilingual Latinas to graduate from universities include, but are not limited to, being undocumented citizens, lacking English proficiency, having economic hardship, having familial accountability, and experimenting with discriminatory practices.

According to C. Kim (2012), between 1,500,000 to 2,000,000 children under the age of 18 are undocumented in the United States. Most of them have lost the their hops of achieving an American Dream. The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act (2001), if approved, would provide legal status to thousands of

university students. Those who have applied for this opportunity as dreamers wait patiently in hopes of an opportunity to continue studying and remaining in the United States. Being an undocumented university-age bilingual Latina student is a definite barrier to achieving higher education.

What about those who have legal rights to an education? Some claim having poor English abilities is a barrier to pursuing university degrees. Nearly 40 % of Latino dropouts have limited English proficiency (Darder & Torres, 2014). This inability to communicate properly is attributed to hindering academic progress. Cortese (1992) reported that Latinos “aged 14 to 30 with a Spanish background withdraw from school 2 ½ times more than Whites with an English background” (p. 75). According to Nieto (2012), the languages spoken in the United States are over 380, “although by far the largest number (about 60 %) speak Spanish” (p. 212). Although every legal resident and citizen has the right to an education, students who have not overcome language barriers have a more difficult time naturally achieving academic success.

Scholars have confirmed that another barrier for Latinas to achieve university degrees is economic hardship. Zambrana and Hurtado (2015) revealed numerous lower-income Latinos’ parents are less educated. Therefore, they are less likely to pay for their children’s higher education. Federal educational grants only go so far and the expenses that are not covered become a burden for these students. In addition, Cortese (1992) found that, in general, Latino students come from poorer families than their Caucasian counterparts and are frequently independent from parental financial support when attending universities. It is evident that present or the anticipation of future economic hardship is a major reason some Latinos make the decision not to pursue a higher degree.

Another important reason more bilingual Latinos are not graduating from universities is family accountability, which in Latino cultures, varies by country, level of education, and family tradition. Darder (2014) describes how, particularly in Mexican culture, women are encouraged to marry to feel accomplished. Latinas, according to Zambrana and Hurtado (2015), tend to have lower self-esteem about their academic abilities than do Latinos. Davenport (2016) suggested that many Latinos begin families at a much younger age than other ethnic groups. Caring for the family is the fundamental priority. Latina university-aged students face complex familial and labor force demands that affect educational plans.

The most disturbing factor, which scholars have amply documented, is that bilingual Latina students attending universities across the nation encounter racial discrimination (Zambrana & Hurtado, 2015). On some campuses, the right to be equal does not contradict the right to be different (Salomone, 2010). Unfortunately, Murillo (2010) found Latinas experience feelings of isolation, micro aggression, mini-assaults, and discrimination while on university campuses. Whereas some Latinas might push through the system, the oppressive struggle against Latinas in academia does not weaken.

As a bilingual Latina myself, I reflect upon how being an undocumented citizen, lacking English proficiency, having economic hardship, having familial accountability, and experiencing discriminatory practices are important reasons bilingual Latinas lag behind other ethnic groups in graduating from 4-year university degrees. Nevertheless, not all bilingual Latinos view these hurdles as barriers to completing a degree. How is it that the Latino community has grown rapidly in the last 10 years (Reyes & Nora, 2012), and nonetheless, in that steady growth, only fourteen percent of Latinos who are 25 years

old or older have earned a bachelor's degree (Gil, 2016)? In order to understand why this phenomenon takes place, I looked around the place I call home for information that could help clarify what bilingual Latinas experience.

Research Site

Michigan is a state that is known for being more than the mitten it resembles. It is rich in culture, industrial businesses, agriculture, and education. Michigan's diversity is predicted to increase, according to census data, from 39 to sixty percent by the year 2060. Michiganders' friendliness and the four seasons their state offers are reasons why many newcomers decide to call Michigan their permanent home.

According to the Pew Research Center (2014), 477,000 Latinos live in Michigan. This constitutes 5% of the population of Michiganders. My interest in selecting this territory for my project was based on curiosity and convenience. In other words, I reported data collected from my backyard (Creswell, 2009).

The topic of Latino's academic achievement in Michigan is not as significant as it is in Texas, New York, California, or Illinois (Greene et al., 2012; Zambrana & Hurtado, 2015). A poet from Michigan, Theodore Roethke (2011) stated, "What's important? That which is dug out of books, or out of the guts?"(p. 179). Inspired by the words of this Michigander lyricist, I proceeded to interview bilingual Latinas in, what I consider today, my state. These six bilingual Latinas did not only choose an academic alma mater in Michigan, but also decided to reside here after completing their university degrees. May, a soon to be lawyer, and Margarita, who is waiting for the Office of the Governor to get back to her about a recent job interview, were born in Puerto Rico and are both Boricuas to the bone. Millie was born in Michigan, but considers her parents' Dominican and

Puerto Rican heritage what made her the bilingual Latina she is proud to be. Angie, a medical lab scientist, and Isabel, a high school math teacher, feel honored to have been born in Mexico. Emma is the only Venezuelan I interviewed. She is a Spanish teacher in a private school and loves instructing a very diverse class of students. All interviewees graduated within the last 10 years and are either in their late 20s or early 30s. Their “gut stories” are those of self-identified bilingual Latinas acquiring a degree from a 4-year university in the Midwest. These stories include details of the hurdles, such as the death or divorce of parents, challenging classes, emergency surgeries, and other stories they considered significant in their pursuit of a career. At the end of each interview, each participant conveyed *consejos*, which is Spanish for advice for current and future bilingual Latinas wanting to experience the success of achieving a university degree. What made each one persist in becoming professionally competent was explained in the data collection. Data collected through individual semistructured interviews aided the development of participants’ synopses. The process included observations that were recorded to obtain details about their journeys. For instance, I could not ignore the way the participants’ faces lit up when they related their personal narratives. I focused on the particulars of the context in analyzing the interactional backgrounds since personal perceptions are built from both what participants say and express with their body language (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2013).

Research Methodology

The data collected in this project were linked to a phenomenological theory, as deeper understandings of personal experiences were articulated (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012). The research process took place from September to November of

2018, with a total of about 20 hours of research. In each of the in-depth and open-ended semi-structured interviews with six bilingual Latinas, I remained critically unbiased, while staying involved, observant, and considerate to the stories each participant shared. The lived experiences of the participants provided a greater level of understanding (Lichtman, 2013) of what it is like to be bilingual, Latina, and on a university campus in Michigan. In the process of understanding the realities, I heard stories of experiences that contradicted the literature. My “preconceived, taken-for-granted ideas *were* challenged” (Kim, 2012, p. 16) because phenomenology guided the path. According to Anfara and Mertz (2006), the main task in qualitative research is to dig through layers of meaning, rather than label participants into specific constructions and categories. As a novice researcher, I stood ready to be surprised.

While I certainly was surprised, I noticed it is important to connect theory, sampling, and data analysis from the beginning of the project (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, 2006). A specific project plan for identifying and enrolling participants included a screening to see if they met the criteria for the study. The criteria included being self-identified as a bilingual Latina who graduated within the last 10 years with a 4-year degree from a university in Michigan. I purposefully decided to explore experiences of bilingual (Spanish-English), rather than monolingual, Latinas because language has an emotional pull toward a culture and its identity (Salomone, 2010). According to Wright (2015), being fluent in a first language, inherited from family, helps preserve original cultural characteristics.

Since my intention was to analyze shared perspectives among a relatively homogeneous group, a small sample of six participants was considered sufficient. Roy,

Zvonkovic, Goldberg, Sharp, and LaRossa (2015) clarified saturation may be reached when the quality or depth of data satisfies the properties and dimensions of the concepts and conceptual relationships selected to render the target event are fully described.

The first participant was recruited through social media. This self-identified bilingual Latina led to more volunteers. This process is called purposeful snowball sampling (Glesne, 1999). People, who knew self-identified bilingual Latinas willing to provide information-rich cases, were contacted until four were found. The other two participants' experiences were extracted from a previous study I conducted. The archived data were revisited and analyzed, and interestingly were similar to the newer data.

The four participants who met the criteria of the study were willing to share their stories through interviews. Each participant was given a pseudonym to protect her identity. Margarita, May, Millie, and Isabel were more than willing to read and sign a written consent to safeguard their privacy, and the data. The participants were promised their confidentiality would be honored throughout the interview process and the entirety of the project. Participants were notified about the voluntary nature of their contribution and their "rights to refuse participation or stop the interview process at any time" (Sampson, 2013, p. 391). The participants were also promised to view the final findings of the analyzed data before any potential publication.

"In-depth interviewing is a method of gathering information in a way to correlate ethic issues" (Anfara & Metz 2002, p. 4). As mentioned before, I searched archived data from interviews conducted 2 year ago and selected two sets of interesting data, out of three, belonging to Emma and Angie (pseudonyms). In order to elicit the most

information possible, all six participants experienced face-to-face semistructured in-depth interviews. In each of the interviews, participants shared valuable information that was recorded, while a researcher's journal was used simultaneously while maintaining a friendly conversation (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). To protect privacy, personal identifiers were excluded from the findings. This procedure included leaving out the names of the universities the participants attended and the cities in which they currently live. In addition, all records were stored in files protected under passwords.

The semi-structured approach to each interview conducted helped to stay focused on the topic at hand and was useful in honoring the participant's time efficiently. I planned each interview carefully (Lichtman, 2013). By using tips that included good posture, positivity, eye contact, and making the interaction personal, I felt all participants opened up in sharing their personal stories. Open-ended questions allowed for multiplicity of findings to emerge and allowed for a better understanding of the lived experiences of the participants during their university days (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Each interview lasted about 45 minutes, and no longer than one hour. No incentives were provided to participants for their time. In order to carefully document each interview, they were audio recorded. Then, the interviews were carefully transcribed verbatim in a timely matter (Cavazos, 2010). In transcribing each interview, I was able to relive and experienced the same emotions, if not more deeply, than I had during the live meeting.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data followed. According to Saldana (2009), codifying is a systematic process of classifying data to find meaning and provide an explanation of that meaning. Anfara et al. (2002) claim, "Constant comparative analysis . . . [aids] in

identifying patterns, coding data, and categorizing findings” (p. 32). Coding places expressions under categories described by words. This approach permitted associations to be made between each transcription by literally reading line by line (Hesse-Biber, 2017). In order to accomplish a thorough analysis, I used intuitive senses to determine what looked alike when grouping certain words or phrases together. This process was repeated several times, and the stories were looked at from various angles until data was refined into the most appropriate categories possible through descriptive or topic coding (Saldana, 2009).

Several themes were identified to help interpret the participants’ understanding of lived experiences from their points of view. These themes included the participants’ perception of their universities’ overall experience, the demographics, how they were treated by peers and professors, their self-complex, factors which made their experience better, and hurdles that made attending university difficult. Later, the coded themes were looked at reflectively. Lichtman (2016) explains that “reflexivity is a bending back on oneself” (p. 164) to self-examine the findings and eliminate the biases. The findings in this study did not simply appear on their own; the data were interpreted with honesty and with the intention to reveal a new, non-manipulated truth (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015).

Although interviews were the core component of this research design, researcher’s journal were very important as recorded observations were made during the study. “Direct observation has been described as the gold standard among qualitative data collection techniques” (Morgan et al, 2016). Observations were logged to gain as much information as possible. “The sense of the whole . . . [was] built from a rich data source with a focus on the concrete particularities of life . . . [to] create powerful narrative

tellings” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 5). Caulley (2008) explains that writing only what the participants reported is risky. So, logging the characteristics of participants’ body language was important. In essence, obtaining data from a variety of sources was needed to better understand the participants’ perspectives (Patton, 2002).

Reading and rereading all the data helped me understand the overall picture of the study (Ericksson & Kovalainen, 2010). By taking the data collected from interview a researcher’s journal, the findings generated natural credibility (Baxter & Jack, 2008). To guarantee even more trustworthiness, Anfara et al. (2002) suggested examining if the research questions to see if they have been answered in the findings and provide sufficient details. Thus, data was matched with the conclusions to provide internal validity. This process offered an audit style trail through the data (Anfara et al., 2002). Validity related truth, which emerged intuitively from the study.

External validity, on the other hand, refers to the extent to which conclusions can be easily transferred to a larger population (Klopper, 2008). Quality was bound with credibility to persuade readers “that every effort has been made to legitimately represent the research setting” (Amis & Silk, 2008, p. 465). In seeking to exhibit trustworthiness, I humbly recognized that multiple realities exist. I agree with Amis and Silk (2008) that “the research process is always negotiable” (p. 465), and truth cannot be ultimately claimed.

To ensure credibility, the narration of the findings is as descriptive and convincing as possible followed by a strong conclusion based on diverse events and participant data. In addition, there was methodological consistency. The purpose of the

study was clear, and referring constantly back to the problem and the questions that guided the project eliminated the biases.

The Participants' Stories

May (September 10, 2018)

I contacted May, a Puerto Rican single mom, law student with two bachelor's degrees, after spotting her on social media. I sent her a message, to which she replied immediately, accepting my invitation to have dinner together. She chose the restaurant, date, and time. I was early to the appointment, only to find that she beat me to it.

After a pleasant meal, we sat near a fireplace, and I turned on the recording device. Time flew as I learned about how May moved to Michigan where she obtained a second bachelor's degree in behavioral sciences. A professor advised her to enroll in law school, which she did. As she takes her last courses, she is simultaneously preparing for the bar, which is an exam that will allow her to exercise her duties as a lawyer in the state of Michigan.

Throughout the entire interview May had a positive reaction to each question and answered accordingly. For instance, when I specifically asked about some of the challenges she confronted in her journey in completing a 4-year degree from a university in Michigan she responded:

“The year before graduating was the worst year of my life! I wanted to quit school. I was like, “I’m done! Why am I doing this?” But I still stayed in school because I had such a huge support system and a new motivation. My dad died in February, and I was to graduating in March. On top of that, I learned that my stepdad was cheating on my mom. I told him, “Are you serious? You are the one who raised me. You are my real dad

and cannot do this the same year my biological dad died!”

Nevertheless, May stayed in school and graduated successfully. Although the experiences she endured reflected on her health, as she was admitted to the operating room for emergency surgery. The negative experiences made her stronger, and she believes they strengthen her faith and courage. Never, during the interview, did she mention that anybody discouraged her in pursuing her academic goals. Although she was asked if she was studying with a foreign visa, this did not make her feel singled out. On the contrary, she used the opportunity to educate her peers on the Puerto Rican status with the United States. Puerto Rico is an American territory. Therefore, Puerto Ricans have American citizenship by birth. Her consejo to future and current university Latinas is to reward each effort with outings, movies, and food. “This practice,” she claimed, “kept me going.”

Millie (September 17, 2018)

Millie is a married registered nurse with two children under the age of five. She lives in an up-scaled suburban community. She agreed to meet with me at her home at 9:00 p.m. after putting her children to bed. I drove to her house, and we sat in her family room overlooking a beautiful, lighted, bean-shaped, swimming pool.

Millie has a very approachable personality. Each question produced a lengthy and elaborate account of her experiences with peers and professors during her university years. Being born and raised in Michigan, Millie did not have deep roots in her ethnic background. In her last year of nursing school, she decided to be part of a Latino Club. This experience, she said, gave her a better idea of who she is as a Latino although she

already spoke Spanish fluently and was raised with Latino cuisine and customs.

“I was able to study a little bit about my Latino heritage, specifically my blood, my makeup: the Taino Indian blend of American and European,” said Millie. “This experience opened up my eyes about my ancestry, my tree, and where my ancestors were really from.”

During the interview Millie did not recall a single time when she felt singled out or awkward for being a minority at her university campus. She expressed embracing diversity and people from different backgrounds with their music, culture, and foods. Nevertheless, she perceived there were very few Latinos in nursing school. Here is where she disclosed what she believed was a major challenge in her experience. Nursing classes were difficult to her, as were the clinical experiences. These stood out as the main challenges on her way to graduation. Her faith, family, and healthy vegetarian diet kept her going toward receiving a 4-year degree. Her consejos to other bilingual Latinas includes staying mentally, emotionally, spiritually, empowered by faith. She also added that being aware of the messages in the mind can make or break somebody, so finding a support group is essential. “There are difficult days on campus, but keep on going,” she concluded.

Margarita (October 24, 2018)

Margarita lives more than two hours away from my house; therefore we decided I would interview her via Zoom. In interviewing Margarita, I learned she arrived in Michigan to pursue a Veterinarian career. As a freshman, she was convinced that she was meant to care for animals. Soon, she discovered that communications and Spanish were

her real assets, and guided by a caring professor, she switched careers. This experience was Margarita's major challenge as a university student. As she reflects back, today she believes it was for the better, as she is anxiously awaiting a response from the governor's office after interviewing for a position there.

When asked how non-Latino professors and peers viewed her as a minority, Margarita says that she perceived a misconception about how people who speak Spanish must be Mexicans. The question she was asked after she was heard speaking Spanish on the phone, for example, was exactly that: "Are you Mexican?" She believes that the misperception was not necessarily an indication of racism, but most likely one of ignorance.

Margarita expresses herself as a natural advocate of education for bilingual Latinas. She has been a guest speaker at high schools, and she insists, "Si, se puede" (yes, you can) get a degree. Margarita believes that every female should be financially independent from parents and men. "Pursuing a degree will help achieve this independence because it will give you a better job," says Margarita. She insists that females should "stay away from Latino culture that teaches women need others to support them." Her conclusion is serious as she firmly says, "Every Latina needs to be better than that and obtain a university degree."

Isabel (November 8, 2018)

Isabel is a married young mother of two who holds a bachelor's and master's degree in secondary education. While born in Mexico, she spent the majority of her life in Michigan. Her father has a doctorate in engineering. His influence was key in Isabel

obtaining a math-related career. Her experience in universities seems to have been wonderful. She felt integrated to a primarily Caucasian population and did not perceive the marked differences between Latinas and Caucasians until she went on vacation to Mexico where she noticed how most people's hair in the airport was dark. She was 14 years old at that time. That realization, however, did not make her feel singled out.

When sharing her most challenging times in her undergraduate studies she recalls student teaching. Being able to understand the different personalities, behaviors, and academic levels in a classroom was overwhelming. Nevertheless, she followed her dream to become a teacher and was successful in her pursuit.

I asked Isabel if she had any consejos she would share with future university students who are considering a career. She said, "Girls need to keep their end goal in mind. They should not look for discriminations; just assume that it is not there. It will eliminate the possible awkwardness. Do not over analyze everything."

Angie (November 6, 2016)

Although I interviewed Angie a couple of years ago, I still remember how her confidence was reflected throughout the process. Angie is a married mother of two and works in a hospital science laboratory. She enjoys her line of work, and the fact that she is Mexican. However, she emphasizes that being successful had nothing to do with proving something about her race. Her very slight Spanish accent is present as she fluently speaks in English and describes how two thirds of the professors at her university were minority and all treated her respectfully. She especially recalls a Greek professor

who helped her develop critical thinking skills. No staff or fellow student was racially discriminatory toward her in the 4 years she attended a university.

The recommendation Angie was adamant in sharing with other Latinas who are pursuing university degrees or planning on doing so is to “Study less and socialize more, because it really does not matter if you have straight As. It matters if you have a wonderful time pursuing a career.”

Emma (November 7, 2016)

Emma is married to an engineer in systems with whom she has two elementary school-aged children. She majored in Spanish and is currently a teacher at a private school. The interview was conducted in Spanish, which is Emma’s dominant language. She emigrated from Venezuela as a young bride and found Michigan to be an accepting home for her to bring up a family. Because of her major in Spanish, the majority of the cohort was Latino with about 10% being Caucasian, and 10% being a combination of African American and Asian.

The experience she had in a Michigan University was very good. She felt confident, especially after reinforcing English. Her self-perception was that of a bilingual Latina who was able to focus and problem solve faster than other students. Emma’s recipe for success is to try to have perfect attendance, engage in Spanish Clubs, and find a church family for emotional and spiritual support.

Discussion

All six participants in this project manifested ethnic pride, but only one expressed to have had been categorized. This categorization, reflected Margarita, was that of being called a Mexican, when in fact she is Puerto Rican. From all stories emerged a strong

theme: familism. But, this familism was bestowed on the university bilingual students, rather than on the parents. The bilingual Latino families who supported higher education and its demands helped their female offspring in achieving success in academic studies. Along with this core theme emerged a set of expectations and hopes from the participants, who believed any bilingual Latina on her way to success can obtain this in academia and future professional roles. These themes became available when participants were asked to respond to interview questions and spontaneous subquestions related to their experiences.

The findings and themes that evolved from the six participants in this study are based on my insight and understanding of their lived experiences on university campuses. All participants shared positive stories of how, with hard work and determination, they overcome challenges. Of the six participants, only one had a significant accent, which she never referred to as a hurdle in her pursuit of a 4-year degree. Racism toward Latinos was brought up during each of the interviews. Nonetheless, not one of the participants claimed to have felt it was part of their experiences. All six participants consider faith, family, and inner strength were instrumental in their pursuit of higher education and career achievement.

The bilingual Latinas interviewed demonstrated individual strength and consistent work ethics. Collectively, all participants seemed eager to succeed in their career paths. Not one single participant claimed their Latino background was an impediment for degree completion. All participants enrolled in a Michigan university with an open mind and willing to welcome the opportunities this state offered them to reach a professional status. Though all six participants fall into what literature would consider typical Latinas,

they did not report having issues with being illegal, having financial instabilities, or lacking proficiency in English. On the contrary, all participants entered the country legally or were born in a U.S. territory. All six participants were economically stable enough to pay their own tuition, and although some have a slight accent, they did not acknowledge it as a hurdle in any way. They affirmed that bilingualism is an asset in each of their lives that keeps them connected to their roots while living in an English-dominant country.

It is characteristic of Latinos to put family first—even before school. Nevertheless, it was not the case of any of the participants who were interviewed. Their families were the biggest support system they had, as their parents encouraged them throughout their experiences.

Racism, the number one reason literature points out as being the biggest challenge to obtaining a 4-year degree for Latinos, was never mentioned. Nothing about feeling singled-out for the way they talked, ate, or looked was reported during the interviews, although I intentionally tried to bring the topic up. When I asked if they had ever felt different, the participants each explained that they felt equal to the students beside them. This truth challenges what scholars in the field of Latinos in the United States have reported. However, every state has its own characteristic. After carefully analyzing the interviews, observations, and theoretical framing that shaped this study; I am ready to believe the truths about the justness in academia in the state of Michigan. As I stated in the first chapter, despite the limitations of this research project, I am hopeful that I have answered the research questions. The reasons why more bilingual Latinas are not completing four-year university degrees are still intriguing. They should be analyzed

case-by-case rather than generalizing the “facts.” The challenges by which bilingual Latinas are faced during their university journeys varies as much as those of other ethnic groups and include being overwhelmed, personal family situations, health issues, and career changes. Bilingual Latinas are capable of pursuing university degrees. I think it is time to stop telling them how terrible they are or how they might be treated if they want to become educated, and instead tell them how well they will do, especially in the state of Michigan.

Conclusion

Uri (2005) explained, “Self-reflexivity is an integral component” in qualitative research. Self-reflexivity will make the subjective parts of the study seem more concrete (Kim, 2016). Reflexivity helped uncover a sensible fact concerning the lived experiences of six bilingual Latinas. Half a dozen bilingual Latinas do not represent the general population. Although Guest et al. (2006) posit that samples as small as four participants can give valuable informational data; I recognize that the findings represent the views of just a small group of interviewed bilingual Latinas. Consequently, more research on this topic would prove beneficial.

Being a bilingual Latina living in Michigan had me self-reflecting on the list of reasons why more of us have not graduated with 4-year university degrees. Data must always be compared and contrasted with published literature (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Accordingly, I read, interviewed, observed, reflected, and analyzed throughout the entire process carefully. The interviews influenced and helped me reflect on who I am as a bilingual Latina in the United States with an earned four-year degree.

I am a self-identified bilingual Latina, as were the participants. However, Latinas

are a very diverse ethnic group of various backgrounds (Darder & Torres, 2014).

Occasionally, Latinos disregard their ethnic group and adopt one they feel describes them better (Rodriguez, 2009). Subsequently, they appear in statistics under another race.

Throughout this study, I put my biases in check and never assumed anything, as I attempted to work ethically towards finding the truth behind the significant achievement gap between bilingual Latinas and other ethnic groups. To avoid researcher bias, reviewers were used to confirm interpretations (Amis & Silk, 2008).

Despite the limitations of this research project, I am hopeful that it will contribute to what has already been reported as reasons why not enough bilingual Latinas complete four-year degrees. I made some discoveries opposite to the perceptions of those who might believe that I am trying to romanticize “the educational experiences of successful students who have overcome tremendous obstacles to attend a top-tier research university” (Perez-Huber, 2010, p. 83). “It is captivating to think about understanding one’s lived experience” first, in order to understand the philosophical substructures a phenomenological study (Lichtman, 2013, p. 90). It is my desire to have accomplished this goal through this project.

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Appendix A

Research Log

Research Purpose: Understand the lived experiences of bilingual Latinas with earned 4-year degrees in the state of Michigan.

Date/Time/Place	What I did	How it went	Additional Comment
<p>September 7, 2018 Contacting Between searching and composing a letter and response I spent at least one hour. (60 minutes)</p>	<p>I contacted May via social media with information about my project regarding bilingual Latinas and waited for a response.</p>	<p>I was amazed at the positive response I had from this participant. She was eager to share her story with me taking time out of her busy schedule.</p>	<p>I felt confident in this step of the process.</p>
<p>September 10, 2018 7:30- 9:30 PM Interview The Tropical Café and Tim Horton’s in Taylor, Michigan Between traveling, meeting, and interviewing I spent three hours. (180 minutes).</p>	<p>May is in Law School an hour and a half away from her home and was willing to meet at 7:00 PM. I was early, but she beat me and arrived before me at the Tropical Smoothie Cafe. It was my treat. After the meal we drove to Tim Horton’s and had decaf coffee next to a fireplace. It was in this setting that I began to record a semi-structured open-ended interview. I took journal-style notes and made observations.</p>	<p>Interviewing May was the highlight of my week. I loved listening to as she shared her world with me. We had to change restaurants in order to have more peace and quiet, but it worked well.</p>	<p>This was definitely my favorite step. I really enjoy listening to people. I wish to continue to do this in the future.</p>
<p>September 17, 2018 Transcribing This step took me</p>	<p>I transcribed the interview verbatim exactly two weeks</p>	<p>This was my very first experience transcribing</p>	<p>Transcribing verbatim “is not my cup of tea”. A good</p>

<p>one hour and a half or more. (90 minutes).</p>	<p>after the meeting. I was surprised of all the information I was able to gather in just one meeting. I consider this experience very valuable and remarkable.</p>	<p>verbatim. I was physically and emotionally exhausted at the end of the process. I thought, "How could anybody do this more than once in a lifetime?"</p>	<p>friend of mine who is a university professor spoke to me about a very good software that does a great job. If I had to do this for the rest of my life, I would certainly get access to reliable technology to ease the job.</p>
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<p>September 17, 2018 Contacting: The time between composing messages, waiting for responses, and composing responses was about one hour. (60 minutes).</p>	<p>I was able to contact Millie through social media. It took her a day or so to answer my message. Then, she only stated that she wanted to help but did not give me a date or time. I worried, but did not want to come across pushy. So, I waited a couple of days until I asked her if she had thought about a good time to meet. Millie responded that it would be better for her to have put the babies to sleep before we met at her house. She gave me a date and time, but not an address.</p>	<p>When I explained I was gathering information about Latinas in Michigan, she told me she really wanted to help. Although she has two toddlers, works full time as a nurse, and has a husband; she finally accommodated me at a time that was convenient for her. It was totally nerve-racking!</p>	<p>Millie has recorded a few CDs. She sings Christian songs in Spanish and English.</p>
<p>September 24 9:00- 10:00 PM Interview: Home of the participant (she chose this). I add the commute to this interview and calculate about two hours. (60 minutes).</p>	<p>On the day of the interview I messaged Millie asking her for an address. It was 8:00 PM and she lives about thirty minutes away. At 8:15 she responded and I took off like a mad woman in a dark rainy night of Michigan Autumn.</p>	<p>As soon as I got to Millie’s house she invited me into her comfortable living room that overlooking a lighted kidney bean-shaped pool. We immediately began recoding after I had her sign a consent form. She was not shy and talked excitedly when prompted. As Millie talked, I observed her body language, wrote notes in my research</p>	<p>After I left the house I was so thankful for the time Millie gave me I felt I owed her big time. It was a feeling that came back to me several times during the rest of the week.</p>

<p>October 1, 2018 Transcription: This process took me about one hour. (60 minutes).</p>	<p>I transcribed the audio recording exactly one week after the interview. It was still very fresh in my mind.</p>	<p>journal. Although I drove a half an hour to meet Millie. It was so worth it!</p> <p>This was my second transcription. I did not feel as overwhelmed as with the first one. I felt much more confident.</p>	<p>I played classical music this time. I had fun and tried to make it work.</p>
<p>October 21, 2018 (This time a sent a message with an adult consent in an attachment. I spent about thirty minutes messaging the participant. (30 minutes).</p>	<p>I was able to get Margarita's information through a mutual friend. Though I sent her a message, and left a voice message, it was not until a few days later that I got a response.</p>	<p>When I was able to finally talk on the phone with Margarita, I noticed her interest in being involved in my study. Out of all the participants, she was the most likely to become an advocate for bilingual Latinas to pursue higher education. She has a powerful voice and positive experience to share.</p>	<p>I think that waiting for participants to respond puts a lot of pressure on researchers. If they are attempting to finish before a deadline it must be even more stressful.</p>
<p>October 24, 2018, my house, 5:30</p>	<p>We were going to FaceTime, but the</p>	<p>Margarita is very outgoing and is</p>	<p>Again, the interview continued to be my</p>

<p>eastern time via Zoom. The total time this interview, counting the introductions and salutations was about tow hours (120 minutes)</p> <p>October 2, and October 14, 2018 Margarita’s Transcription: The total time was approximately one hour of typing her recording verbatim. (60 minutes).</p>	<p>devices were not cooperating. We finally contacted via Zoom, and I recorded the interview on my cell phone, which has a password.</p> <p>I worked on two separate days on this transcription. This participant spoke more and faster than others.</p>	<p>currently employed. But, she is waiting to hear back from the mayor’s office where she recently applied for a government job. Margarita holds two bachelors from a public university from Michigan. This participant revealed passion for speaking out about how Latinas can be successful in university settings. My interview questions, apparently, are very friendly. Margarita was very open to answer each one. She was the only one of the participants who believed some kind of racism was used toward her by asking if she was Mexican.</p> <p>I think that taking a rest in the middle of the transcription helped feel it was easier to complete.</p>	<p>favorite part of the data collection process. I enjoyed the Zoom experience as much as the onsite experience. It was a great meeting, and I believe my participant felt heard.</p>
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<p>November 3, 2018 Contact It took me a total of thirty minutes to communicate, respond, and communicate again with Isabel. I felt I was getting the “hang of it”. (30 minutes).</p>	<p>I was getting nervous about being able to find enough interviewees for my project, and I mentioned this at a staff meeting. A colleague reminded me of another colleague who had taught at our school and was both bilingual and Latina. I immediately messaged her. She was glad to help out but did not give me a date or time. I waited a few days and then sent her a suggestion. She said, “Yes”.</p>	<p>I struggle with anxiety a little bit, especially when there is nothing I can do about a situation. That is why I insisted on setting a date and time for this interview and waited for a response. Thankfully it went well.</p>	<p>Out of all the participants, Isabel is the most quiet. Although she responded happily, she tended to overthink, in my opinion every response. We know each other from working together for a year and have bumped into each other here and there. Nevertheless, after concluding the interview I believe it is much easier to get information from extraverts.</p>
<p>November 8, 2018 Isabel’s interview was 60 minutes long. (60 minutes).</p>	<p>Because Isabel lives a few hours away, we arranged to meet via FaceTime. It worked very well. I proceeded to interview Isabel, who is an introvert, but really smart math teacher. I recorded the meeting, as I did with all the previous interviews with her approval. Making sure she knew the voluntary nature of the experience and that she could finalize the meeting at any time.</p>	<p>Isabel is a self-identified introvert. So, I found myself coming up with spontaneous sub questions during the interview. It was a great meeting, yet much different due to the personality of the participant.</p>	<p>Being an extravert was not one of the requirements participants needed to fulfill in this study. I conclude that researchers become experts at interviewing all types of personalities and are ready to expect them.</p>

<p>November 8 and 11, 2018 Transcription of Isabel’s interview took place in two separate days. It made the process seem less tedious. The process took me the same sixty minutes, but they were less intense. (60 minutes).</p>	<p>I enjoyed transcribing Isabel’s interview the most because she is less talkative. Although her interview was as long as the other interviewees’, she made more pauses and spoke less.</p>	<p>I like this new method of dividing the task of transcribing in two.</p>	
<p>November 11, 2018. Finding archived data and coding it took me at least an hour. (60 minutes).</p>	<p>Angie was the first Latina I ever interviewed. She was very confident and remembered her college days clearly. She assured me that in her entire career, she was not alienated for being Mexican and speaking or looking very Latina. On the contrary, she remembers how it seemed to be that everyone she met embraced her.</p>	<p>I read and reread the archived data from an interview I conducted two years ago after finding it in a sealed folder. I selected Angie, because I remembered her positive spirit as she allowed me to interview her. She was a neighbor back then.</p>	

<p>November 11, 2018. Finding archived data and coding it took me at least an hour. (60 minutes).</p>	<p>Interviewing Emma was a pleasure. She acted very professional. Out of all the interviewees, she was the only one who was married while in university. This characteristic, she mentioned, was an asset. Her parents would never be comfortable with her studying far from home. When she married, the approved and supported her studies.</p>	<p>Emma’s interview transcript was filed with Angie’s. I had to familiarize myself again with the content. As I read through my writings I noticed how much I have grown since the beginning of my doctoral program.</p>	
<p>November 11, 2018 Findings All participants Putting the data together took me approximately three hours. (360 minutes).</p>	<p>Coding and finding themes was interesting. I made a table, similar to this one for the process. Narrating the findings in the study. (This process includes the collective data).</p>	<p>I am not very confident I did a thorough job because it was my second time ever practicing coding. I tried to be as crystal clear as possible. I tried to narrate the facts each participant shared regarding her university experience as an individual, then as part of a group. I had reported finding similar to those in this study, but in the past had never got feedback about my narratives. I felt at a lost, and am eager to learn how I did in this project.</p>	<p>As a novice, I am particularly concerned about the third chapter in my project. I liked finding themes and trying to be surprised with looking at the data from different angles. But, I don’t know if I got that intriguing factor. It looked pretty straight forward my first attempt, which makes me feel a little bit insecure of my work.</p> <p>Total Research hours: about 22.5 hours</p>

**Coding Process
Appendix B**

Themes	Interviewee 1 May	Interviewee 2 Millie	Interviewee 3 Margarita	Interviewee 4 Isabel	Interviewee 5 Angie	Interviewee 6 Emma
Perceived University Experience	It was fun , challenging , and different	I was a very good experience. Well-rounded .	The experience gave me a reason to expand my knowledge .	It was more challenging than high school, but not too difficult.	Very good .	Empowering and fun .
Demo-graphics of University Student Body and Teachers	So many different cultures : Muslim, Indian, Arabic, Egyptian (which are also Arabic), other Hispanic cultures, Anglo-American African-American and smaller cultures like Sumerians and Lebanese, French	A lot of diversity : Asian, white, black, Hispanic, Arabic	Caucasian, Asian (Chinese, Indian, Middle-Eastern), Brazilian, Hispanic, and African-American.	Caucasian, African-American, very few Asian, Middle-eastern, or Hispanic.	Very diverse , but in the Spanish Cohort consisted mainly of Latinos.	Very diverse , but the only Latina in the Medical Lab Science cohort.
Perceived treatment from professors	A variety of professors I loved because I was pushed into law school. I saw me as a litigator.	Two teachers were extremely tough on me. The rest expected the best out of me, but were kind .	Good teachers who used office hours to make sure we excelled. They were amazing .	Felt they treated me fairly and seemed concerned for my education.	Only one professor, whom was Latino, stands out as being harsh . The others were very kind and encouraging .	Teachers were amazing, encouraging and supportive .
Perceived treatment from peers	Peers were surprised with my legal status and the fact I had a job. They did not know Puerto Rican are born	Involved in a Spanish club and being part a part of the choir.	On a few occasions I was called Mexican because I spoke Spanish. Other than that I never	Never viewed self as being different than any other classmate.	One student commented her accent was so-phisticated and beautiful . She felt included on	Respected and admired for her career choice.

	Americans.		felt singled out.		campus.	
Self-image during university years	Strong, older, single mother, Latino culture, vegetarian.	Not being a straight A students, but every little success pushed to the next goal.	Proud of being a first generation university student in my family.	Equal to everybody else.	Being bilingual helped feel as having an advantage.	Happy and driven.
Factors helpful to finish a degree	I did not let anything bring me down and said, "Fake it 'til you make it." I pushed myself and prayed to God. He and my sorority sisters helped me.	God, family, study groups, A healthy diet.	Church, friends, and family.	Parents, God, keeping a strict schedule, and having a heavy class load.	God, husband, church, and the Spanish club.	God, church, family, and classmates.
Factors obstacles to finish degree	Personal problems: Dad died, Mom divorced, and an emergency surgery.	Nothing was an obstacle too big to consider quitting.	Personal problems: Career change.	Personal Struggle: Student teaching in public high schools.	None could be recalled.	Nothing at all.
Advice	Find a support system (sorority, family, church) Talk to people Set goals. Give yourself treats.	Mentally, emotionally, spiritually, empower yourself daily with your faith.	Every single Latina needs to get a degree and show herself she does not need anybody else.	Keep goals in mind and do not look out for discrimination.	Latinas can finish a degree because they are not less intelligent than others.	Study less and socialize more, because at the end success has nothing to do with straight As.