



Constructing Pathways to Responsible Manhood: Controlling Images and Meaning Making Through the Use of Counter-Narratives

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■ In recent years, growing scholarship and studies have focused on challenging deficit narratives and discourses perpetuating a criminalization of Latino men and boys. But even with this growing scholarship, mainstream counter-narratives of young Latino boys and their attitudes toward manhood and masculinity stand in stark contrast to the dangerous and animalistic portrayals of multiracial Latino boys and men in the media and society (Molina, 2014; Martínez, 2018; Noguera et al., 2012; Rios, 2017).

The present study explores how Latino boys understood and made sense of manhood and their masculinities. We addressed the following questions: (1) How do Latino boys describe their conceptions of masculinities? (2) How do Latino boys make sense of their conceptions of manhood?

RELEVANT LITERATURE

Latino Masculinity

Much of the literature on masculinity and related notions of male identity about Latino men has focused on “macho” and “machismo.” Initially defined in psychoanalytic terms, “machismo” referred to a hypermasculine stance of Latino men, Mexican men in particular, characterized as violent, aggressive, and dominant, both in competition with other men and when performing worthiness for female attention (Mirandé, 1988). The notion of macho developed was embraced as highlighting positive inner traits or qualities of Latino men, including honor, respect, personal dignity, and courage (Mirandé, 1988, 1997). However, in this literature, Latino masculinity is still viewed as monolithic, in many respects, where Latino men share a host of supposed common features instead of recognizing their distinctions within and across race, ethnicity, class, nationality, and sexuality, and the structural factors that inform the construction of diverse Latino male identities.

Theoretical Framing

We draw on the notion of counter-storytelling and counter-narratives from critical race theory (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) to explore the narratives that emerged

in these Latino males’ talk about masculinity and manhood. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) define counter-storytelling “both as a method for telling the story of those experiences that are not often told and a tool for analyzing and challenging the stories of those in power and whose story is a natural part of the dominant discourse—the majoritarian story” (p. 32).

METHODOLOGY

Data are from the Black and Latino Male School Intervention Study (BLMSIS) conducted by New York University’s Metropolitan Center for Urban Education. A longitudinal study of seven single-sex schools across four states, BLMSIS sought to assess the merits of single-sex schools through a study of their effectiveness in meeting the academic and social needs of Black and Latino boys.

Mixed Method Design

A mixed methods design was used to examine the conceptions of masculinities and manhood of Latino male participants of BLMSIS. Quantitative data shows Latino boys’ adherence to traditional notions of masculinity, and qualitative data provide a more complete contextual understanding of Latino boys’ notions about manhood.

Participants

This article is about the boys who identified as Latino in the BLMSIS survey and interviews; they attended one of two high schools. The sample consists of 127 Latino boys who completed the survey and data from interviews with four Latino boys.

FINDINGS: MERGING TRADITIONAL AND PROGRESSIVE MASCULINITIES

Respect, Responsibility, and Strong Beliefs

Responsibility and respect ranked high among these Latino boys’ understandings of masculinity. While there appeared to be a consensus about the values attributed to the ideals of masculine honor, a larger percentage of the remaining Latino boys were consistently more neutral rather than in disagreement across their beliefs regarding mascu-

line honor. This suggests that they may have been trying to understand the limits and possibilities offered by the mechanisms of masculine honor

Emotional Vulnerability and Expressiveness

Most of the Latino boys reported they would not be embarrassed to ask for assistance. Many of the Latino boys did not believe that expressing their concerns with others was related to signs of weakness. However, the remainder reported being somewhat equally divided between being neutral or in agreement. These findings suggest that these Latino boys were resisting norms about traditional masculinity that did not allow them to be emotionally vulnerable and expressive, while a slightly smaller percentage tended to report conforming to such views.

Heterosexuality and Gender Nonconformity

Most of the Latino boys indicated that they would be bothered by a boy acting feminine but would respect a boy who backed down from a fight. They were also torn about befriending boys who identified as gay. This suggests that while these Latino boys were challenging traditional notions of masculinity about fighting and asking for help, they were still expressing conservative attitudes about male standards of behavior that require some distancing from boys who identify as gay or display feminine qualities.

Qualitative Findings

Above all, being a boy involves hypersexuality along with compulsive heterosexuality, where they are only interested in girls, and only for sex. Second, paradoxically to their understanding of boyhood, the boys described developing men as becoming accountable to self and others by being goal-oriented, educated, ethical, and accountable to others, especially to their families. Additionally, they emphasized a multifaceted perspective of Latino masculinity that runs counter to stereotypical political and media portrayals of Latino boys. In addition, their interpretation and construction of masculinity lends itself to literature encompassing African American men and their interconnected meaning-making of manhood (Hammond and Mattis,

2005). In many ways what the students enacted was a hybrid construction of manhood that incorporates both Latino and African American meaning-making.

Controlling Images and Racialization

Latino boys' narratives about what they believed were stereotypes about themselves or their perception of how others viewed them centered on notions of criminal behavior, deviant heterosexual desire, and sexual aggression against girls and women. Similarly, the Latin lover/macho, gang member, or thug are ideological collective representations or "controlling images" of Latino boys and men, particularly from economically marginalized communities.

Isaac, a study participant, recalls a conversation he had with his mother about how boys are expected to behave toward girls on a date: "I was home with my mother and she tells me, 'You better not touch her.' You know, I don't see her mother or think her mother would say to her daughter, 'You better not touch him.'" Isaac recognized the unequal social expectations between boys and girls regarding their ability to control or not control their sexual desires. Isaac felt that because of these stereotypes and images of boys as hypersexual, he had to prove himself as trustworthy to parents, and as a potential provider and protector.

Alex, another participant, echoed Isaac's perceptions of what he believed were broader society's narratives of him as a Latino boy. He shared that boys are viewed as "wild" for two reasons, hormones and their association with crime. Alex articulates a counter-narrative about who he is and his behavior in opposition to what he perceived as his community's stereotypical assumptions and misperceptions. He said, "I personally respect myself and I respect other women. So, I don't do that kind of thing." Alex appears to be distancing himself from the wild, sex-crazy conception of boys put forth by his community.

To contrast these negative images, in their counter-narratives, Alex and Isaac expressed that they had to defend themselves and work hard to be seen as trustworthy and exude a level of responsibility, pushing back against the socially constructed master narratives that were being placed upon their bodies.

Relational Masculinities and Femininities

Their relation to girls was central to how most of these Latino boys defined their masculine identities. Overall, Latino boys' perceptions of the role of girls in the structuring of their academic experiences in all-boys environments appear to be aligned with their beliefs about what it means to be a boy. Like Isaac's experience, Alex's case was reinforced by the messages he was getting from his parents. That is, boys are both heterosexual and hypersexual, and because of this, girls are a distraction in their journey to manhood. Specifically, their narratives, which were positioned as counter-narratives, focused on them not being able to focus on their schoolwork because of the assumed sexual tension between boys and girls. This assumption upholds problematic heteronormative constructs of gender that portray all boys as sexually attracted to girls and not attracted to other boys.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In their meaning making of masculinity, the Latino boys in our study discussed how they were very aware of master narratives of behaviors, values, and roles that are defined for them, but not by them, and in response were in conscious construction of counter-narratives based upon controlling images of what it means to be a responsible man. Their discussions of what it means to be a boy often highlighted stereotypical beliefs from the media about Latino boys from low-income urban communities that portrayed them as sexually aggressive, wild, and violent. At the same time, their definitions of what it meant to be a Latino man expressed a nuance that was more diverse and complex than those associated with being a minoritized and racialized boy. The Latino boys simultaneously ascribed to traditional as well as progressive ideas of manhood.

These mixed method findings suggest that the boys' gender identity and meaning making of manhood was constructed based upon relationships with their schools, family, and peers, offering counter-narratives to deficit imaginaries of their ethnoracial identities of being Latino. What we found were students who merged many of the messages they received from their school along with those from their families to create their own interpretation and an embodied

image of what manhood should be. These findings countered beliefs in traditional machismo while embracing the transformational meaning-making literature for African American men, yet through Latino boys' bodies.

These Latino boys were hyperaware of the historical and current discourses of Latino manhood that have been placed upon their bodies. They critically examined public narratives and imaginaries of masculinities associated with Black and Latino men and boys while critiquing both boyhood and manhood in ways outside of the "gaze" of the general public and outside of their peers of the opposite sex.

Though their (re)imagination of manhood and willingness to aspire to be "responsible men" is not completely transformational, this study does demonstrate the malleability of young boys and how responsive they are to challenging the world around them. By pushing school administrators, teachers, and curriculums to be more acutely aware/critical of gender norms, we can begin to address the reproduction of oppression, namely, address patriarchy and its deep impact.

AUTHOR BIOS

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