2010

Understanding teen pregnancy amongst Latinas: an investigation of the cultural values and societal factors that contribute to adolescent motherhood

Mary Bateman Krom

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Recommended Citation

Krom, Mary Bateman, "Understanding teen pregnancy amongst Latinas: an investigation of the cultural values and societal factors that contribute to adolescent motherhood" (2010). LSU Master's Theses. 1106.

https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses/1106

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Master's Theses by an authorized graduate school editor of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact gradetd@lsu.edu.
UNDERSTANDING TEEN PREGNANCY AMONGST LATINAS:
AN INVESTIGATION OF THE CULTURAL VALUES AND
SOCIAL FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO ADOLESCENT MOTHERHOOD

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures

by
Mary Bateman Krom
B.S. Salisbury University, 2006
December 2010
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to all individuals in the United States that in some way, shape, or form identify with the term “Hispanic” or “Latino”. May you find success in the pursuit of all your personal ambitions.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to my thesis advisor, Dr. Andrea E. Morris for her encouragement, support, guidance, and collaboration. You helped me follow my heart in this project and enabled me to investigate something so near and dear to my heart, Latina youth. I also would like to thank Dr. Rafael Orozco and Dr. Solimar Otero for your insight and recommendations in my thesis-writing process. Also, thank you to Dr. Laura Martins who kindly agreed to join the committee at a last minute’s notice. You all have helped me grow as both a writer and a researcher.

To my family in Maryland, although many miles away, you have encouraged me and supported me more than you know. To my husband, Michael, you are an amazing blessing and I genuinely appreciate every sacrifice you have made on account of my academic studies. Your love and support have been critical elements in my ability to pursue my passion.

To Maddie, who’s been there from the beginning, and all the other Hispanic Studies colleagues (both past and present), your advice and support has meant so much. Best of luck in your future endeavors!

To the “DIVAS de Dios” here in Baton Rouge, thanks for sharing your lives with me. You are beautiful, intelligent, wonderful young ladies and I cannot wait to hear what lies ahead in your future.

Lastly, I would like to thank God for giving me the ability, resources, and passion to investigate this highly complex and relevant topic. All glory to Him.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION .......................................................................................................................... ii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................ iii

ABSTRACT .............................................................................................................................. v

CHAPTER

1 INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 1
   1.1 Existing Studies ................................................................................................. 4
   1.2 Further Research ............................................................................................... 5
   1.3 Theoretical Framework ....................................................................................... 7
       1.3.1 Feminist Latino Studies ............................................................................. 15
       1.3.2 Sociology .................................................................................................... 16
   1.4 Methodology ......................................................................................................... 17
   1.5 Chapter Summaries ............................................................................................. 18

2 FEMININITY ...................................................................................................................... 23

3 VIRGINITY ....................................................................................................................... 39

4 MOTHERHOOD ............................................................................................................... 59

5 EL ENTRE ......................................................................................................................... 74

6 U.S. SOCIETAL FACTORS ............................................................................................. 97

7 CONCLUSIONS .............................................................................................................. 110
   7.1 Summary of Future Efforts .................................................................................. 121

REFERENCES ...................................................................................................................... 123

APENDIX

A CONSENT FORMS .......................................................................................................... 131

B QUESTIONNAIRES ......................................................................................................... 137

C INTERVIEW QUESTIONS ............................................................................................... 141

VITA ........................................................................................................................................ 142
ABSTRACT

This thesis presents an investigation into the various cultural and societal factors that contribute to the Latina teen pregnancy rate. According to the PEW Hispanic Center, Latinas account for more instances of adolescent motherhood than any other ethnic or ethnic demographic in the country.

Although much research has been done in the area of teen pregnancy, so far little has been completed with the specified focus on the Latina population. This study therefore offers a unique perspective of the phenomenon in its consideration of various literary and sociological works, by both Latina and non-Latina authors, that underscore the prevalence of cultural expectations and ideologies behind the notions of femininity, virginity, and motherhood. Each of these cultural precepts is so deeply embedded in the Latino community (and influential over the teen pregnancy rate) that each merits its own designated chapter. The fourth chapter explores the actual manifestation of Latino norms in the United States framework as Latinas, being feminine and part of an ethnic minority, encounter significant generational, cultural, and linguistic struggles in the nebulous borderlands of “el entre” (in-between).

The subsequent chapter analyzes the pivotal role that the U.S. society has on the lives of these young ladies as many are confronted by profound educational and economic limitations. Results from the conducted qualitative research, either through questionnaires or personal interviews with young Latinas, will be incorporated throughout these five chapters when relevant. The Latino cultural expectations of femininity, virginity, and motherhood will be increasingly powerful when simultaneously considered with the dearth of opportunities available to many Latinas in the U.S. Understandably, the appeal of young motherhood becomes inversely related to their probability of attaining financial independence and educational success. Lastly, an exploration of the overall conclusions and suggestions for increasing the multiplicity of options for current and future Latinas in the U.S. will constitute the final chapter.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of teen pregnancy in the United States has become a highly publicized and controversial point of debate for many individuals, organizations and government agencies throughout the country. Although there was a significant decline in adolescent pregnancies starting in the 1990s, 2006 experienced a rise that has yet to slow down (Wind). Multiple federal programs have been initiated in order to combat the high pregnancy rates and in January of 2010 the Obama administration appropriated $110 million towards the campaign to prevent adolescent pregnancy (www.youthtoday.org). This substantial amount of money is even more significant when considered in its full context, as it was budgeted in the midst of a sizeable federal financial crisis.

An initial consideration to be made is the notion that teen pregnancy is problematic. Although teen pregnancy is documented as having existed since the country’s inception, it is in the past 30-40 years that a considerable amount of resources and attention have been allotted to this ‘issue’. The sizeable wave of pregnancy prevention efforts in the U.S. is an evident indication of the overall mentality that adolescent pregnancy is a problem in need of a solution. In January 1995, President Clinton declared a war against adolescent pregnancy (Erickson 9), an action clearly indicating teen motherhood to be problematic. One must consider the different factors leading to the national consensus that adolescent pregnancy is inherently undesirable and detrimental to both the individuals and the society in which they exist. One potential reason for concern is the fact that the United States indisputably holds the title for the most teen pregnancies amongst the top fifteen industrialized nations (http://www.thenationalcampaign.org). The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy (denoted in this paper as NCPUP), an organization founded in 1996 with the goal of reducing the nation’s rate of adolescent motherhood, affirmed the following of a United Nations research study (2006):
By way of comparison, the U.S. teen birth rate is one and a half times higher than the teen birth rate in the United Kingdom (26.7 per 1,000) which has the highest teen birth rate in Europe, more than three times as high as the teen birth rate in Canada (13.3 per 1,000), more than eight times higher than the teen birth rate in Japan (5.1 per 1,000), and seven times higher than Denmark (5.9 per 1,000) and Sweden (5.9 per 1,000).

(http://www.thenationalcampaign.org)

This comparison with other industrialized countries is a startling and potentially embarrassing statistic for the United States government and therefore has become an area of focus. Adolescent pregnancy, a prevalent phenomenon in many developing countries, is not an easily overlooked trend in a country that prides itself on progress and development.

Another element that may have contributed to the recent attention of this phenomenon is the amount of money that is spent as a result of teen pregnancy. According to a 2006 report by Saul Hoffman, adolescent pregnancy has cost the U.S. approximately $9.1 billion in tax payers’ money that fund health care, foster care, and other related costs (1). Another source estimated that “The U.S. federal government spends over $30 billion a year in health and human services on adolescent parents and their children” (Cherry, Dillon, and Rugh 189), a figure that does not include state and local expenditures. Provided the current heated debate over health care reform, indubitably teen pregnancy will remain a critical topic in political debate.

Other sources propose adolescent pregnancy to be a direct result of the sexual freedom movement beginning in the 1960s. Many felt this moral debasement was a direct contributor to the increasingly evident rate of adolescent motherhood (Erickson 10). Due to the fact that adoption was a much more common decision amongst teen mothers in the 1960s than the 80s, many experts believe that the phenomenon was not necessarily more prevalent, but rather increasingly visible as more mothers decided to parent. Additionally, the passing of Roe v. Wade (1973) which legalized abortion threw the topic of unwed motherhood even more into the public eye (Erickson 10). Although refuted by more recent studies, earlier studies claimed that teenage mothers (and their children) are more susceptible to health risks and complications during pregnancy due to their young age. Pamela Erickson,
a medical anthropologist, conveys a variety of other social and economic risks that accompany young motherhood in her publication, *Latina Adolescent Childbearing in East Los Angeles*. She enumerates the risks in the following passage,

In comparison to women who wait until their twenties to begin childbearing, teen mothers complete fewer years of formal education, have lower socioeconomic status, are more likely to be dependent on welfare, have higher divorce rates, have higher total completed fertility and more closely spaced births, have children with lower cognitive development, and are more likely to abuse their children. (12)

Considering the gravity of these social and economic risks, in conjunction with the political attention directed toward the “issue”, it is not alarming that teen pregnancy is often identified as a problematic trend\(^1\).

In comparison with other teens in the U.S., adolescent Latinas overwhelmingly have a higher birth rate than all other ethnic sectors, a position held since 1990 that has yet to be relinquished (“Family, ...” 73). PEW Hispanic Research Center confirms that 26% of 19-year-old Hispanic females are already mothers as opposed to 22% of black females, 11% of White and 6% of Asian ethnicity (“Family, ...” 73). Of course there is an immense amount of diversity within the rates themselves of Latinas. According to the NCPUP, teens with a Mexican heritage have the highest rate of pregnancy (33%) while Cubans have the lowest (3%) (NCPUP). A similar pattern applies to the percentage of Latina teen moms that will have multiple pregnancies. In addition to the guaranteed struggles of raising a child, teen moms often experience other difficulties. There are multiple consequences that often accompany teen pregnancy including, but certainly not limited to, dropping out of school, remaining below the poverty line, and perpetuating the cycle of teen pregnancy by raising children in the same circumstances in which they themselves were raised (Brown and Castle 1).

\(^1\) While many still choose to explain adolescent motherhood on account of moral deficiency, chapter five will further explore Erickson’s proposal that limited economic and educational opportunities for Latinas in the U.S. are the main culprits of teen pregnancy.
An important perspective to take into account is the particular ideology concerning teen motherhood prevalent in the cultural and national heritage passed on to young women of Latin American descent. Is teen pregnancy considered a problematic phenomenon or is it a common practice that is socially acceptable in the countries of origin of Latinas and their ancestors? How have these attitudes changed over time? These considerations will be explored in this investigation. Another element intricately connected to the teen pregnancy debate, also a heated and controversial topic, is that of immigration. According to the PEW Hispanic Research Center, teen pregnancy is most common amongst Latina immigrants, as this demographic is 50% more likely to have a child than the native-born population (“Family, …” 69). One might be inclined to argue that this statistic will lower in correlation with assimilation rates. However, the same PEW investigation reveals that this high pregnancy rate does not necessarily decrease with time. In fact, the Latina third generation population is more likely than the second generation to get pregnant and/or drop out of school2 (“Family,...” 75). The recent debate over the birthright citizenship of “anchor babies” born to undocumented immigrants, combined with the fact that unauthorized immigrants account for the highest teen pregnancy rate in the country, make it an even more controversial topic highly worthy of investigation.

1.1. Existing Studies

Undoubtedly there have been many recent attempts to serve the Hispanic population when dealing with teen pregnancy. The research done by Lisa Dietrich, as documented in Chicana Adolescents, certainly is groundbreaking in its effort to deconstruct the fallacious assumptions involving adolescent pregnancy. She finds that poverty, substance abuse, violence, and crime are in fact causal factors, not direct results, of teen pregnancy (3). She also asserts that too often the issues of high teen pregnancy and dropout rates are simply accredited to being a part of the Hispanic culture (26) when really they are due to failures of schools, society, community, and the individuals themselves (106). It is

2 Not necessarily in that order.
this assertion of Dietrich upon which much of this investigation is based as it evaluates both the cultural values and societal circumstances that influence Latina behavior.

Another considerable investigation was conducted by Liz Sabatiuk and Ruthie Flores in which they joined with the Latino Initiative Advisory Group of The NCPUP. This study, titled “Toward a Common Future; Latino Teens and Adults Speak Out About Teen Pregnancy (2009)” aims to reveal the cultural beliefs and attitudes that impact Latina behavior. According to the authors, “Understanding the effect of acculturation on beliefs and behavior regarding sex and relationships can help practitioners, providers, and educators to create more effective messages and outreach strategies for Latino teens, their families, and their communities” (Sabatiuk and Flores 5). Through telephone interviews, the study questioned a total of 1,674 individuals about their attitudes, beliefs, and expectations in regards to sex, relationships, and personal ambitions. The findings proved to be insightful and will be discussed in more detail throughout this investigation. Other sources of information that have either examined or given a voice to the population presently being considered will also be included in the thematic chapter to which they relate. The qualitative research conducted in this study will provide additional insight to the existent body of knowledge in regards to adolescent Latina behavior and decision-making. The investigation at hand will be distinctive from prior studies in that it incorporates fictional Latina writing for cultural insight, sociological research for better understanding teen motherhood in the U.S., and actual data related to adolescent pregnancy collected from a variety of young Latinas.

1.2. Further Research

Although there have undoubtedly been recent strides to uncover the most effective methods of addressing Latina issues, there nonetheless remain many areas in need of attention and research. As stated by Sabatiuk and Flores, “It’s clear that there’s still much to be learned about the many factors that affect the beliefs and behavior of Latinos regarding teen sexual activity, pregnancy, and related issues” (30). The intent of this study therefore is to better comprehend Latina adolescents’ attitudes
and beliefs about femininity, virginity, and motherhood and how their surroundings in the U.S.
contribute to the decisions they make in their relationships with others. Many individuals concerned
about Latina teen pregnancy, including Lisa Dietrich, Aída Hurtado (Voicing Chicana Feminisms), and
Julia Alvarez (Once Upon a Quinceañera), have personally connected with and published the voices of
young Latinas in order to augment the current understanding of this population. However, this study
will be the first to analyze the phenomenon through the dual consideration of the actual experiences of
Latinas in the U.S., as revealed in sociological publications, as well as the influential cultural norms, as
evident in literature. Teen pregnancy is also considered problematic throughout all of Latin America
(except for Belize) and has recently been identified as “the only region in the world where teen
pregnancy has risen over the past 30 years” (United Nations Population Fund), but some countries have
a higher rate than others. In Peru, Colombia, and El Salvador approximately 14% of females between
the ages of 15-19 are already mothers³

(https://www.towardfreedom.com/home/content/view/152/57/). The method of uncovering these
different beliefs, in addition to the qualitative research, will be the exploration of multiple books,
articles, and films that capture various values that have shaped young Latinas.

As evidenced in the existing studies, much advancement can be made in terms of effectively
serving others when there is an informed awareness of the individual’s beliefs and values. However, to
identify these findings as differences from the non-Hispanic population in the U.S. confines them to the
category of ‘other’. By solely establishing their beliefs as the culprit of the teen pregnancy “issue” is
dangerous in that it can further the gap between the Latino and non-Latino population. Although it is
clear that cultural sensitivity is advantageous in any interaction between two people, a fuller perspective
as to the origins and manifestation of cultural attitudes and beliefs is even more effective in bridging the
gap between differing cultures. The thorough investigation of these beliefs, through the different

³ This rate is extremely high when compared with countries such as Japan, Switzerland, Netherlands, Denmark,
Sweden, and Italy where the teen pregnancy rate is lower than 7% (“Teen Birth Rates”).
primary sources of books, articles, and film will augment the current understanding of the Latina experience as well as enable non-Latinos to better serve the Latino population when dealing with teen pregnancy. As previously mentioned, a qualitative research study will complement the analysis in order to assess the real-life situation of young Latinas living in the United States. The factors that are exposed through both forms of research will then be analyzed together and used to formulate suggestions for potential areas of improvement in the current approach to teen pregnancy among Latinas.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

In his essay “The Latino Imaginary: Meanings of Community and Identity”, Juan Flores presents three approaches that can be taken in relation to Latino unity and diversity and his explanations will hold extremely pertinent to the work at hand. He identifies them as the demographic, analytic, and imaginary conceptions that are not mutually exclusive, but necessary and complimentary (609). The current investigation considers Flores’s explanation to be relevant and appropriate as it offers multiple perspectives on a single phenomenon. Flores’s notion will also be expanded in this work to incorporate gender differences, a consideration that originally not included into his explication of the Latino imaginary. Similarly, the interdisciplinary approach presented here, composed of literary works, sociological research, autobiographies, and qualitative research, will be beneficial in its ability to examine the U.S.-Latino situation through multiple lenses. As Flores himself asserted, “only a full interdisciplinary approach, guided by attention to cultural expression and identity claims and transcending the bounds set by positivist analysis, allows for an integral understanding of Latino experience” (618). As will be evident below, Flores’s theory highly corresponds with the analysis of teen pregnancy and affirms the merit in utilizing an interdisciplinary framework.

4 The investigator would like to clarify that is not her intent to alter the values (family, cultural, etc) of young Hispanic adolescents, but rather to make applicable conclusions and practical suggestions for increasing the available personal, educational, and professional options for this particular population.
Flores’s demographic approach refers to the numerical presence of Latinos as a “quantified slice of the social whole”, stating “count them, therefore they are” (609). He highlights that this method is necessary for political and economic reasons serving both governmental and corporate purposes with “voting blocs and consumer markets” (609). For this particular study, the demographic approach is necessary as it provides the capability of examining the sociological studies and anthropological works that explain the current social trends of Latinos on a general level. The overall Latino population, as opposed to a specific national origin, has been identified as the demographic with the highest rates of teen pregnancy and academic failure and therefore merit attention in this manner. Although diversity is acknowledged as important, it is this approach that enables the analysis of the research and conclusions that have been projected on the population as a whole.

The second conception suggested by Flores is that of the analytical perspective that distinguishes between the parts that constitute the whole Latino population. The analytical approach attempts to “deaggregate” by “recognizing and tabulating the evident diversity of Latino groups and experiences” (610). Flores provides national origin, time in the U.S., place of settlement, occupation, socioeconomic status, and academic background as examples of accounting for the significant differences amongst Latinos (611). This consideration is extremely relevant to this study and the relevant clarifications of these differences will be highlighted when necessary. Without a doubt, multiple elements play a part in the formation of the situation that young Latinas face. For instance, a young Cuban immigrant will be granted amnesty upon entering the United States. On the other hand, a young Mexican individual, having been brought to the country at a young age, will not have the same privileges as her Cuban counterpart. While the second girl may have grown up in the U.S., she will most likely be limited in government assistance, educational eligibility and occupational opportunities. The Cuban, while having legal permission to reside in the country, may suffer due to her linguistic and cultural differences (especially if she resides in an area with no Cuban community). A third Latina may
feel disconnected from her Latino heritage due to the fact that she was born in the U.S. and adopted by a Caucasian family. All three hypothetical situations highlight the unique and distinct situation that each Latina potentially faces. With these differences in mind, the overall trends (as established by multiple research investigations) of the Latina population in the U.S. will be analyzed to better understand the situation that a considerable amount of Latinas currently face. The immigration status, socioeconomic level, and academic background will prove to be monumental factors in the available opportunities to Latinas and therefore will thoroughly be discussed in chapter six. Likewise, works that have been conducted solely on a particular national origin will be identified as such. There undoubtedly exists a great amount of diversity amongst the Latino population and the current investigation in no way seeks to underestimate that multiplicity.

Flores’s third approach is the imaginary, which emphasizes the manner in which Latinos self-identify and negotiate their own personal conceptualization of a Hispanic community. He affirms that this particular analysis is “guided above all by lived experience and historical memory” (612). This method of understanding the Latino community applies considerably to the current study as the majority of the included sociological publications are founded upon the actual testimonies and personal beliefs of Latinas in relation to the Latino community. It is this approach that facilitates multiple glimpses into the authentic Latino perspective. While it indubitably is inaccurate to make generalizations of the entire population based on a single individual experience, the reappearance of analogous themes throughout Latina accounts is considered relevant and applicable to the study at hand. It is apparent that Flores’s evaluation of the interconnectedness and importance of each individual conception of the Latino community is applicable to the research of Latina teen pregnancy and subsequently supports its utilization of an interdisciplinary approach.

In the same publication, Juan Flores also attempts to unfold the true meaning behind the war of labels; that is Hispanic vs. Latino. He affirms that ignorance, fear, and disdain are truly the responsible
factors behind the desire to label a particular group of people (Juan Flores 606). It is because of these hidden feelings, as well as the political and economic demands, that a label becomes necessary. Flores highlights the fact that many Latinos in fact prefer to identify more than anything with their home country rather than some all-encompassing terminology, an assertion backed by the PEW Hispanic Research Center. ““Hispanic” and “Latino” are terms used by the U.S. Census Bureau and other government agencies as well as by the media, civic groups, political leaders, and scholars in this country. These terms are not as widely used in any of the world’s Spanish-speaking countries” (“Identity” 23). Ed Morales prefers the term “Spanglish” over Hispanic or Latino because it expresses what the people are “doing” rather than “where [they] come from” (Morales 2). The editors of Americanos, a photographic portrayal of the diversity of Latino life in the United States, reveal that one of the reasons they selected this specific title “is that too often society sees us not as Americans but as strangers to this land” (Olmos, Ybarra, and Moterrey 9). As political and social movements often shape one’s speech, it is apparent that these editors chose “Americanos” in an effort to highlight the important role that many Latinos have had in the shaping and progression of this country. Although this specific instance is an example of terminology intently chosen to facilitate awareness and improve integration, the process of summarizing one’s identity into a single word can be challenging and potentially detrimental to one’s self-conceptualization.

Certainly, the process of pinning a label on another person or group can be confusing and insulting to the individual(s) being defined. A prime example of the manifestation of this complicated process and resulting effects is the U.S. census administered in 2010. It states, “For this census, Hispanic origins are not races” (Census 2010). Now in addition to the label regarding their home country, Spanish-speakers are being forced to categorize themselves as “White, Black, American Indian, Asian Indian, Chinese, etc” (Census 2010). For any census participant that is a mixture of races (such as the Mexican mestizo) or identifies with multiple countries simultaneously, (such as Mexican families whose
ancestors inhabited Texas prior to the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, the completion of the census may lead to confusion, frustration, and/or feelings of ostracism. Although the need to label individuals may be necessary for federal funding, as argued by several census proponents, the process of narrowing it down to a simple check or one word explanation is in itself extremely insufficient and potentially detrimental to respondents’ self-conceptualization and identity. Flores does however assert that the desire to label a group of people does not only derive from the outside, but also from those themselves that are being labeled. The need for a historical memory is paramount in enabling those individuals to create their own individuality. According to Flores, “Latino identity is imagined not as the negation of the non-Latino, but as the affirmation of cultural and social realities, myths, and possibilities, as they are inscribed in their own human trajectory” (615). Clearly this partially fabricated notion of community plays an important role in Latino identity as individuals are made more aware of themselves within a larger U.S. society. Though it is important to recognize that not all Latinos share the same values and beliefs, living in the U.S. undoubtedly creates a need for solidarity and fellowship amongst individuals with similar backgrounds. Access to Latino networks largely shapes the assimilation process and impacts the formation of self-identity and meta-awareness.

Alejandro Portes also emphasizes the importance of identity in his work The New Second Generation in which he concludes that a collective identity plays an important role in successful assimilation. After interviewing nearly 3,000 individuals, Portes found that “The perceptions of immigrants and their children about themselves and other groups are not always accurate. What matters however, is that as social constructions those perceptions are an integral part of segmented assimilation” (51). He explores the concept previously presented by Flores of “labels” and includes some specific responses provided by his respondents. One Cuban woman explains why she resents the term “Hispanic”, she states, “We all speak [Spanish] but there are differences. [Cubans] always had self-respect, a sense of cleanliness and duty toward children, a work ethic. Miami used to be a clean city
until the Nicaraguans came and covered everything with graffiti” (Portes 51). The testimony of a young Nicaraguan female explains why she, as opposed to the Cuban participant, prefers the general term “Hispanic”. She affirms, “(The Nicaraguans) are vulgar, ignorant.... When I am with my Cuban friends I can speak to them normally, but some Nicaraguans make me feel ashamed and I am tempted to deny my nationality” (Portes 51). Clearly the act itself of labeling is an integral element to self-definition and thus obligatory in the formation of one’s identity. The words used by individuals to describe themselves not only reveal their own self-perceptions, but also serve to differentiate themselves from others, an important step in establishing one’s identity in a cultural interstice.

As evidenced above, it is impossible to accurately label all individuals residing within the U.S that have a connection to Latin America. No individual term in English or Spanish exists that can genuinely capture the vast diversity that exists amongst this population. The notion that all persons with Latin American ancestral connections can be grouped together and become the subject of cultural and linguistic generalizations is unfounded and largely inaccurate. It is extremely important to recognize and celebrate individual differences amongst the Latino population. Keeping in mind this consideration, the term ‘Latino’ will be used in this current investigation to refer to any individual, regardless of nationality, language choice, skin color, or place of birth, who has any ancestral connection to Latin America\(^5\). While recognizing this multifarious characteristic of the U.S. - Latin American population, this investigation affirms that the current situation facing many of its individuals is in desperate need of attention. Although generalizations of an entire population can be dangerous, this unprecedented phenomenon amongst the Latina population is significant and worthy of focus and thus requires generalizations to a certain extent. As research shows, the high academic drop-out rates and instances of teen pregnancy amongst this demographic are higher than any other ethnic or cultural sector. With the intention of better understanding the reasons behind the inception and continuance of this phenomenon, the

\(^5\) Except when used in a quote or research finding in which a different term was used. In these cases, the original wording will remain unaltered.
current study aims to investigate the commonalities that connect many members of the Latino community.

Developmental psychologists Samuel Roll and Marc Irwin echo Flores’s assertion that there is merit in analyzing a population as a whole. Both Roll and Irwin married women with dissimilar cultural backgrounds (from their own) and published their personal and professional observations in *The Invisible Border*. Roll and Irwin both lived for extended periods of time in their spouse’s home country and were subsequently able to make comparisons between the Latin American and U.S. cultures. The book’s introduction notes that while generalizations are objectionable,

…in important ways every Latino is like every other Latino, and every Anglo is like every other Anglo. Members of each group share a core culture with major points of consistency. That shared culture contains similar social organization, childrearing practices, and values. (xx)

Roll and Irwin are not alone in their claim that there exists a consistency of certain cultural aspects throughout the Latino population. In *Americanos* Hayes-Bautista affirms that the four “stable factors of Latino identity measured over three generations” are family, culture, Catholicism, and the Spanish language (qtd in Olmos, Ybarra, and Monterrey 40). The intent of this investigation is not to further the pre-existent and potentially inaccurate stereotypes of the Latino population, but rather to explore these various elements, of both the Latino culture and U.S. society, that have merged and contributed to an undeniably high rate of teen pregnancy. The immediate goal is to identify various cultural elements that exist within the Latino community⁶ with the eventual goal of assessing the influence that these factors have on the likelihood of Latina adolescent motherhood when placed in the U.S. societal context.

Debra Castillo explicates the unique situation in which many Latinos find themselves in *Readreaming America*. Upon exposure to the U.S. society, they are immediately confronted with a myriad of conflicting notions of “in-betweenness”, preventing them from belonging to either location.

---

⁶ There is a significant variation amongst Latino populations of teen motherhood. According to the NCPUP, 3% of Cubans, 33% of Mexicans, 19% of Puerto Ricans, and 20% of Central/South Americans in the U.S. are teen mothers (“Proportion of Girls...”).
This disrupts their self-conceptualization of their own identity and locates them in a contradictory and perpetual state of disequilibrium. Issues of ethnicity, race, assimilation, and bilingualism become salient and potentially insurmountable obstacles in this uncomfortable intersection of divergent cultural and linguistic norms (Redreaming America 8). As will be extensively examined in chapter five, first generation immigrants are not unique in their struggle to fit in as many ensuing generations continue to navigate the contradictory borderlands between the Anglo and Latino cultures in an effort to belong.

On top of the Latino’s crisis of belonging, the transition from childhood to adulthood can be extremely challenging. It marks a significant milestone in the process of identity formation and is even more important for those belonging to an ethnic minority. “In contrast to children, adolescents have the ability to interpret ethnic and cultural information, to reflect on the past, and to speculate about the future” (Santrock 327). Adolescence alone can be a difficult and traumatic time period for any individual. Taking this into account, teen immigrants are thrown into an even more vulnerable and challenging situation. Pedro Noguera is relevant to this study in that his work considers the important factor of age in the process of assimilation. He describes this experience as a trying period that not even the immigrant parents can completely comprehend. The immigrant youth are therefore “susceptible to a variety of hardships and pressures that many adults, including their parents, do not fully understand” (In Motion Magazine). Noguera underlines that multiple factors, such as skin color, linguistic production, and personal preferences can play a role in one’s self-identity. He argues that the Latino who appears black by U.S. standards, speaks Ebonics, and listens to hip-hop music may have an even more complicated negotiation of self-perception (In Motion Magazine). Without a doubt Latino adolescents are in a unique predicament in which they desire to fit in, yet may not want to suppress their individuality. They are the recipients of mixed messages arriving from contradictory cultural and societal institutions and this paradoxical existence makes them even more susceptible to potentially destructive behavior. The implications of this luminal existence will further be explored in chapter five.
1.3.1. *Feminist Latino studies*

The past couple of decades have witnessed a considerable emergence of Feminists within Latino studies. Many have examined the unique situation that applies specifically to Latinas as they attempt to navigate between the two very different realities of simultaneously identifying with the U.S. and their home country. *Borderlands* by Gloria Anzaldúa and *Killer Crónicas* by Susana Chávez-Silverman are two such works that use language code-switching and detailed descriptions to confront the complex and contradictory state in which they exist. Regardless of their cultural background, racial minorities in the U.S. undoubtedly struggle with doubts of belonging and this insecurity is particularly amplified in the unique case of young Latinas who are labeled in many ways as minority.

Julia Alvarez also confronts the contradictory messages of the borderland that face the adolescent Latina today. In *Once Upon a Quinceañera* she follows multiple girls as they prepare for their own elaborate celebration of their fifteenth birthday. Her journey reveals many relevant findings that go much deeper than simply the girls’ dresses and hair-dos. The celebration actually served many families and young girls as a connection to their past. Many parents voiced their support of the event because it helped the girls “connect with who they are” (117). Alvarez also notes the struggle that adolescent Latinas have because their goals of fitting in with the American society conflict with those of their parents who strive to embed in their daughters traditional values and beliefs (243). Alvarez captures the notion made by Noguera in regards to the unique situation facing Latina adolescents:

> We were all adolescents once. We know how intense and confusing that period is. Imagine adding to that mix two major forces, American culture and Latino traditions, and you might understand why growing up Latina in the United States is shocking and difficult. (243)

The conflicts confronting adolescent Latinas are distinct from those facing other demographic groups and require the continual navigation of the various sexual, racial, cultural and geographic elements that comprise their very existence.
Another contribution of Latino feminist writing is the reclamation of traditional female figures, such as *La Malinche, La Virgen María, and La Llorona*, for their own purposes and initiatives. These figures, as many theorists claim, have been the source of oppression and silencing of the female gender and need to be redefined. Stacy Skar suggests that *La Malinche and La Llorona* are “figuras que sirven para controlar la voz y la sexualidad de la mujer”\(^7\) and the *Virgen de Gudalupe* is a “modelo femenino supuestamente positivo como el de la madre y esposa ideal”\(^8\) (109). She is joined by other writers, including Cherrie Moraga and Alma Villanueva, who question the previously accepted and fortified notions of motherhood and silence as constituting essential characteristics of femininity. Alvarez also challenges the social expectations of Latinas to become a mother in “Imagining Motherhood” in which she quotes her Dominican aunt as saying “But you have to have your niño”\(^9\) (220). Many of these authors, as well as other influential Latina feminists (Sandra Cisneros, Esmeralda Santiago, and Judith Ortiz Cofer), capture their own personal experiences and beliefs in *Latina Self Portraits* and thus confront the challenging demands of various social expectations (concerning language choice, motherhood, etc), immigration and assimilation. The contributions of these women will undoubtedly provide insight into the various themes explored throughout this investigation.

1.3.2. Sociology

There are two particularly relevant sociological studies that are also important contributions to the theoretical framework of this study. Patricia Zavella in the article “Talkin’ Sex” and Aída Hurtado in the book *Voicing Chicana Feminisms* conduct qualitative research to unveil the various cultural beliefs and traditions that exist concerning sex, virginity, and motherhood in the Chicana populace\(^10\). The

---

\(^7\) figures that serve to control the voice and sexuality of women  
\(^8\) Supposedly positive feminine model for the ideal mother and wife  
\(^9\) child  
\(^10\) Certainly not all Latinas trace their roots back to Mexico, but the conclusions about the religious and ideological implications of Mexico on Chicanas can largely apply to non-Chicanas considering the strong Catholic and patriarchal strength of many Latin American countries.
recurring themes throughout both investigations were the lack of communication about sex between mothers and daughters, the behavioral restrictions placed on adolescent females (as compared to males), the obligation to stay a virgin until married, and the pressure to stay physically attractive in order to secure a husband. Although many feminists have made many strides and observable efforts to contend the traditional expectations and individual limitations of Latinas, these relatively recent studies reveal that there is still much work yet to be done.

1.4. Methodology

There are multiple methods that will be used throughout the course of this investigation. A variety of books, poems, short stories and research articles will be the primary focus in an attempt to uncover different issues revolving around motherhood. Over-arching themes in the non-fiction and sociological publications will be highlighted as they capture the different factors connected with femininity, virginity, motherhood, and living in a cultural interstice. Mexican historical and mythical models of femininity, such as La Virgen María, La Malinche, and La Llorona will be investigated as well as the various societal factors impacting the U.S. immigrant experience. Multiple angles, such as autobiographical, documental, sociological, and theoretical approaches will be included with the overall objective of considering multiple perspectives and factors related to the complex and unique U.S. Latina experience. Literature is considered an ideal avenue for exploring cultural constructs as it provides the author with the space and voice to document his or her own examination, deconstruction, and redefinition of the world in which he/she exists. Fictional elements, such as novels and films, will be incorporated for the purpose of exemplifying the common themes as discovered in the non-fiction investigation, which assists in the ultimate goal of portraying genuine Latina reality. Some works not only portray the concept, but also present it as problematic and this consideration will be made in the analysis. Authors from different countries will be included in the literary analysis in order to further extract overarching themes from individual Latina experiences.
Additionally a modest amount of qualitative research will be conducted in order to complement the literary analysis. The format of the investigation is congruent with the guidelines set forth in the qualitative research publications by Marvasti (2004) and Flick (2006). Approximately ten females between the ages of 13 and 18 with ethnic ties to Spanish-speaking countries other than the U.S. will be participants in the questionnaire portion of this study. The questionnaire presents the participants with 25 fill-in-the-blank and open-ended questions in relation to their own personal observations of teen pregnancy amongst Latinas and familial opinions about femininity, pregnancy, virginity, and motherhood. The research will also include a personal interview with a 15-year old Mexican female, Elisa, residing in Baton Rouge. Her experience is relevant because although she has lived in the U.S. 95% of her life (since 9 months old), she “doesn’t have papers” and thus provides insightful observations into the genuine immigrant experience. The interviewee will be asked to describe the teen pregnancies that she has witnessed amongst friends and family as well as the social, economic, and educational obstacles she faces as an undocumented immigrant. Results from both portions of the qualitative research will be embedded within the other chapters when appropriate and compared and contrasted with the literature analyses in search of any over-arching commonalities and/or differences that may arise.

1.5. Chapter Summaries

The investigation will initially focus on the cultural values that many of these young females are importing from their home countries (or that of their ancestors). Literary works will be examined in each chapter and will be followed by an analysis of sociological findings that relate to the topic at hand. The initial three chapters will analyze the influential cultural values while the remaining chapters will investigate societal factors that contribute to the high Latina teen pregnancy rate.

11 All personal interviewees are provided with a pseudonym in order to ensure confidentiality.
12 While the analyzed female figures (Malinche, Llorona) will be of Mexican origin, it will be clear that they have infiltrated a more widespread U.S.-Latino consciousness that impacts women of various national backgrounds.
The second chapter will investigate the definition of femininity as established by the patriarchal society in which Latinas exist. Two aspects that make a woman more “feminine” relate with her physical appearance as will be explored in *When I was Puerto Rican*. An autobiographical memoir by Esmeralda Santiago, this literary work describes her transition from a girl into a young lady. Her re-appearing theme of being labeled *casi señorita*\(^\text{13}\) will highlight the importance of physical development in the transition into womanhood and the societal conceptualization of femininity. Other aspects of femininity will be explored including submission to males, silencing of the voice (as exemplified through the legend of *La Malinche*), and the bequeathal of cultural traditions and values to the woman’s offspring. It will be evident that all of these social expectations are demanded of the females, not the males, of the Latino community. The next two chapters will explore two additional expectations of women, both of which revolve around the wedding day. Latina women are expected to remain a virgin until getting married and afterwards are confronted with extreme pressure of entering motherhood. Although times have changed and this is no longer the exact situation that faces every Latina, it will be evident that these conservative values continue to have a strong impact on adolescent Latinas.

The third chapter will narrow in on the importance of virginity as portrayed in the poetry by Michele Serros in *Chicana Falsa* and in the independent film *Real Women Have Curves* directed by Patricia Cardoso. Both works evidence the transmission of purity expectations from the adult females to their adolescent offspring. These assertions will also be compared with the findings of Aída Hurtado and Patricia Zavella in their respective publications of Chicana voices and opinions. The role of the *Virgen María* in the Latina community will also be explored as it undoubtedly contributes to these corporal demands. The double standard that exists between female and male adolescents in terms of sexual behavior will also be analyzed as it proves to be a recurring theme throughout multiple theoretical and literary works.

---

\(^{13}\) almost woman
Chapter four will analyze the automatic expectation placed on Latina women to bear children. Julia Alvarez’s “Imagining Motherhood” and Cherrie Moraga’s *Waiting in the Wings* will be used to highlight the encountered struggles as they choose non-traditional paths towards motherhood. The pressure and social castigation these women undergo point to the embedded expectation that they become mothers in the way society demands, not in their own way. Their experiences therefore highlight not only the extreme importance of motherhood, but motherhood as defined by the patriarchal society. *La Llorona* will further be used to exemplify the notion of an ideal mother that is required to continually put the demands and desires of her children and significant other before her own. These expectations will be supported by sociological studies that reveal Latina women’s intense desire to have a family. Although this yearning is not strictly unique to the Latina population, it is a desire that arises and is acted upon at a younger age than other ethnic populations in the U.S.

The fifth chapter will explore the concept of *el entre* in which all Latinas, as females of an ethnic minority, find themselves inhabiting. The idea of immigration requires the investigation of this cultural interstice as immigrants inevitably bring with them the cultural beliefs and attitudes of their native land. From the moment they are born to the second they enter the U.S., they bring with them a life-long acquirement of values, beliefs, and attitudes that may be incongruent with those of the new country. Many times a rude awakening or culture shock is in store for these new arrivals as the values and beliefs of the new country largely clash with those of the old. Individuals that arrive at a young age are especially susceptible to disappointment and frustration in this borderland existence as they often struggle with their own uncertainties and insecurities about identity and belonging. This analysis also applies (to a certain extent) to native-born Latinas with ancestral heritages dating back several generations as they may also similarly find themselves trapped within the complicated interstice of multiple cultures. Although a multitudinous amount of work has been published in exploration of *el entre*, the specific pieces explored in this investigation will be *Borderlands* by Gloria Anzaldúa, *The
House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros, and “Homecoming” by Ana Chavier Caamaño. Both literary works use language code-switching and detailed explanations to elucidate their experiences as Latinas living in the U.S. The descriptions produced in these works will undoubtedly connect with the high pregnancy rate as it captures the heightened need of Latina women to belong and have a sense of purpose in their lives.

Chapter six will investigate the current situation that many Latinos find themselves facing in U.S. society. Erickson’s publication Latina Adolescent Childbearing in East Los Angeles and Promises I Can Keep by Edin and Kafalas are two sociological glimpses into the cyclical phenomenon of minority adolescent childbearing that will be largely referenced in this chapter. As the largest ethnic minority, certain societal factors such as educational limitations and financial constraints indubitably reduce the potential professional progress of many Latina women. After exploring the dearth of other options presented to these women, it will be clear why such a sizeable portion of Latina adolescents choose to enter motherhood at a young age.

The final chapter will draw overall conclusions of the preceding chapters and examine the implications of the overlapping themes of adolescent pregnancy. This chapter will unveil the investigative results of the qualitative research in connection with the preceding chapters as well as the implication on future action to be taken. Ideas for future research as well as suggestions for meeting the needs of these young individuals will be stated in the concluding section. The incorporated literary and sociological sources will be evaluated for usefulness as potential resources in programs designated to empower young Latino immigrants. The overall objective is not to prevent Latina pregnancy, but instead to ensure that these young women are aware of the various available options and resources that will help them make more informed decisions as well as enable those educating Latinas regarding life choices to have a deeper understanding of relevant cultural differences. This begins not only with the education of the Latina population, but with every inhabitant of the United States. Obviously, given the
deep-rooted nature of culture and tradition itself, change cannot happen overnight. But the eventual hope is that in knowing more, both Latinos and non-Latinos can cross the cultural divide and improve the staggering statistics that exist today. Clearly this is a complex, intricately woven situation that needs more attention than it is currently allotted. The intent of this investigation is to inspire various ideas and suggestions for new and improved programs and resources that may help bridge this gap. If we are not able to understand and meet the specific needs of young Latinas, as stated by Pedro Noguera, “many Latino youth will remain like so many immigrant youth of the past, industrious and hopeful but trapped in circumstances that stifle their ambitions and dreams” (In Motion Magazine). With the hope of introducing a more expansive understanding to the current dialogue of Latina teen pregnancy, this investigation aims to analyze and interpret the cultural and societal elements that contribute to the phenomenon. The expectation that Latina women be feminine (according to societal standards) is one such cultural value that will be further examined in the following chapter.
CHAPTER 2

FEMININITY

Different cultures put varying degrees of emphasis on disparate attributes of femininity and what it means to be a woman. Although members of a society can individually reassign values to these characteristics, overall certain assets emerge as more important than others. The Latino culture is no exception in that it assigns strong values to the characteristics of womanhood. These values include submission, tradition, appearance, virginity and motherhood. The first three characteristics will be explored in the current chapter while the latter, being of such notable size and importance to the study at hand, will be investigated more thoroughly in the chapters that follow. Each value will be examined within the Latino context as well as the implications on adolescent pregnancy.

Submission has long been an expectation of assumed female behavior within the Latino historical context. Silence, passivity, and deference to males have comprised the definition of femininity since the Spanish conquest of the Americas. The importance of silence is evident in the figure La Malinche, also known as Malintzin, who allegedly gave herself to the conquistador Hernán Cortés in the sixteenth century. She has since come to represent the embodiment of treason and unfaithfulness. As Cortés’s interpreter she is accused of having used her voice and consequently handing over the lives and land of her own people to the Spanish conquest. In order to better understand the significance of this eminent female figure, one must first consider the historical context in which she lived. Being in Mexico, Malintzin lived in a society that was heavily ruled by clear gender-based roles. Cordelia Candelaria explains, “Born female in a rigidly role-conscious society, La Malinche was bred to serve and to obey. She would have brought shame to the cacique of Tabasco and to her adopted people, had she not obeyed and served as best she could” (5). The figure of La Malinche is commonly considered to have freely given herself over to the Spanish forces upon her own free will while history suggests otherwise. Candelaria continues, “The fact that La Malinche had been betrayed by her mother and sold into slavery
cannot be overlooked as a factor in a more complete interpretation and understanding of this remarkable woman” (5). Undoubtedly several Latino feminists have attempted to thwart this misinterpretation and introduce a more positive perspective on the life of La Malinche (Skar 93), but the transformation of a figure so rigorously ingrained into the culture and mindset of a tradition-based people is no easy task. The invention of words such as malinchismo and malinchear highlights the negative stigma associated with her name and the stigma that still exists today of a woman opening her mouth. La Malinche continues to serve as a warning of the potential adverse consequences of female speech.

Several different feminists confirm the implicit connection between femininity and silence. Lucía Guerra Cunningham captures this phenomenon; “hemos utilizado la palabra femenino para designar toda una zona enraizada en la subordinación, el silenciamiento y la represión” (151). Debra Castillo also explores this social restriction in her work Talking Back. She asserts that “under old traditional codes, the woman- ambiguously the figure of truth or of untruth- remained silent and withdrawn” (41). These notions are extremely relevant in that they largely affect the potential effect of Latino feminism in the U.S. Any individual that speaks out against the social expectation of the surrounding patriarchal society is in danger of being labeled a rebel and traitor. Julia Alvarez contends, “I would sometimes scare myself sick thinking of what would happen if I didn’t fall in line and praise this important tradition of nuestra cultura. The Malinche fear of betraying my own people to the conquistador culture hangs heavy on my heart” (Once Upon a Quinceañera 163). As a Dominican, Alvarez demonstrates how La Malinche infiltrates every Latina woman’s worries, not just those from Mexico. Stacy Skar documents the term Malinche as referring to “Chicanas who sought higher education, a move regarded as assimilating to white culture, and to those who allied themselves with feminism” (95-96). This definition demonstrates the preference of Latina women to retain their cultural

---

14 we have used the word feminine to designate an entire zone rooted in subordination, silencing, and represión of our culture.
values and not entirely assimilate to Anglo attitudes. The negative applications of the term Malinche further underline the harmful possibilities associated with speaking out and encourage women to remain silent.

Silence has two major effects on teen pregnancy in that many females do not receive the necessary information about sexual matters from their parents as well as many of the girls do not communicate effectively with their partners about contraception methods. Three major studies reveal the lack of communication that exists between parents and their offspring. Hurtado finds that clear and explicit conversations about sex are seldom held between daughter and mother and even more rarely with the father (54). Other family members are often the educators for sexual topics and obscure euphemisms are used in place of the actual words. One participant notes that her family used the term ‘cookies’ to signify feminine pads (51). The same unclear and opaque messages were prevalent in the essay “Talkin’ Sex” by Patricia Zavella (237). One woman described her experience as an adolescent Latina and affirmed that “talking about sex has not been a part of our cultural practice” (Zavella 245). The conclusions by Russell and Lee corroborate these assertions in that sex is often a taboo topic in Latino households (“Practitioners’ Perspectives” 142). While one optimistic study by Guzmán, Arruda, and Feria (of 8th graders in Los Angeles County) found that more than ½ of their Latino participants are talking with the parents about sex (22), another similar study (9th graders in northern California) by Yvette Flores revealed that 0% of the 60 surveyed participants had discussed sex with their parents (204). A recent study conducted by The NCPUP also introduces relevant findings in regards to the communication breakdown between parents and children. Their data reveal that the majority of parents are in fact talking with their children about sex, but that the percentage of parents talking corresponds to the child’s English language ability (“Toward a Common Future” 21). In other words, the more the child speaks English, the more likely they are to have spoken about sex with their parents. This is extremely pertinent in that it may help to explain the aforementioned discrepancy of pregnancies
between the foreign and native born Latina populations. The research also reveals that a sizeable portion of parents are not talking with their children about contraception and pregnancy prevention ("Toward a Common Future" 22). This lack of communication then leads to unprotected sex as documented in the responses to the question: “What do you think is the main reason teens do not use birth control or protection when they have sex?” ("Toward a Common Future" 24). Although the most popular reason cited was fear of parents finding out, the second most common answer was that the teens have a lack of knowledge about contraception and how to use it ("Toward a Common Future" 24). Clearly the communicative gap between generations is influential on adolescent behavior and may attribute largely to the high rate of Latina teen pregnancy.

The silence between parents and children therefore plays a major role in not only the sexual ignorance of Latino teenagers, but also in their levels of comfort when communicating with their partners about such sensitive subjects. They consequently are unlikely to establish a plan of pregnancy prevention before engaging in sexual activity and thus increase their chances of becoming teen parents. One young Latina in Yvette Flores’s study asserts that “guys just pressure you too much, you don’t have time to plan” and that the suggestion of condoms leads their partners to believe they’re “doing it with others” (204). This hesitancy of women to voice their opinions in a romantic relationship is intricately connected with the gender-based behavioral expectation of submission. Although they may choose to consult with the wife before making decisions, men are commonly placed at the head of the hierarchal order of the Latino family structure (Roll and Irwin xxi). An evident derivation of the Judeo-Christian belief system is this notion that women always place the desires of men ahead of their own and respect his decisions. As the New Testament affirms, “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head to the wife....” (Ephesians 5:22-23 New King James). This attitude arises as a dominant force in many heterosexual relationships in a variety of Latino literary works and studies. One

---

16 Erickson concludes that while teen Latinas are less likely to be sexually active than other groups, “once they become sexually active they are less likely to use contraception” (33).
Latina participant in Hurtado’s investigation voiced her reasoning for not wanting to date a Latino guy. She asserts that Latino men “want to wear the pants, they want to be the macho, they want to be the ones who are superior to the woman” (146) while another participant’s mother warned her to stay away from Mexican men (not born in the U.S.) because they are machistas (Hurtado 145).

The word machista is an important point of investigation as it clearly has implications for the relationship between men and women. One of the most widely acknowledged definitions of machismo comes from Evelyn Stevens in the mid-twentieth century who defined it as “the cult of virility, the chief characteristics of which are exaggerated aggressiveness and intransigence in male-to-male interpersonal relationships and arrogance and sexual aggression in male-to-female relationships” (Stevens 316). The expectation that males and females are to comply with their respective roles in this paradigmatic schema has penetrated into U.S. Latino society as evidenced in many recent anthologies.

Windows into My World is a compilation of various essays by Latino men and women growing up in the U.S. Not only is machismo evident from a female standpoint, as expressed in “Independence Battle” by María Teresa Brothers, but also from a male perspective in “Men Also Cry” by Juan Macias. Macias remembers the transition from his original belief that “machismo was the only respectable way of life for men” (Macias 110) to his eventual fulfillment of an “authentic man” that embraces his inner feelings and realizes that “the machismo life exists only as an illusion” (Macias 112). Hijas Americanas by Rosie Molinary is another anthology that documents the power imbalance reported by various Latina women in their relationships with Latino men. One participant explains, “Latino men—and I won’t speak for all of them, of course—conduct their lives in the machismo way that they were raised. For a strong, independent Latina woman, that is hard to deal with. My first husband was very jealous of me being away from him and presenting myself as independent” (Molinary 108). Another woman describes her previous marriage to a Latino man,

\[\text{17 in which the daughter is being trained to be an obedient housewife in the event that she marries a “macho man”}\]
What bothered me more was that I couldn’t leave the house, couldn’t be with my friends. Since my divorce I have dated Latinos, but in the back of my head, I know it won’t go past friends. I know that is wrong, but I can’t live with someone who has a *machista* mentality about women... there are still a lot of men out there with that throwback way of thinking. I like to come and go as I please. I don’t feel like I belong to anybody. (Molinary 108)

One woman contends that “Latino men tend to be more controlling and possessive” (Molinary 111) while another asserts that her own father advised her not to date Latino men due to their “wandering eye and tendency to be unfaithful” (Molinary 112). Although these descriptions may understandably be considered simple generalizations and stereotypes, there is nonetheless merit in the fact that many women are united by these common experiences. Beginning at birth, females are exposed to the expectation that the males of the households (father, brother, etc) are authoritative figures in charge of the behavior of the young Latinas in the family\(^{18}\) (Hurtado 94). Latinas are taught from a young age to serve the males and comply with their demands (Roll and Irwin 47). It starts with the daughter-father relationship but will likely continue to influence the Latina’s adult life in her romantic relationships. One young Latina shares her personal experience, “But I was never truly happy, because he wanted me to stay home and not work or go to school. He had the typical *machista* mentality. I tried to conform for the sake of my family, but eventually I ended up despising him for trying to hold me back. I went from taking orders from my dad to taking orders from him” (Molinary 121). The expectation that Latinas are to submit to males in all areas of their lives includes the implication that they are to acquiesce in sexual relationships as well.

Not only is the female stripped of her individual freedom in the *machismo* framework, but she takes on a more passive and silent role in familial interactions. There are multiple connections of the image of a silent, submissive woman as pertaining to the high level of adolescent pregnancy within the Latino population. Within the familial relations there is a lack of sexual education and related information being presented to the younger generation. Considering the gender-based power

---

\(^{18}\)“One Holy Night” by Sandra Cisneros reveals the story of a pregnant teen whose deviant behavior is blamed on the absence of her watchful godfather.
imbalance, open communication about personal topics becomes an extremely difficult and uncomfortable subject for the young Latina to approach. The communication between parent and child is thus insufficient and plays an important factor in increasing the daughter’s likelihood of becoming a teen mother. In their personal relationships females have been trained since infancy to comply with the demands of males and sacrifice their own personal desires to satisfy those of others. They also have been raised in an environment that hesitates to directly talk about sex and therefore are less likely to approach the subject with their partners. As women are expected to be the submissive gender, they are often left with feelings of inferiority and these feelings often become evident in their relationships later on in life. Women who are talked down to or controlled often find it hard later to take control of their bodies and sexuality (Zavella 247). Acceptance of patriarchal demands can ultimately prevent these women from asking questions and voicing opinions about sexual topics and leave them verbally restrained and consequently more susceptible to adolescent motherhood.

It is necessary to analyze the role that women play in possibly perpetuating the expectation that females remain silent and submissive. Several descriptions of Latino communities describe the women as the cornerstone that supports the whole family. Females are most commonly the designated individuals for instilling in the younger generations the values learned from their elders. They are often considered the “glue” that holds the family together and reinforces the attitudes and beliefs of the traditional culture (Ruiz 115). One such instance is found in the Catholic religion. Within the family network, females are often the ones to encourage church attendance, prayer, repentance and other religious involvements while males decrease their church affiliation with time (Roll and Irwin 12). Due to the fact that women are not permitted to hold an authoritative clerical position, mothers and grandmothers, by reinforcing the Catholic values, are perpetuating the patriarchal ideals of submission to men. From the moment of birth the infant enters a solid, historical, almost inescapable domain in
which patriarchal ideals have infiltrated every fiber of their existence. The passing down of these values turns into a repetitive cycle that, as evidenced by Latino feminists, is extremely hard to deconstruct.

Another characteristic of femininity in the Latino community, undoubtedly deriving from the sizeable adherence to conservative religions, is the expectation that a woman embrace and commit herself to a heterosexual marriage. The study by Russell and Lee revealed that Mexican women are more likely than other demographic sectors to believe that marriage is an important component in affirming one’s womanhood (Practitioners’ Perspectives 142). Renowned author Sandra Cisneros found herself challenging cultural norms with her unmarried status. Cisneros never quite realized precisely how hard she had been fighting for her solitary lifestyle until inquired by the critic Norma Alarcón, “How do you do it?” (Kevane and Heredia 17). Not only are Latinas expected to get married, but lesbianism is strictly frowned upon. In fact, studies have indicated that lesbianism is not even a point of discussion in many Latino households (Zavella 235). Although a variety of Latinas, such as Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, have made considerable advancements in the acknowledgement and acceptance of homosexuality, there is still much room for progress. Understandably, change in this area cannot occur overnight as it is the ultimate rejection of patriarchy (Hurtado 94) and therefore would require the complete transformation of multiple aspects of Latino culture and identity.

An enlightened perspective of Latino marriage is gained with an augmented understanding of the original purpose of the large celebration of the fifteenth birthday, or Quinceañera. The Quinceañera has blossomed into a major industry of which hundreds of websites, magazines, shops, and party planners have capitalized. Julia Alvarez follows several young Latinas as they prepare for their celebration and presents a remarkably unbiased and insightful documentation of the elaborate occasions in Once Upon a Quinceañera. She cites the origination of the event as being rooted in the public display of the marriageable age of the guest of honor. Although religion was once the main motivation behind the celebration, many agree that it no longer is the focus (Once Upon a Quinceañera
Clearly age fifteen has historically been demarcated as an appropriate age for marriage. Based on her experience working with Latina youth, a Baton Rouge ESL teacher remarked, “A lot of the parents themselves had a Quinceañera and then got married, that’s when they’re getting their period, becoming a woman, able to get married and have kids then. It becomes culturally normal” (Smith). The precedent behavior of the parents clearly has an influence on the younger generations as is clear in the testimonies of many Latinas in Chicana Adolescents. One Mexican interviewee makes a personal observation of the appropriate age to get married. She explains, “That’s the difference between whites and Mexicans. If you were Mexican, your mother would already be a grandmother five or six times over already. We get married young. That’s the Mexican way. I got married when I was 18, but for us that’s not too young to get married” (Dietrich 8). As evidenced in both the literature and sociological findings, the traditional values and expectations of what defines womanhood are continuing to be bequeathed to younger Latina generations. They witness from a young age that they are to submit to the male gender and silence their voices at all costs. They are taught from a young age to be the nurturing, servile, passive partner in a heterosexual matrimony. Although these expectations have weakened with time and exposure to United States ideals, these patriarchal expectations of the Latino community continue to influence the attitudes and behaviors of many of its members.

The Quinceañera is not only relevant for its historical context, but also in its representation of feminine ideals revolving around the womanly physical appearance. This is the coming of age moment in which the young female, previously considered a child, is prominently portrayed as a young feminine woman. Loads of time, money, and effort are dedicated to making the young woman as physically attractive as possible. The aspect of appearance is so great that some young ladies, who cannot even afford a celebration, will nonetheless insist on hiring a photographer to document their adorned bodies. Karal Ann Marling, author of Debutante: Rights and Regalia of American Debdom, describes Quinceañeras as “a staged show, theme parties with semi-professional dance routines, tiaras...high
heels, big hair, and a sparkly white dress” (qtd. in *Once Upon a Quinceañera* 141). The celebration of the *Quinceañera* may not be considered too distinct from the North American celebration of sweet sixteen, however when compared with literary and sociological findings, it becomes evident that physical appearance does play a considerable role in defining femininity within the Latino community.

Physical appearance is a critical element to an adolescent’s identity as it not only makes changes evident to the owner of the body, but also to the world around them. Others may notice changes and begin to treat the individual differently. Parents might increase their level of protection over their children and the behavior between the sexes undoubtedly gets altered. The Latino culture particularly acknowledges these physical changes in their daily interactions. Marc Irwin, an Anglo that moved to Guatemala as a young researcher, made the following observation,

> I was unprepared for the intense femininity of Latino women and frank enjoyment that Latino men took in their *machismo*. No one seemed to worry about sexual harassment there. In fact, the air felt charged with sexuality, and it seemed to me that flirting was a world-class art in Guatemala. (Roll and Irwin xvi)

In an environment where flirting is an acceptable behavior, it comes as no surprise that physical appearance is an important consideration in measuring one’s femininity. Roll and Irwin further assert that the gender roles in the Latino society are clearly defined as males are expected to be chivalrous and respectful toward women while females are nurturing and attractive. These authors later discuss the recent success of female politicians, noting that there is more female political leadership in Latin America than in the United States. They contend that so long as Latinas “show respect for the female role, ... through their attention to appearance and decorum, may in fact enjoy more power and respect than most women are able to obtain in Anglo culture” (Roll and Irwin 119). It is evident that immense value is placed on the physical appearance in evaluation of one’s femininity.

---

19 This assertion is validated by the multiple women, such as Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and Laura Chinchilla, that currently hold presidential positions in Latin American countries and fit the physical expectation of slender bodies and attractive appearances.
These assertions are backed by the findings in the current qualitative investigation for Question 21 where the participants were asked to produce three different words associated with the word “feminine”. Roughly half of the provided answers referenced aspects of physical appearance (e.g. clean, pretty, body). A variety of sources have highlighted the importance of physical appearance in the definition of femininity according to Latino standards. In Hijas Americanas, Molinary explores the intense pressure on Latina women to fit a certain body image projected by Hollywood. Although many of these women acknowledge an appreciation for the emergence of more curvy actresses such as Jennifer Lopez and Eva Mendes, many still feel that their ever slimming waste lines are anything but representative of the common Latina body shape (Molinary 187). Although progression seems to be made in some Latina roles, such as America Fererra’s part in Real Women Have Curves, opposing messages are simultaneously transmitted with the same actress being labeled ‘ugly’ when given some braces and glasses in the ABC television show “Ugly Betty”. There seems to be a lacking of representative Latina images in the media as noticed by a variety of participants in Molinary’s research. One girl attests, “Hollywood doesn’t have enough diversity of Latinas. I haven’t seen a Latina with cocoa-brown skin and black hair” while another feels pressure to have “big breasts and a small stomach” (Molinary 187). Certainly the Hollywood creation of an idealized figure is not unique to the Latina population, but this unrealistic image makes the notion of self-approval appear even more distant in a culture that so highly values physical attractiveness.

From a historical perspective, physical appearance has always been an important aspect to the Latino culture. Ruiz traces back the history of beauty pageants as early as the beginning of the twentieth century when various organizations, including churches, would endorse contents based on physical appearance (117). Conflicts were common occurrences between adolescent females who wanted to wear make-up and get a bob hair-do. Some girls left their houses in one outfit and arrived at their destination in another in order to conform with their parents’ demands at home while liberating
themselves in public (Ruiz 116). Evidently, concern over physical appearance within the Latino community is not a recent phenomenon, but rather dates back many years.

Physical appearance is an important aspect when considered in the full context of Latinas living in the United States. They are surrounded by Anglo standards of beauty that in many ways conflict with those of Latin America. Numerous Latinas in Voicing Chicana Feminisms compare the divergent reactions they receive depending upon their location to the U.S.-Mexico border. When in Mexico many Chicanas report positive feedback about their appearances and consequently a more active romantic life (Hurtado 182-3). Many of the same girls attest that in the United States they are considered dirty and inferior because of their dark skin (Hurtado 177). Upon being asked if she thought she was beautiful, one girl replied “it depends where I am” (Hurtado 183). Another respondent recalls of her childhood,

My adoptive mother was white and even she would never touch me, never. It was like being dark was a really bad thing. I had to actively pursue people in my life and find dark people and be around them because they’re beautiful and if I’m with them, then I’m beautiful and I’m just as brown. (177)

Judith Ortiz Cofer highlights the stark contrast of Puerto Rican beauty standards with those of the U.S. in her essay “The Story of My Body”. Although on the island she was described as a pale, tall girl, her self-image was challenged as a result of her move to New Jersey. She begins the essay in a succinct, yet insightful introduction, stating “I was born a white girl in Puerto Rico but became a brown girl when I came to live in the United States. My Puerto Rican relatives called me tall; at the American school, some of my rougher classmates called me Skinny Bones, and the Shrimp because I was the smallest member of my classes all through grammar school....” (Ortiz Cofer 132). Contrary to her looks being deemed “beautiful” on the island, on the mainland they were looked down upon and means for discrimination. She observed skin color to be a determinant of social status as she found that in her school the “the hierarchy for popularity was as follows: pretty white girl, pretty Jewish girl, pretty Puerto Rican girl, pretty black girl” (139). Ortiz Cofer also encountered her first incident of racial prejudice in the United States when a shop clerk yelled after her, “Don’t come in here unless you gonna buy something. You PR
kids put your dirty hands on stuff. You always look dirty. But maybe dirty brown is your natural color” (135). Being that this was her initial exposure to racism, Ortiz Cofer ran home and scrubbed her fingers hoping to no longer be dirty. It was not until a few years later that she realized it was her actual color of skin that the man was criticizing (135). Although these beauty standards are geographically relative, they nonetheless impact Latino adolescents’ self-conceptualization and self-value. Ortiz Cofer realized that and eventually learned to base her own value on more significant standards. She concludes her essay with her own revelation of self-worth:

My skin color, my size, and my appearance were variables—things that were judged according to my current self-image, the aesthetic values of the times, the places I was in, and the people I met. My studies, later my writing, the respect of people who saw me as an individual person they cared about, these were the criteria for my sense of self-worth that I would concentrate on in my adult life. (142)

Fortunately Ortiz-Cofer was able to find her personal value in measurements other than aesthetic standards. However, as stated by the author herself, this change did not manifest itself until her adult years. She, similar to many other adolescents, lived her youthful years in continual comparison with the surrounding beauty standards that undoubtedly impacted her own body-image and assessment of physical beauty.

How the García Girls Lost their Accents by Julia Alvarez and When I Was Puerto Rican by Esmeralda Santiago are two literary works that stand out as prominent examples of the important role of physical appearance in a young Latina’s experience of the merging of two contrasting cultural standards. In this semi-autobiographical novel, Julia Alvarez explores the characters’ appearances to highlight the self-awareness of adolescent females. She brilliantly provides different points of view, including those of the four sisters and the mother, in order to provide the reader with a more ample understanding of the actual experiences of Latinas living in the U.S. The García girls have moved to the United States after living for several years in the Dominican Republic, a story line that very closely resembles the actual life of Alvarez. In the chapter titled “Floor show”, Alvarez explores the physical
characteristics of Sandi as similar to the surrounding societal norms. Sandi is described as “a pretty girl” who could “pass as American with soft blue eyes and fair skin” (181). The standards as established in the U.S. society are clearly being used as evaluative tools of physical attractiveness. Clearly the opinion of an American seems to carry more weight on what constitutes beauty when the narrator identifies Dr. Fanning, an American, as being “important” and having a more profound impact when describing one as “pretty” (181). It is evident through both the above novel and previously mentioned personal accounts of Latinas in the U.S. that there are identifiable characteristics in evaluating beauty. Light skin and straightened hair are considered beauty markers as well as an hourglass shape of voluptuous curves and a small waist. It comes as no surprise therefore that within the Latino community the transition into womanhood is largely assessed by the adolescent’s physical maturation.

When I was Puerto Rican by Esmeralda Santiago is another exemplary account of a young Latina’s physical transition, both geographically and developmentally. The autobiography captures the experiences of Esmeralda at a young age when she is confronted by a variety of challenging situations and emotions while moving to mainland U.S. and entering womanhood. As the oldest child in her family, Esmeralda (or Negi as her family calls her), at the age of thirteen desires to be considered a woman rather than a child. However, the repeated reaffirmation by her mother that she is casi señorita reminds her continually that she is too young to be considered a woman. Her frustration with being subjected to the position of child rather than señorita is evident when she asks her mother, “Why do you keep saying I’m casi señorita? When am I going to be señorita without the almost?” (197). It becomes apparent later that bodily maturation is the key element in defining her femininity and ultimately responsible for eliminating the almost. The first conversation that highlights body as the foundational element in identifying womanhood is Negi’s quickly dismissed inquiry about a bra.

Negi: “Mami, can I get a bra?”
Mami: “What for, you don’t have anything up there.” She laughed.
Negi: “Yes, I do. Look! All the girls in my school...”
Mami: “You don’t need a bra until you’re señorita, so don’t ask again”. (233)
Negi’s insistent desire to prove her femininity is squashed by her mother’s laughter and refusal to consider her teen daughter a señorita until her body proves otherwise. Obviously physical appearance is intricately connected with femininity as in Negi’s case it is the only obstacle blocking her from officially reaching womanhood. The climactic moment for Negi comes when she informs her mother that she has begun menstruating. Her mom asks her, “Really? When?” and Negi replies “I noticed it when I came home from school” (233). The significance of the event is evident when Negi’s mother shouts to Aunt Tata, “Guess what, Negi is a señorita!” and Tata responds “Ay, that’s wonderful!” (233). On account of her physical development, Negi finally feels accepted and legitimate in her femininity. Her family’s opinion on what constitutes a woman reflects the larger societal values that intricately connect physical appearance with womanhood and thus influences Negi’s own evaluation of femininity.

Connecting back to the previous analysis of silence, the period conversation between Negi and her mother demonstrates the use of euphemisms and lack of direct speech in relation to sexual topics. Negi never directly states “I got my period”, but rather informs her mother, “I’m going to need that bra now” (233). Her mother further asks her, “Do you know what to do?” (233) revealing that she herself has never discussed puberty with her adolescent daughter. Negi explains that she knows what to do because she learned about it in school (233). A lack of communication exists between this mother and daughter that, as documented in the studies by Hurtado and Zavella, is common to many Latino families. This silence further strengthens the messages transmitted to the adolescent from both society and family members in regards to femininity and womanhood.

The connection between appearance and femininity is highly applicable to the analysis of teen motherhood as Latinas are physically maturing before many other ethnic categories. According to a recent study by Health magazine, 15% of Latinas have begun puberty (as opposed to the Caucasian 10%)

---

20 This notion that physical development is an indicator of womanhood is also prevalent in Molinary’s Hijas Americanas when the mother shares with the entire family that her daughter is now a woman because she got her period (39-40).
by the age of seven (Gardner). Being that womanhood is connected with physical development, at a younger age these young Latinas are appearing grown up and increasingly more eligible for romantic involvement. At the onset of puberty, Latinas are considered to be women (or señoritas) and are expected to fulfill the specific beauty standards, (as largely established by Latina Hollywood figures).

In conclusion, through the sociological research and literary analyses it is undeniable that hefty expectations continue to weigh on the shoulders of the adolescent Latina. In order to satisfy cultural norms and fulfill her feminine role, as designed by the patriarchal Latino society, she must silence herself and submit to the male figures that surround her, both inside and outside of the home. She is trained from a young age to serve the male gender and relentlessly project a passive, laconic demeanor in their presence. The Latina is also expected to reinforce traditional values in her offspring with respect to religion and marriage. It is expected that enter a heterosexual relationship, get married at a relatively young age, and promptly raise a family. Additionally, she is responsible for maintaining connections between her family and the church, a social institution that further perpetuates the patriarchal order established in the Latino community. Lastly, in order to fulfill the societal ideals of what constitutes a feminine woman, her appearance is compared with a variety of beauty standards. Lighter skin in the U.S., as revealed in the study by Hurtado and How the Garcia Girls lost their Accents, is perceived as more attractive. Additionally, a woman’s body, being that it is the necessary element of womanhood, as established in When I was Puerto Rican, is an integral asset in evaluating one’s femininity. Lisa Dietrich concludes in Chicana Adolescents that Latinas are “expected to be sexually attractive, but not sexually active” (61). As the current chapter has explored various expectations of femininity, the subsequent chapter will investigate a conspicuous expectation placed on the Latina’s body. The notion that females, unlike males, are expected to maintain sexual purity until marriage is a recurrent theme throughout Latino literature and thus merits its own comprehensive examination.

21 The age difference discussed in chapter three also confirms that Latinas are often involved in relationships with older males, further revealing that the girl, by the man’s standards, appears physically mature at a young age.
CHAPTER 3

VIRGINITY

The Catholic religion and value system undoubtedly influence the lives and beliefs of the people of Latin America. Although there have been signs of its decreasing presence throughout Central and South America (Cevallos 1), Catholicism nonetheless exists as an influential and historical force within the Spanish-speaking world. Irwin and Roll note that many individuals who never attend church services continue to self-identify themselves as Catholics. This translates into a sense of loyalty to both the Catholic Church and its prominent figures (Irwin and Roll 74). Rosaries and images of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary permeate both public and private sectors of Latin America. The importance of La Virgen María is notably palpable in its inspiration of the Marianismo effect. Marianismo is the veneration of La Virgen and the notion that she is the archetypal role model for many Latin American women. “She is the mother, the nurturer, the one who endures pain and sorrow, the one who is willing to serve, the one who invests devotion, loyalty, and nurturance in the family” (Hurtado 15). In addition to these venerated traits of La Virgen, there is one other highly critical characteristic that Latin American women are expected to emulate, that is virginity. The immaculate conception of Jesus (Matthew 1:18) affirmed the sexual purity of his young mother. Her abstinence has deeply penetrated the Latino culture and has become a widespread expectation of unwed females. Dietrich found that amongst adolescent Latinas in the U.S., a loss of virginity equates to a life of shame and possible banishment from home as they are considered “damaged merchandise” (54). Hurtado notes that “to be a good woman is to remain a virgin until marriage” (15), a belief reflected in the tradition of the Quinceañera. Zavella attributes the inception of the Quinceañera to the honoring of La Virgen and the celebration of the girl’s sexual purity (240). While some Latinas consider La Virgen to be a positive prototype of mothers and spouses, others see her as a sexual oppressor that limits the potential freedom of Latinas (Skar 36, 109). Anzaldúa reclaimed La Virgen to signify the unification of different races and religions and the symbol of rebellion
against the middle and upper classes (52). Certainly her function can vary amongst personal opinions, but one thing that remains indisputable is her symbolic representation of the importance of virginity. This expectation indubitably is accompanied by many implications and effects on the entire Latino culture as *La Virgen María* is not only a prominent figure in Mexico, but throughout all of Latin America. Although each country identifies the figure with different names ("*La Virgen de Lujan*" in Argentina, "*La Virgin de Copacabana*" in Bolivia, etc), her image and embodied message remain consistent throughout the vast majority of the Spanish-speaking world ("The Virgin Mary in Latin America"). In order to conserve the traditional values of *marianismo*, there are many noticeable efforts by the familial and clerical elders to maintain a girl’s purity, thus resulting in observable effects on the attitude and behavior of the young woman. Typically, the adolescent Latina is subjected to immense pressure from her parents and church to remain a virgin until marriage while potentially receiving conflicting messages from her boyfriend, friends and the media. The various societal functions of virginity, the efforts taken by authority figures to encourage sexual purity, and the resulting effects on young Latinas and adolescent pregnancy will be discussed below.

Although the high value of virginity is rooted in religious ideology, it has gained multiple societal functions in the Latino community. A girl’s maintenance of sexual purity until marriage reflects not only her own value, but simultaneously exhibits her family’s worth. Irwin and Roll note that contrary to Anglo culture, Latino culture clearly disapproves of an unmarried woman’s sexual activity as her impure behavior “reflects badly on her family” (27). This assertion is corroborated by their subsequent notion that shame is highly undesirable and to be avoided at all costs for Latinos (67). Shame is difficult to purge once associated with a name and its unpleasant effect becomes even more significant when considering the high value of community and connecting with others in the Latino culture (Irwin and Roll 67). A sexually impure daughter therefore can potentially tarnish the favorable reputation that her family has worked hard to establish. A female who is even slightly perceived to be
sexually promiscuous is in danger of disrespecting and dishonoring her family and all are likely to be subjected to public humiliation (Zavella 228). In her study of Chicanas, Zavella observed that the most common reaction to a pregnant Latina is that her parents refuse to speak with her and above all else worry about what others think (239). The same conclusion was made in Dietrich’s research, also involving Chicanas, when she discovered that more than anything a teen pregnancy puts the family pride at stake and potentially ruins their reputation (48). The upholding of one’s virginity (or at least the appearance of doing so) clearly is an important element in reflecting the family’s moral fiber and reinforcing its commendable reputation. It is interesting to note that sexual purity has also been associated with economic success. Female chastity has historically been considered an indicator of social class as the virginity of working-class females, as opposed to that of the upper class, is less scrutinized at the time of marriage (Zavella 232-3). Not only is virginity evidence of the family’s social standing, but it also gravely influences the reputation and marriageability of the unwed Latina.

The Latina’s reputation, which is expected to remain pure and dignified, is assigned by others on the basis of her behavior and appearance. Once again, the notion of shame and community begin to emerge as important factors in controlling private behavior. The anticipated reaction from others becomes the motivating factor in acting a certain way. A girl’s sexual activity is no exception, as various sources (Dietrich, Hurtado, Zavella) cite the importance of virginity in the evaluation of a girl’s reputation. Participants in Dietrich’s study identified virginity as “highly prized” (47, 60) and, if lost, the culprit of a bad reputation. According to one girl, “you lose respect after losing your virginity because everyone finds out” (Dietrich 58). Another girl spoke of her friend’s tough situation in that “[her parents] think she’s not a virgin now, so they don’t want her back home. There’s no reason to take care of her, nothing to take care of” (58). The girl’s personal worth is closely linked to her willingness to accept and abide by the patriarchal expectations of sexual purity. Her obligation to remain a virgin until marriage is complicated by the messages sent by peers, which demand that she not appear too
innocent. Dietrich identifies the “bitch, ho, or schoolgirl” labeling system that both girls and guys use to classify female behavior (41). Within the young Latina community that Dietrich observes, the ‘schoolgirl’ is identified as the nice and pure girl that abstains from sex, gangs, and drug use (42). This seemingly positive reputation can be considered negative amongst Latina teens as the female may be perceived as “acting white” (43). A ‘bitch’ is a girl with an attitude, is loud and may have gang affiliations, while a ‘ho’ refers to a girl that wears skanky clothes, flirts a lot, and appears to sleep around with different guys (44-45). As evidenced in the preceding descriptions, contradictory messages are continually sent to the adolescent Latina. According to peer evaluation, a ‘school girl’ can be undesirable in that it projects an ignorant and racially weakened image. On the other hand, if they are seen as being too flirty and friendly with males, they will be labeled as a ‘ho’\textsuperscript{22}. Dietrich found that “many girls go to great lengths to avoid the reputation of ‘ho’” (47) and she cited a specific measure that many Latinas take to absolve themselves from public scrutiny. She found that girls preferred to have steady boyfriends in order to avoid being labeled ‘ho’ and to protect their reputations (45). The result of the girl avoiding the portrayal of a scandalous appearance is her involvement in a steady relationship, ironically leading to an increased likelihood of sexual behavior.

The pressure on Latinas to remain sexually pure is evidenced in the poem “Planned Parenthood: Age Sixteen” by Michele Serros, an author of Mexican descent. As revealed in the title, Serros captures the experience of an adolescent Latina in the waiting room of a Planned Parenthood clinic. The poem begins with the identification of the office as “The devil’s workshop” (64) because this is how she has always heard it described. She continues to explain that her childhood “catechism teacher warned [her], “If you walk too close/ or too long/ in the direction of the sin clinic,/ your soul will be contaminated!”” (64). A few years later she received a similar message that “Only putas\textsuperscript{23} go on the pill” (65). Both pieces of advice intricately associate sex with negative effects, soul contamination and being

\textsuperscript{22} Zavella identifies this as the “virgin-whore continuum” (228)
\textsuperscript{23} whores
called a *puta*. Clearly this adolescent Latina is risking a lot, not only her own reputation but also her family’s pride, simply by sitting in the waiting room of this clinic. Her Aunt also eliminated any chance of discussion about sexually-related topics when she informed the young Latina, “Sexual activity begins after marriage. / Any questions, ask your husband” (65). Her aunt’s matter-of-fact assertion makes it impossible for the young lady to initiate any sort of sexually-based inquiry or conversation. Because those around her have clearly taken a stance against pre-marital sex, she has no other choice but to visit the “sin clinic”.

Another relevant theme of the poem arises towards the end when Serros writes, “I’m the minority/ in a sea of blond and green eyes. / Equal only ‘cause,/ separately, we share/ student status,/ parental fear,/ having a lover (or two)” (65). By self-identifying herself as belonging to the minority and a “sea of blond and green eyes”, it becomes apparent that this young sixteen year old is experiencing the reality of racial difference based on physical characteristics. By highlighting the fact that she is the only Latina in the waiting room, Serros is underlining the extreme strength and courage that it takes to seek out information and help about sexually-related topics. Serros ends the poem with the girl filling out the questionnaire, crossing out “other” and writing “woman of color”, and waiting for her name to be called (65). Although obviously the speaker is aware of the opinions in opposition to the clinic, she nonetheless understands that she needs to be there. By having her character cross out “other”, Serros is attempting to show that she there is nothing weird or unnatural about being brown. She proudly and confidently corrects the questionnaire that most likely represents the deeper ideological North American notion of “otherness” and asserts the inferiority of minorities. Against all odds, and racially separated from the other patients, she remains seated in the waiting room. Serros, through this empowering poem, is transmitting the message to young Latinas to defy the odds and reach out for help and education in relation to sex. She acknowledges that although pre-marital sex is considered taboo and impure, it is a reality that young Latinas need not be ashamed to confront. By capturing the
experience of this brave, young Latina, Serros simultaneously has echoed the grave disgrace that can be associated with sexual activity. Clearly this young lady poses a threat to her own reputation, as well as that of her family, but she realizes that her own health is important above all else. In a recent blog, Serros affirmed that the experience in this poem was actually her own. She writes, “The majority of other young women were not of color, and actually had the gall to bring their mothers with them! I couldn’t even fathom such a concept! While my own mother, a third-generation, self-proclaimed “liberal” Californian voiced her opinion on many topics in our home, the topic of sex education never came up for me. Not once” (“Ms. Magazine Blog”). Now that it has been established that virginity has a high value in the Latina community, efforts to assure a girl’s sexual purity will be explored in the next section.

In both literary works and sociological findings, Latina parents play an important role in emphasizing their daughters’ virginity. Since parents often use euphemisms or broad speech to talk about sex (if at all), they often resort to sending fictitious warnings to their daughters about the physical effects of sex. Zavella highlighted several physical indicators of pre-marital sex that her participants’ parents had used. Amongst her findings were that girls who had sex, “don’t walk right, dress provocatively, look different, have shame in their faces, have yellow ears, and have a change in appearance on the backs of knees” (238). Although these warnings may seem a bit humorous and exaggerated, to a young Latina who is extremely fearful of bringing shame to herself and/or family, these words could undoubtedly be frightening.

In addition to the physical consequences, many other negative results of pre-marital sex are expressed to the young Latina as well. Since family is highly venerated in the Latino community and femininity is measured by one’s entrance into a heterosexual marriage, the threat of not being able to find a husband is often cited for losing one’s virginity. Hurtado, emphasizing that “Virginity is a big deal”, found that many of her participants’ parents “communicated to them many times that virginity
was the only way they could ever secure husbands and happy futures” (54-55). The phrase “to ruin one’s life” reappears throughout various investigations as the consequence of sexual impurity (Hurtado 56, Irwin and Roll 134). Inevitably, through the reception of these messages, the Latina’s internal value may rely primarily on her ability to remain sexually pure until marriage. Irwin and Roll explain that shotgun marriages are “common in Latin America, where a woman who is known to have had sex is considered ruined, even if she is not pregnant. She will not be considered an acceptable wife by most traditional Latino families, and her behavior is considered a disgrace to her family unless she marries her lover” (134). Although Latinos in the U.S. are also surrounded by the more liberal North American perspective on pre-marital sex, these historical and cultural beliefs undoubtedly remain influential. An excellent example of a young Latina caught in the crossfire of contradictory cultural attitudes is Ana from the film Real Women Have Curves. Various scenes from this cinematic work will be explored in the following section as it applies to several previously discussed aspects of virginity in the Latino community.

The film Real Women Have Curves (2002) portrays the life of a Latino family living in California. The daughter Ana is a senior in high school and struggles with whether or not to move away from her parents in order to attend college on the east coast, an idea her mother adamantly opposes. In the end we learn of her decision to make the move and see that she has finally blossomed into a young woman who walks with confidence, just as her mother had instructed. By witnessing the interactions between her and family members, specifically her mother, the audience sees snapshots into the Latino culture and value system.

One of the only scenes in which Ana is not present is when her mother is in the kitchen hanging up figurines of St. Antonio. Mamá informs her friend that she devoutly prays to St. Antonio in order for her daughters to get married one day. She claims, “It’s too late for Estela to get married, now I have to

24 based on the play by Josefina Lopez
concentrate on Ana”. This moment reveals just how extremely important it is to Mamá that her
daughters marry. This desire becomes evident again when Mamá takes advantage of an obscure
opportunity to warn Ana about the potential consequences of not listening to her parents. Mamá is in
the living room updating her older daughter, Estela, of the recent occurrences of her favorite
telenovela. Ana listens from the dining room and gets scolded for disrupting her mother’s story. The
conversation goes as follows:

Mamá: One night Anita goes out with the stranger.
Ana: Oh mom (unenthusiastically), let me guess, she gets pregnant?
Mamá: Ay, Ana don’t spoil the story.
Estela: What happened?
Mamá: She gets pregnant (Ana laughs). Of course that means she has to betray her mother’s
wishes ... she sticks out her head and all of a sudden this bus comes by y ... le cortó la
cabeza. Ana, you better listen, that’s what happens to people that don’t listen to their
mothers. (Real Women Have Curves)

Mamá is using a tale, resulting in decapitation, to simultaneously warn her daughters about the dangers
of pregnancy and disobedience of her parents’ instructions. Ana finds the tale humorous and
predictable, indicating that she has likely heard similar stories before. Mamá’s opinions surface again in
the form of story-telling while she is working in the factory and sharing gossip with some co-workers.

Based on the prior interaction between Ana and Mamá, most likely Mamá understands that Ana will not
be open to a lecture on sexual purity. Nonetheless, Mamá takes advantage of another opportunity to
convey her beliefs in front of her daughter while conversing with others. She begins:

Mamá: Norma’s fiancé convinced her to have sex with him the night before the wedding. Girls
now days think they know so much, that’s why they end up panzonas.
Ana: No Mom, the reason they end up pregnant is because they don’t know how to use contraceptives.
Mamá: Your husband’s not going to like you knowing so much.
Ana: Why?
Mamá: A man wants a virgin.

---

25 soap opera.
26 and ... cut off her head.
27 big bellied.
Ana: Why is a woman’s virginity the only thing that matters? A woman has thoughts, ideas, a mind of her own.
Mamá: (finds this so outrageous, almost laughs) A mind? Thoughts? (Others shake their heads in disbelief with what Ana has said)

(Real Women Have Curves)

Mamá sends a variety of messages in this short conversation. First, she is critiquing the pre-marital sex of another couple, clearly dismissing it as a shameful act. Next, after Ana’s mention of contraceptives, her mother warns her that she will not make for a suitable wife if she shows knowledge of sexually-related topics. Interestingly, her reaction is not about Ana or Ana’s knowledge, but rather focuses on her suitability as a wife and the reaction of her hypothetical husband. As previously demonstrated in the scene with St. Antonio, it is evident that Mamá’s main desire is to ensure her daughter gets married. The main criteria for obtaining a husband, according to Mamá, is to maintain one’s status as a virgin.

Although Ana presents her contradictory opinion, Mamá quickly dismisses her daughter’s suggestion that a man could want a woman for her mind, not her virginity. This conversation is not the only one in which Ana presents herself as an informed, insightful young woman. In school she values the opinions of her guidance counselor, Mr. Guzman, and eventually decides to pursue a college degree. She also inspires a liberating movement in her sister’s dress shop which leads all the workers, save her mother (who storms out of the factory saying “You have no shame”), to strip themselves of all clothes and societal expectations that had previously confined them. Ana also demonstrates independence in her decision to unabashedly purchase condoms at a local pharmacy and responsibly enter into a sexual relationship with her boyfriend. Although the film does not convey where Ana learned about contraception, it can be assumed that the insight was not provided by her mother based on their previous conversations. Perhaps Ana was advised by her sister (with whom she seems to have an intimate relationship), friends, entertainment mediums (TV, movies, internet, etc) or health classes in school. Additionally, her expertise of the English language and U.S. retail system (that condoms are sold in a pharmacy) undoubtedly assisted her in the quest to obtain contraception. The day following Ana’s
date and first sexual encounter, her mother instinctually senses that Ana lost her virginity and consequently states that her daughter is no longer dignified.

Mamá: (Looks at Ana) You tramp!
Ana: What?
Mamá: You lost your virginity, didn’t you?
Ana: Mamá, you’re imagining things.
Mamá: I can tell. You’re not only fat, now you’re a puta (yells last word)!
Ana: You would say that, wouldn’t you?
Mamá: ¿Por qué no te diste tu valor?
Ana: Because there’s more to me than what’s in between my legs!
Mamá: (slaps Ana in the face) You better not get pregnant and embarrass me.

(Real Women Have Curves)

Ana is asserting her own value by saying that there are more important aspects to a woman than her virginity, while her mom ignores this notion and immediately fears her own public castigation. Although Ana is developing her own opinions and beliefs, as are many young Latinas in the U.S., she nonetheless is continually berated about finding personal value in sexual purity. The above examples from Real Women Have Curves demonstrate the importance of sexual purity and the role it plays in establishing one’s own value and establishing the family’s reputation in the community. Her mother resorts to tactics such as verbal threats and abuse in an attempt to prevent her daughter’s sexual activity and becomes devastated upon discovering her failure to do so. Ana’s mother warns her, “You better not get pregnant and embarrass me” (Real Women Have Curves). Although the film ends optimistically with Ana boldly heading to college, her mother is never able to overcome her shame and disappointment and refuses to bid her daughter farewell. We see in this unfortunate ending that although children are sometimes able to break free from cultural ideologies, change is often a more difficult task for older generations. As shown above, parents are willing to communicate verbal threats and warnings to their daughters in order to prevent sexual behavior. There are several other methods that parents employ to control their daughter’s behavior and the following section will explore them in greater detail.

The article “Star Struck” by Ruiz is particularly pertinent to the discussion at hand because it documents the conflicting parent-child relationships that have historically arisen within the American-
Latino communities. She identifies female behavior toward young men as the most common issue that causes conflict between adolescents and their parents (Skar 117). As early as the beginning of the twentieth century parents were sending family members and friends to either openly chaperone their daughters or secretly spy on them (Skar 118). Surprisingly, similar behavioral controls continue to be utilized in the twenty first century by many Latino parents. In her investigation Dietrich found that her participants regularly disagreed with their parents in terms of what constitutes “good girl behavior” (58) and observed that more freedom is equated in many Latino homes as “more American” (49). Hurtado concludes that in the Chicano/Mexicano communities, “Young women are closely monitored by their parents, their mothers in particular, until they are handed over to their next “keeper”, ideally a husband” (37). Dietrich’s findings corroborate Hurtado’s assertion as she also finds that most often female behavior is placed under the responsibility of the male figures in their lives, the brothers and fathers (50). Once again sexual purity emerges as a critical female attribute as “a major motive for women’s restriction is the concern over the preservation of their virginity until marriage” (Hurtado 38). One mother even went to the extreme measure of having the daughter’s nurse investigate her daughters hymen to assure the mother that her daughter is, as she claims, still a virgin (Hurtado 61). The apparent correlation between physical development and increased parental restrictions further evidences the concern over Virginity preservation. Hurtado states, “Almost all my respondents experienced restriction and were policed constantly as they developed physically” (94). Interestingly, much evidence suggests that there exists a double standard exempting adolescent Latino males from the same expectations.

A wide variety of literary and sociological sources are in agreement that male Latinos have more freedom than females. These gender-based treatments, although amplified during adolescent years, seem to take root from birth. Irwin and Roll cite an event, involving both Anglo and Latino families, which took place in a U.S. neighborhood to exemplify this special treatment. The children were caught
playing “spin the bottle” and the Anglo parents punished both girls and boys equally for their involvement. Latino families, on the other hand, punished only the girls while saying nothing to the boys (xv). It is evident that from a young age Latinas are held to a higher standard for sexual behavior than their male counterparts. Many researchers agree that this double standard becomes most apparent during the years of adolescence when females are more likely to experience earlier curfews (Skar 239-40), parental surveillance and monitoring (Hurtado 42), parental involvement in friendships and relationships (Roll and Irwin 33), and an overall heightened strictness of parental rules (Hurtado 42). Although most of Hurtado’s participants simply blamed this double standard (that is not as prevalent in Anglo families) on cultural reasons (42), a potentially larger motivating factor for the gender-based difference is apparent in their responses. After one young Latina, Gloria, noticed the different treatment of her brother, she inquired about the issue to her parents. When her parents responded “He’s a boy. Girls have different rules”, she asked, “Why?” The response she received was “Well, you guys could get pregnant; you can ruin your lives” (Hurtado 45). The parental goal of sexual dominion over the daughter’s body is a likely reason for this double standard when considering the highly corporal nature of the specified restrictions. The justification for increased strictness as provided above is also a reflection of the fact that the father can physically remove himself from the pregnancy if needed, unlike the mother. In an attempt to conserve the girl’s virginity (and thus reputation, marriageability, etc.), parents place physical restraints over the daughter’s body. The parental expectations, which do not exist in isolation, in fact are largely based upon the larger societal double standard that not only accepts male sexual experimentation, but expects it. From a young age Latino males are entitled to seek carnal pleasures, engage in sexual activity with multiple partners (Skar 240), and experiment during adolescence (“Practitioners’ Perspectives” 143, Irwin and Roll 12, 43). Of course these expectations are extremely relevant when put in opposition to the norms of Latina behavior in which “sexual experimentation by unmarried Latino women is strictly forbidden” (Irwin and Roll 47). It appears as
though many of these expectations also carry into marriage as, on the contrary to females, many Latino men engage in sexual relationships outside of their marriage (Irwin and Roll 44). Although undeniably this double standard may largely be the creation of a patriarchal society which accepts male deviant behavior more so than female (violence, drunkenness, vulgar language (Irwin and Roll 45)), there is undoubtedly an evident parental desire to control the daughter’s sexual activity through the enforcement of strict corporal regulations. Hurtado identifies it as the “cult of virginity” in which representatives of the patriarchy (father, brother, uncle, older female) supervise the adolescent girl’s behavior in order to ensure her pre-marital sexual purity

Without a doubt the young Latinas are aware of this corporal control and react in a variety of ways. After entering into adulthood, many Latinas express an appreciation of the parental concern with which they grew up and show a positive reaction to the strict guidelines (Hurtado 42). However, there are many possible negative reactions and results to this physical control that may encourage adolescent pregnancy. In an attempt to regain control of their own bodies, young females may engage in rebellious behavior. They also might give in to sexual activity, even if they do not want to, simply because they are used to relinquishing control to patriarchal figures. The extreme importance of virginity with the Latino culture may also cause a sense of fear or shame in the adolescent Latina that prevents her from approaching sexual topics with other family members. Lastly, considering the notion that virginity is the cornerstone of female worth, it is incredibly difficult for a female to publicly acknowledge sexual activity and openly take the necessary precautions of pregnancy prevention. All of these potential responses to the social expectation of female sexual purity will be explored in the next section.

Although there has been an increase in the variety of religions found in Latin America, an undeniably considerable allegiance to the Catholic Church still prevails with approximately 70% of its

---

28 The hypocritical circumstances of this double standard are worthy of consideration. In a culture that rejects homosexuality, pre-marital female sexual experimentation, and female extra-marital affairs, the female counterpart is always the guilty party and occupies the unacceptable subject position of either a “whore, unmarried but sexually active woman, or divorced woman” (Hurtado 94).
population identifying themselves as Catholic (Yam 227). PEW Hispanic Research Center reveals that although Catholic ties loosen with each Latino generation, there nonetheless remains a fortified allegiance (60%) to the Catholic Church (“Life Satisfaction...” 64). The second and third most popular religious affiliations within the U.S. Latino population are Evangelical and Mainline Protestantism which also hold conservative stances on sexual topics (Kelly and Kelly 89). This palpable religious affiliation generates the expectation of pre-marital chastity and discourages the usage of birth prevention methods. An analysis of statistical reports focusing on Latinos in the U.S. exposes that their low rate of birth control usage is, as suggested earlier, a resulting factor of the strong Catholic affiliation rather than mere failure to plan ahead. Although certainly not all Catholics agree with the Church’s public stance against birth control (Irwin and Roll 73), the ability of young Latinos to discuss such sensitive subjects with their parents becomes extremely difficult due to the strong influence of conservative religions. Pre-marital sex is considered a sinful, shameful act and is kept hidden from family members if possible. Dietrich finds in her research that “the use of birth control is seen as an admission of planning for sex and an indication of promiscuity. Consequently, the girls rarely use any method of birth control” (62). Not only is it a challenge to discuss sex and birth control with parents, but some Latinas avoid contraception altogether to prevent parental discovery of their sexual activity. Other reasons that girls cited for avoiding birth control was that they were fearful that their boyfriend might think less of them, their reputation would be destroyed, or it does not coincide with their religious beliefs (Dietrich 62). One girl went as far as to say that using birth control is like “killing a baby before it’s even born” (Dietrich 62). Dietrich uses her data to conclude that girls are not just getting pregnant because of their poor usage of birth control, but because they simply are not using it at all and allowing sex to “just happen” (76). Not only does there appear to be a rejection of birth control usage, but a similar attitude in opposition to abortion seems to be prevalent amongst the Latino population.
The legal restrictions imposed upon a woman’s right to choose abortion are widely enforced throughout the region of Latin America. Many countries only permit abortion procedures in the events of rape or health risks while several others, including Chile, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Honduras, prohibit abortion under all circumstances (Guttmacher Institute 2). Although undoubtedly legislature does not always represent the actual attitudes and beliefs of the common people, PEW Hispanic Research Center reveals that Latinos in the U.S. hold more rigorously to conservative ideology than other U.S. demographics. PEW found that “more than half (56%) of Hispanics ages 16 and older say abortion should be illegal in most or all cases, compared with less than half (45%) of the adult U.S. population that says the same” (“Life Satisfaction...” 65). Erickson also confirms that “Latinas are more likely to carry the pregnancy to term” than non-Latinas in the U.S. (33). Along these lines, many participants in Dietrich’s investigation verbalized this anti-abortion sentiment by saying “If you can’t keep your legs closed, you gotta pay the price” (38), “pregnancy is a gift from God” (75) and “Mexican babies are always wanted, not neglected like others” (75). This negative social perception towards birth control methods and abortion undoubtedly impact the Latina’s decision to keep her baby and thus may explain the unparalleled pregnancy rate amongst this demographic. It also important to acknowledge the potentially insightful connection between the already mentioned high pregnancy level amongst Latina immigrants and the affirmation that “traditional Hispanic values are strongest among those who are least acculturated in the U.S.” (“Practitioners’ Perspectives” 143). These two individual pieces of information, when combined, suggest that cultural values and attitudes may in fact largely influence Latina sexual behavior and the reluctance to utilize birth prevention methods.

In addition to lower usage of birth prevention methods, another phenomenon is occurring amongst several young Latinas in the U.S. that indisputably is a contributing factor to the high pregnancy rate. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Latino culture demands that the female partner be submissive and subservient towards the male figures in her life. This notion relates back to the idea of
machismo as previously discussed. From a young age young Latinas are trained to place the needs and wants of her father, brothers, and potential suitors above her own. This places the control of her body in the hands of these male authoritative figures. The ensuing outcome is a lack of control of the female over her own body. “Women who are talked down to or controlled often find it hard later to take control of their own bodies and sexuality” (Hurtado 247). This powerlessness is further worsened by the silence that often surrounds sexually related topics and the shame and guilt that many Latinos associate with sexual activity, leaving much of the control and power to the male partner.

A variety of sources concur that male pressure is a major cause in teen pregnancy. This makes sense considering that in the U.S. an overwhelmingly large portion (74%) of the male partners in adolescent pregnancies are over the age of 1829 (Dietrich 59, “Practitioners’ Perspectives” 146). Not only does fatherhood establish adult status for males (Dietrch 63), but having control over the sexual relationship enables them to demonstrate dominion over the female’s body. One young Latina in Dietrich’s study, Naomi, contends that “Latina girls are not supposed to even enjoy sex. The guys tell you when, where, and the position, and the women are supposed to just lay back. The boys are responsible for sex, but they say the girls are responsible for birth control” (Dietrich 62). Unfortunately this delegated responsibility of taking care of the birth control is not an easy task when the female is afraid of speaking about the subject ahead of time. Dietrich found that “because Latinas are expected to be sexually attractive but not sexually active, they never admit to planning for sexual intercourse. Consequently, many of the girls feel like they have very little control over their sexual experiences” (61). Another research study found that Latina girls felt they had little power to say no to sex and desired less pressure from guys to engage in sexual contact30 (Yvette Flores 207). Not only do many girls feel a lack of control, but also a substantial amount of pressure from their boyfriends to engage in sexual activity.

---

29 A similar finding by Erickson states that on average Latina teen mothers have partners that are five years older (79).
30 Erickson also found that Latino boyfriends are more likely to want the pregnancy than their teen girlfriends (69).
One girl states, “The guy just, you know, kinda talks you into it” (Dietrich 61). Some girls also report having been persuaded by their older boyfriends to conceive a child. One Latina adolescent confesses, “He wanted me to get pregnant, now I am and I regret it” (Dietrich 59) while another admits, “My boyfriend wants me to have a baby, I think I’m too young” (Dietrich 62). But the same young participants admit that they do not know how to handle their relationships and express their own desires and say ‘no’ without hurting their partner’s feelings (Dietrich 71). Because they have been raised in a culture that values male over female speech and encourages male dominion over female bodies, it is extremely challenging for young Latinas to assert control and speak out. At the same time they have been taught, since birth, that virginity is their most valuable asset. These contradictory and confusing messages make it extremely difficult for young Latinas to navigate through adolescence. It is important to note that some Latin American countries have even begun to incorporate lessons about this male superiority into pregnancy prevention programs. For instance the Mexican text used in sex education courses “does not present the traditional view of the Mexican family; in fact, the curriculum carries a strong message that the male’s machista role in the family is no longer acceptable. The curriculum makes the point that not only is machismo contrary to equality, but it is frequently the origin of aggression and violence towards women” (Moreda 132). Even with increased efforts to abate machismo, the gender-based inequality permeates Latino communities. In Dietrich’s study, several girls admitted to finding it difficult to “negotiate the conflict between [maintaining] virginity and “giving in” to their boyfriends” (73). Unfortunately in an attempt to regain control of their bodies, many Latinas see no other option but to resort to destructive and rebellious behavior.

The girls often chafe under the efforts exerted by their families, school officials, and boyfriends to control them. Many of them find creative means to assert control over their daily lives, their bodies, and their futures. Unfortunately, sometimes their efforts toward emancipation end in pregnancy, criminal records, or drug addiction. (Dietrich 3)
It is evident in the previous analysis that many adolescent Latinas are placed under an intense microscope by their parents to maintain virginity. This attempt to regain control through rebellious behavior is explored in the following section.

The cultural and religious expectations further demand sexual purity from these young ladies until getting married (Hurtado 234). There is little doubt therefore that adolescence, a time period when young women “experience a new interest on the part of men in their developing body and when the pressure to experiment with sex, drugs, or alcohol comes from friends and kin their age” (Hurtado 241), becomes a challenge for teens as they simultaneously undergo immense parental control. They are able to react in three different ways according to Ruiz. She states that the different options for a young Latina are to either accept the rules, rebel, or find ways to comprise and/or circumvent traditional standards (118). A variety of sources buttress this affirmation by incorporating personal accounts of young Latinas that purposefully acted counter to the regulations set forth by their parents. Hurtado documents the story of Sara Rivas, a young Latina in the U.S. that confirms that “not surprisingly, the control led to rebellion” (241). Hurtado explains,

Sara Rivas moved very quickly from being her mother’s favorite daughter at the time of her quinceañera to disgrace when she became a young single mother of two out-of-wedlock children at 17. She made her rebellion clear: “My mom said she doesn’t know why I did this to her. She thinks that it’s something against her, like I’m rebelling and stuff. And at first it was; they were just so strict, you know? And the more they would tell me that, the more I did it to hurt them. And that’s what I still do sometimes now: they tell me not to do something, they make me mad, then I’ll do it.” Unfortunately, by having unprotected sex, Sara’s rebellion eventually pushed her into circumstances in which she had very little autonomy. (241)

Many young Latinas see their bodies as an opportunity to resist parental control and corporal intrusion and regain power in the one area which parents have continually restricted, sexual activity. One young Latina confirms this in her personal account while discussing the reason she lost her virginity, “I did it on purpose, probably to get back at my mom. The more my mom told me no, the more interesting he became to me” (Dietrich 59). Obviously the emphasis within the Latino culture on the sacredness of virginity makes it more appealing to an adolescent desiring rebellion. Another way in which sex
becomes appealing as a means of rebellion against parents is that it provides an escape to the teen that
wants to move out on their own and escape parental supervision (Ruiz 118). To a teen daughter pinned between
the demands of her family to abstain from all impure behaviors and the contradictory societal pressures
urging her to experiment sexually, a physical escape from parental supervision may be considered a
tempting solution. Another young Latina in Dietrich’s study, Arlene, weights her options and considers
pregnancy to be the key to her personal freedom. Her friend admits, “Arlene wants to have a baby. She
says if she goes on welfare, she can move out of the house. She knows her parents won’t take her back
if she’s pregnant” (Dietrich 58). Arlene, as is the case with many other teen Latinas, feels suffocated by
the parental supervision and control that surrounds her entire life. Due to the constant reminders that
she must remain a virgin until marriage, she sees sexual activity (and the resulting baby) as an appealing
method of escape. Knowing that this is a behavior her parents will not condone, she desires to rebel by
losing her virginity and having a baby (which in fact ends up happening, Dietrich 59).

To conclude, there are many messages, both advertent and subliminal, sent to young Latinas
that pronounce virginity as the integral element in establishing one’s value and reputation in the
community. Multiple parties, including but certainly not limited to the girl’s parents, continually
perpetuate the idea that virginity is important in establishing one’s dignity and future happiness. A
variety of preventative procedures, as explored in this chapter, are adopted by the parents in order to
ensure the chastity and reputation of their daughter. Provided that sex-related conversations are
discouraged and females are expected to remain submissive, little opportunity for the young Latina to
exercise control over her own body is afforded. This can often result in rebellious behavior by the young
woman, potentially manifested in the form of sexual activity and/or intentional pregnancy, which
enables her to regain control of her life in a culture that denounces female sexual experimentation and
personal independence. It is apparent that the immense pressure, from multiple institutions including
the family, church, and community, on the adolescent Latina is to maintain her virginity until marriage.

Although on her wedding day the Latina bride may initially feel relieved to finally be freed from the expectation that she remain a virgin, she will quickly discover that another expectation is right around the corner, motherhood.
CHAPTER 4
MOTHERHOOD

Motherhood has long been an integral element in the Hispanic culture and population. As noted in the first chapter, procreation is a key ingredient to establishing a woman’s femininity. This chapter aims to investigate the traditional notion of the patriarchal society that all Latinas must become mothers. Undeniably, a wide variety of “feminist scholarship has long challenged monolithic notions of family and motherhood that relegate women to the domestic arena of private-public dichotomies and that rely on the ideological conflation of family, woman, reproduction, and nurturance” (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 390). *Voces Híbridas*\(^{31}\) insightfully captures the efforts made by multiple Latino feminists to redefine the act of motherhood. Skar affirms that various authors, including Galván Rodriguez, Alma Villanueva, and Ana Castillo, “*resemantizan el signo “maternidad” y la redefinen no como reproducción biológico y cultural sino como capacidad creativa*”\(^{32}\) (85). Both Julia Alvarez and Cherrie Moraga, the authors explored in this chapter, have written personal accounts to confront the cultural expectation that they comply with traditional expectations of having children. This chapter will investigate the traditional perspective of the Latino community expecting all heterosexual women to enter into motherhood. Included in this analysis is the essay “Imagining Motherhood” by Alvarez and *Waiting in the Wings* by Moraga. The significance of both literary pieces will be heightened when considered in the larger historical context. Although the previously explored realm of virginity (and the resulting implications of birth control, rebellion, silence, etc) certainly is a contributing factor to this high birth rate, societal expectations embedded within the Latino culture further demand motherhood of all women. The historical background and literary analyses of Latino motherhood will ultimately present insightful findings to the investigation of adolescent pregnancy in the United States.

\(^{31}\) *Hybrid Voices*

\(^{32}\) “*resemantize the term “maternity” and redefine it not in terms of biological and cultural reproduction, but more as a creative capacity*”
Research continually documents the propensity of Latinas to not only begin childrearing at younger ages than other ethnic subsets, but also to have more children (Unger and Molina, 284, “Family,...” 71). Hurtado’s findings corroborated this assertion as her participants expressed an average desire to have three children (139) as opposed to the national average of 2.06 (CIA Factbook). Recent findings have suggested that motherhood is so heavily important that it even outweighs marriage in many Latina’s personal life ambitions. Hurtado documents the case of one participant that said her mother would often pressure her to have children with comments such as “Just have a child, your bloodline. You don’t have to marry the guy. Who cares?” (149). Another Latina added, “If I don’t get married, I’m going to have children, even if I adopt. But I still want to have children” (Hurtado 149).

Overall Hurtado found that the majority of respondents acknowledged motherhood as a higher priority over getting married (148). Several participants in Molinary’s work Hijas Americanas vocalize the incongruity of their parent’s beliefs surrounding motherhood and those of their own. When speaking of her own response to parental pressure, Cassandra, a Honduran residing in Miami, shares “I’ve learned to not conform. My parents believe that a woman is supposed to get married and become a baby factory. I hear my mom’s stories, and she had an adventurous spirit, but she learned to conform and gave up her dreams” (Molinary 44). Molinary adds her own personal observations in regards to her mother’s generation, stating, “For the Latin American women of her generation, there is pride in being a mother; there is a way in which their own identities can seem to be consumed by their children’s” (38). While the above testimonies reveal generational differences, the pressure to bear children still remains considerable on young Latinas. This societal expectation is especially palpable in Julia Alvarez’s “Imagining Motherhood”.

Julia Alvarez, a renowned Latina author from the Dominican Republic, shared an intimate account of her experiences as a childless woman. She shares that in her twenties and thirties she was completely content to hand her nephews and nieces back to their parents at the end of the day and go
home to her writing. It was not until her other childless sister, single and forty, decided to become a mother that Alvarez started feeling the pressure to have a child. Being in her forties herself, Alvarez had accepted that her life focused more on her career than children. She contends, “I came to realize with that straight, clear-eyed vision of a writer analyzing her fictional characters that I didn’t really want to be a mother solely for the sake of being a mother” (“Imagining Motherhood” 220). Unfortunately for her, society had a different opinion. She writes, “Yet I still felt the pressure to at least say I wanted to be a mother. For all our talk of feminism and pro-choice, willful childlessness continues to have a bad reputation…. A woman who doesn’t care to have a child is considered foolish at best. At worst, as I heard one lecturer proclaim, she is “committing genetic suicide”” (220). Unquestionably, the pressure to enter motherhood exists in several cultures throughout the world, but the expectation tends to be even higher amongst Latino populations. Alvarez clarifies that although while living in rural Vermont she has witnessed the societal demand to bear children, the pressure is significantly amplified when she visits her relatives in the Dominican Republic. The criticism and interrogation from family members has been so burdensome that it has caused her to not want to visit her homeland (220). Alvarez effectively captures the immense pressure she feels in the following passage:

And if being childless is unusual in rural Vermont, it is mucho más\(^\text{33}\) odd in my own Latin culture, where being a woman and a mother are practically synonymous. Being childless—by choice—is tantamount to being wicked and selfish. Marriage is a sacrament for the procreation of children, how many times have my old tías\(^\text{34}\) told me that? Even the one family holdout, my maiden aunt who grew orchids and read books and knew Latin, finally married in her thirties and had her one child. “I won’t deny,” she has told me, “that this has been the most significant event of my life.” Ever since I married Bill, the pressure has mounted. On my annual visit to the Island, the inevitable question pops up, Don’t I want a child? More tactful aunts approach the topic through my eating habits. Don’t I know I have to put aside that vegetarian foolishness in order to strengthen my body for a child. “But you have to have your niño,” my aunt’s maid told me. It’s mandatory, she might as well have said. (220)

Alvarez highlights with this passage the fact that as a Latin woman she is often considered by her relatives to be less of a woman for not having offspring. Fortunately the author has used her writing as

\(^{33}\) more  
\(^{34}\) aunts
a tool for venturing through this difficult journey of not equating her own life goals with those of society. She has come to acknowledge the lack of children as a “loss” and use her creative writing abilities and endless imagination to write about children without having personally experienced motherhood. She concludes her essay with an optimistic acceptance of childlessness, stating, “Now, when I travel to my native Dominican Republic, and my tías inquire after my sister and her new baby, and winking at Bill, ask us if we don’t feel inspired, I will have to say, “Yes, I feel inspired.” Inspired, that is, to come home and write about it” (221). Alvarez is not alone in her utilization of writing as a tool in challenging the societal expectations that surround her; Cherrie Moraga documents her trials and tribulations of queer motherhood in Waiting in the Wings.

The compilation of journal entries by Moraga in Waiting in the Wings allows the reader to embark upon a journey that defies societal expectations and challenges established norms. The author evidences an ability to remove herself from and critically analyze the Latino culture in which she grew up. She explains,

Growing up, the we of my life was always defined by blood relations. We meant family. We were my mother’s children, my abuela’s grandchildren, my tios’ nieces and nephews. To this day, most of my cousins still hold onto a similar understanding of we. Not I…. Still, the need for familia, the knowledge of familia, the capacity to create familia remained and has always informed my relationships and my work as an artist, cultural activist, and teacher. (Moraga 17-18)

Although Moraga attests that the need to create family was always an integral element in different areas of her life, as a lesbian she remained unaware of her own capacity to become a mother. As demonstrated in the following passage, Moraga remained blinded by society’s definitions of both “woman” and “mother”.

When I came out as a lesbian at the age of twenty-two, I simply assumed that since I would never be married to a man, I would never have children…. Then, at the age of thirty, it hit me: I was a woman and, therefore, potentially capable of having children. This may sound strange, a

35 grandmother’s
36 uncles’
37 family
statement of the blatantly obvious, but buried deep inside me, regardless of the empirical
evidence to the contrary, I had maintained the rigid conviction that lesbians (that is, those of us
on the more masculine side of the spectrum) weren’t really women. We were women-lovers, a
kind of third sex, and most definitely not men. Having babies was something “real” women did-
not butches, not girls who knew they were queer since grade school. We were the defenders of
women and children, children we could never fully call our own. (Moraga 19-20)

Until she was able to take a step back and consider the assumption that child-bearing was out of the
question, Moraga restricted herself to the expectations and pressures that were projected on lesbian
women. As opposed to Alvarez’s situation in which (as a heterosexual married woman) she was
supposed to become a mother, as a homosexual Moraga was expected by society to remain childless. It
took a traumatic event, the loss of a lover and the lover’s son (Joel), to enlighten Moraga on her own
capability to have children. She explains her awakening, “One thing Joel’s presence in my life taught me
was that, without realizing it, I had grown up to be woman enough, on my own terms, to mother a
child…. Not until 1992, a handful of years after the loss of Joel, could I answer that question
unequivocally and affirmatively: I wanted a child. I was forty years old” (22). Regardless of her own self-
assurance, the journey to lesbian motherhood proved to be difficult and frustrating. Members of her
own family spoke about her decision in a painful manner and echoed the embedded understandings of
the patriarchal society. Moraga describes a conversation between her siblings, “When I hear my brother
asking my sister, “Was it artificial insemination or did she just get together with some guy?” the
harshness in his tone chills me. Is it anger? Fear? What he wants to know is: Who is the father? Where is
the man in the picture?” (37). Her brother’s speculation, shaped by the societal expectation that only a
heterosexual female enter motherhood, reminds Moraga and her lover, Ella, of the atypical lives they
are leading. Upon daily entering the hospital to visit the premature baby, Moraga and Ella are
continually confronted with an invariable interrogation by the hospital guard. He would repeatedly halt
them with, “Only immediate family” and “I didn’t know two women could have a baby together” (75).
The couple failed to find much assistance from the guard’s boss as well. Moraga’s journal captures her
frustration,
We had already filed our complaints over earlier harassment, called their supervisor who always seemed to enjoy the joke as much as they did, spoken with the ICN social worker, and in a few days I would write the obligatory letter to the hospital administrator. Pero, para nada. Nobody really gives a damn that two women have their baby in a hospital for over three months, not knowing if he is going to live or die, and they still have to endure insults from testosterone—driven homophobes with no power acting like they got some. As Rafael’s biological mother, I am surrounded by acceptance at the hospital, until Ella walks in and we are again the lesbian couple, the queer moms—exoticized and ostracized. (75-76)

From family members to hospital guards, Moraga is continually compared to the societal blueprint of what allows an individual to have children. This ostracism is even more caustic when set in the cultural context of the Latino community that so highly values family and motherhood. Regardless of Moraga’s courageous and audacious stance against the established societal norms, she perpetually is forced to confront the expectations that surround her and her nonstandard family. As previously stated bearing children is essential to establishing the femininity of Latina women. By the same standard Moraga, not being considered a woman, is socially stripped of her right to produce offspring. It was not until her forties that she eventually defied these societal norms and gave birth to Rafael Angel Moraga.

As revealed in the personal testimonies of both Julia Alvarez and Cherríe Moraga, many times the acceptance of one’s lifestyle and willingness to counter popular norms is an achievement that occurs later on in life. Several well-known Latina authors (including Alvarez, Moraga, Sandra Cisneros, Judith Ortiz Cofer, and Esmeralda Santiago) were interviewed by Bridget Kevane and Juanita Heredia in Latina Self-Portraits. The common thread between all of these women is in their utilization of writing as a therapeutic agent in facing life’s challenges. Kevane and Heredia capture this phenomenon, “the page offers them a home… and language is the vehicle through which they can sort out their conflicting ideas” (11). Considering that adolescent mothers have had less than two decades to become comfortable in their own skin, chances are they have not yet reached a solid level of confidence and self-understanding as have these writers. It is during their adolescence (a term which implies periods of maturation and development) that young Latinas are made aware of the societal expectations to which they are to

---

38 But, all for nothing.
conform. Indubitably, as evidenced in the intimate accounts of “Imagining Motherhood” and *Waiting in the Wings*, the societal assumption is that all Latina women are to bear children in order to validate their femininity. Undoubtedly this accepted trend impacts the high adolescent pregnancy rate as many teenagers are not yet comfortable or confident enough to contend their community’s established expectations. In order to better understand teen pregnancy and the expectation that Latina women have children, one must investigate its derivation. The inquiry as to the origin of the cultural belief surrounding mandatory motherhood becomes significant as does the investigation of how this pressure has accrued so much gravity.

In considering the potential influence that this societal expectation has on teen Latinas in the U.S., one must first consult its origin. Certainly *La Virgen María* is an important figure and reinforces the notion that women are to bear children and submit to patriarchal obligations. However, *La Virgen* is not the only evident figure in Latino history and culture. A number of other prominent female figures have emerged over the years including various biblical and mythical figures. *La Llorona* is one such character that exists in several Latin American countries (known as La Pucullén in Chile) as a reminder to women to commit themselves to not only having children, but caring for them continually. The details of the Legend vary amongst different countries, but a common thread tying them all together is that *La Llorona* was in some way negligent as a mother and therefore spent the remainder of her life wandering the streets and mumbling statements such as “*ay mis hijos*” or “*dónde están mis hijos*”39 ([http://lanzadeldestino.com/tag/la-llorona/](http://lanzadeldestino.com/tag/la-llorona/)). Some feminists describe *La Llorona* as negative femininity who “serves to control Mexican and Chicana women’s conduct by prescribing idealized visions of motherhood” (“Working at Motherhood” 391). She is an ever-present model of the consequences of poor parenting, reminding Latinas to be loving wives and responsible mothers. The fact that this legend

39 “oh my children” or “where are my children?”
has been passed down from generation to generation is an indication of the large importance placed on family and the expectation of motherhood in the Latino culture.

Considering the common perception amongst many United States citizens that adolescent pregnancy is problematic, it is relevant to consider the different values placed on family in the Latino perspective versus that of the counterpart U.S. population. Various scholars emphasize the increased value on family in the Latino culture. Russell and Lee suggest the existence of “familialism” or “strong feelings of loyalty to extended family that may outweigh predominant U.S. values of individual success” (“Practitioners’ Perspectives” 143). They identify family as the source of strength for many Hispanics (148) and Irwin and Roll describe family as an important element in the composition of Latinos’ self-identity (7). Interconnected with this high value of family is the Latino emphasis on interdependence. While many Anglo children are encouraged from birth to establish independence, many Latinos are taught to sacrifice personal ambition to create stronger family ties (Irwin and Roll 6-7). These divergent sets of cultural values undoubtedly impact the attitude towards teen pregnancy. Although adolescent motherhood may not be desired by many Latinos, it nonetheless parallels the belief that family is of paramount importance to all other factors in life and presents an opportunity for increased family unity. On the other hand, the U.S. glorification of independence affirms it to be pivotal to one’s happiness and therefore considers teen pregnancy to be a hindrance and obstacle. The resulting experience of an immigrant Latino to the U.S. therefore manifests itself into a cultural clash or gap in which his or her own personal goals may not coincide with those of the new country. Russell and Lee found this to be especially true in their research of several practitioners that continually were confronted by cultural differences in their Latino patients. So often the U.S. culture strives to postpone teen pregnancy while the Latino patients did not seem to have that goal (“Practitioners’ Perspectives” 147). One Planned Parenthood worker commented, “You try to counsel these 15 year old girls about the responsibilities of parenthood and all they want to know is how they can get pregnant” (Dietrich 74). Major roadblocks in
teen pregnancy prevention programs may potentially arise from these cultural differences. Many young Latinas are forced to simultaneously navigate between Latino values and the established Anglo norms of the U.S. There is a negative correlation between their time spent in the U.S. and their adherence to Latino norms. In other words, the longer the Latina lives in the U.S., the more likely she is to adopt mainstream values (“Practitioners’ Perspectives” 143). This finding may explain the aforementioned finding that the immigrant Latina population has the highest rate of teen pregnancy. The more recently arrived Latinas may adhere more willingly to the traditional values of their home country and therefore reject the surrounding values of independence and economic success. The practitioners surveyed in Russell and Lee’s study cite “country of origin, economic status, immigrant status and acculturation” as important factors in evaluating one’s likelihood of adolescent motherhood (“Practitioners' Perspectives" 143). The underlying implication of these findings therefore suggests a significant emphasis on the value of motherhood in Latin America. Although the aforementioned globally unmatched fertility rate in Latin America reveals much about the inhabitant’s perspective of motherhood, personal accounts further highlight the pressure to have children. Rosie Molinary’s Hijas Americanas captures this motherhood expectation in her participants’ testimonies. Angela, a Puerto Rican who was born on the island but moved to the mainland at a young age, shares her rude awakening when returning to her birthplace at the age of sixteen. She noticed the glaring difference between Puerto Rican and mainland U.S. ambitions when relatives started asking about her future. She recalls, “I was about to finish high school, and people were so concerned about when I was getting married. The pressure for these women is on marriage and children. You are almost defined by whether or not you are married and have children. My friends from there are really impressed that I went to school” (Molinary 57). Similar to Angela, many Latinas experience this cultural clash not only when visiting their home country, but in their own homes.

Bridging the gap between the cultural differences of the U.S. Latino and Anglo populations is not an effortless task by any means. As much as Anglos may perceive Latino values to be too dependent
and family-oriented, Latinos are susceptible to viewing the independent and success-driven Anglo mentality as too self-centered. One Latina willing to present her opinion on the matter states, “American women are selfish, they want to travel instead of having a family” (Dietrich 75). The trend over the past half-century by women in the United States to focus on career before family is not in accord with traditional Hispanic values of starting a family at a young age. Some physicians have a difficult time confronting this cultural gap as they want to remain culturally sensitive while at the same time giving the most beneficial advice to the patient. One physician attests, “You don’t want to completely tell them, ‘Okay, you don’t have to go to school because this is how it is in your country.’ At the same time, you want to teach them that school is important. And then you try to find the balance” (“Practitioners’ Perspectives” 144). This physician, although undoubtedly bringing his own cultural understandings, attempts to find common ground with his Latino patients. However, cultural sensitivity has not always been quite as apparent in this country’s historical dealings with birth rate. During the 1960s, the United States government forced over 30 percent of Puerto Rico’s population to undergo reproductive sterilization (Skar 88). The targets of this medical invasion were families on welfare and other federal economic assistance programs (Skar 88). Skar writes, “Aunque algunas mujeres blancas de las clases acomodadas luchaban para tener acceso al control de natalidad y al aborto, la mujer hispana a veces tenía que defenderse de la violación médica de su capacidad reproductiva” (88). Considering the obvious disdain of the U.S. government over multiple births in financially stretched households, it is no surprise that immigrant populations tend to cling to their native cultural values. They likely believe that a weakening grasp on ‘familialism’ (“Practitioners’ Perspectives” 143) and interdependency may lead to a loss of identity and affiliation with their home country. In a state of such cultural turmoil, many young Latinas look to their parents for guidance. As mothers have emerged as having stronger bonds with

---

40 “Although some White women of the well-to-do classes fight to have access to birth control and abortion, the Hispanic woman at times had to defend herself from the medical violations upon her reproductive capacity”
their daughters than fathers (Dietrich 33, Hurtado 77-84), the next section will focus specifically on the maternal influence over the daughter’s conceptualization of motherhood.

Many Latino mothers in the U.S. have vocalized their opinions to their daughters in regards to parenthood. In Voicing Chicana Feminisms Hurtado reports a sizeable portion of mothers advising their daughters to not have children at a young age (210). However, the mother’s past often does not coincide with her own advice. Many had gotten married or became single parents at a young age due to pregnancy (Hurtado 55). Although possibly these mothers are informing and warning their daughters of lessons learned from their own life experiences, they nonetheless have personally evidenced young pregnancy as an option. In fact, research shows that oftentimes a parent’s own life choices set a precedent as children of teen parents are three times as likely to enter into adolescent pregnancy themselves (Hoffman 17). This cycle reveals that although parents may be advising their daughters to avoid teen pregnancy, their actions speak louder than words. Another important indicator of adolescent pregnancy is the level of education of the parents. The higher the parents’ academic degree, the more compliant they tend to be with the motives of pregnancy prevention programs (“Practitioners’ Perspectives” 145). Certainly this correlation is impacted by a variety of factors, but it clearly indicates that academic achievement largely influences the cultural beliefs surrounding motherhood in both Latino and non-Latino populations. The next section intends to investigate the Latino drop-out rate and its relationship with adolescent pregnancy.

The Latino drop-out rate has understandably become the focus of much attention as this population faces a considerably larger likelihood of not graduating high school. According to a 2009 research study by the PEW Hispanic Research Center, 17.2% of all high-school age Latinos in the U.S withdrew from their academic studies. This is a staggering statistic when compared to the drop-out rate of other ethnicities.

It is necessary to note that the fact that the mother entered teen parenthood is not the sole element responsible for the adolescent pregnancy cycle. As highlighted in Hoffman’s research, other influential factors that are intricately interlaced with teen parenthood are the parents’ education level and economic status (Hoffman 14, 23).
rates of 9.9%, 5.7%, and 3.7% of African American, White, and Asian ethnicities respectively (“Education” 48). Although there seems to be some advancement between the first and second generation Latinos (foreign-born having a 32% and native-born a 9.9% rate), the third generation seems to show regression in high school completion rates (“Education” 49). Contrary to the above statistics that may imply a lack of value placed on education, many studies have actually documented a strong desire, on behalf of both parents and children, to attain academic achievement. PEW Hispanic Research finds that “young Latinos are just as likely as other youths to say a college education is important for success in life” (“Education” 45). One must therefore consider this sizeable disparity between educational aspirations and actual achievement. Undoubtedly there exist many U.S. societal issues that factor into this complex equation of academic struggle, such as economic responsibility to the family (the most commonly cited explanation provided by Latino drop-outs), but those elements will more deeply be explored in a further chapter. Currently the focus remains on the Latino cultural belief system that continues to infiltrate the academic and professional expectations placed on its adolescents. Widespread cultural beliefs about motherhood, especially in a people heavily reliant on tradition, are not going to disappear in one or two generations. Therefore the young Latina continues to receive messages in regards to her value and identity being rooted in motherhood, not academic success. The film Real Women Have Curves captures this phenomenon in a conversation between Ana’s mother and father. The father suggests that perhaps they can support Ana in her pursuit of a college degree while her mother provides a traditional, patriarchal perspective on the education Ana should receive. In reference to her daughter she declares, “Yo le puedo educar, yo le enseño a coser, yo le enseño criar a sus hijos, atender a su marido. Esas cosas no le van a enseñar en el colegio” (Real Women Have Curves). After a brief silence Mamá reveals why she has this opinion, “Es cuestión de principios, no es

---

42 “I can teach her, I’ll show her how to sew, how to raise children, take care of her husband. They aren’t going to teach those things in college”
justo. Yo trabajo desde la edad de trece años, ella tiene dieciocho años. Ahora le toca a ella”43 (Real Women Have Curves). Mamá demonstrates a more difficult time with breaking tradition and allowing Ana to move away from the family for college, a more commonly accepted occurrence in the U.S. Anglo culture. The values presented in this film highly correlate with real Latino perspectives as illustrated in various investigations. In addition to the examples previously mentioned in this chapter, the essay “Working at Motherhood” by Denise Segura reports that U.S. Latina women are permitted to work (without public scrutiny) as long as they make motherhood a priority, explain their employment in terms of family financial goals, and manage the housework and childcare responsibilities without husband assistance (382). Latina women obviously undergo several obstacles in their pursuit of academic and professional success. Not only do they see their fellow Latinos dropping out and entering parenthood at a young age, but if they associate with any form of Latino community, they are surrounded by a cultural system that prioritizes motherhood over individual achievement. It is no surprise therefore that motherhood is cited by many Latinas to be considered an appealing alternative to educational completion.

In her research publication Chicana Adolescents, Lisa Dietrich encountered young Latinas who showed an interest in becoming teenage mothers and effectively extracts the motives behind their desires. Amongst the responses are explanations such as wanting to be young enough to be able to relate to the kids (23) and considering it an opportunity to gain independence from parents (74). It was also suggested that automatic companionship and avoidance of loneliness at an older age are benefits of motherhood (75). Above all else, several respondents concluded that motherhood is advantageous due to its ability to provide the mother with the feeling of self-fulfillment and purpose (75). It leaves the mother feeling needed, loved, and important (75). When considered along with the country’s capitalistic context where educational and professional opportunities may be limited (especially for

43 “It’s a question of principles, it’s not fair. I’ve worked since I was thirteen, she’s eighteen. Now it’s her turn”
undocumented immigrants), this notion of self-fulfillment is even more significant and appealing to young Latinas. As indicated in the above examples, motherhood indubitably presents itself as a viable option to many young Latinas facing the daunting task of finding their way in the United States.

In conclusion, to capture the significance and resulting influence of a cultural value in a single chapter would be an impossible task. Many traditional values such as the importance of family have been so intricately woven into the Latino community that they impact a multitude of domains. Individual responsibilities have been established, such as the delegation of religious responsibilities to the mother, as well as interpersonal relationships have been modeled as relying on familial interdependence. Tradition in the Latino community, being heavily dependent upon Judeo-Christian principles, is emphasized as being an important element to pass down from generation to generation. Considering that religion and family are both such fundamental identifiers of the Latino identity, assuredly both have influence over the importance of motherhood and thus adolescent pregnancy. While motherhood is so highly valued, as previously demonstrated in the personal testimonies of Hurtado’s participants and the literary works of Alvarez and Moraga, discussion about sex-related topics is eliminated as unmarried Latinas are expected to refrain from any form of physical intimacy. Clearly the freedom to freely converse of pregnancy prevention methods is limited (or non-existent) and thus leads to a higher risk of teen motherhood. Femininity is also embedded in motherhood in that being a woman equates to being a mother. Due to the highly traditional and patriarchal roots of the Latino community, changes to these inculcated cultural beliefs and values can only occur slowly. Research has shown that there have been many improvements from the first to second generation Latinos (in terms of drop-out rate, teen pregnancy), but unfortunately the third generation seems to have a more difficult time than its antecedent (“Family,...” 74). Experts cannot confirm specifically what accounts for this regression, but the statistic serves as an indication that individual behavioral issues do not necessarily
dissipate from generation to generation\textsuperscript{44}. Although the Latino traditional values are becoming less obstinate in the younger generations (as captured in the work of Ruiz, Hurtado, and Dietrich), there nonetheless remains strong evidence of its influence over the U.S. Latino culture. Progression is more likely to take place when experienced, older Latinas share and connect with younger generations. While larger projects such as mentor programs would indubitably benefit the young mentees, smaller changes such as including Latina literature and autobiographies in class curriculum may also assist adolescent Latinas in their own journey of self-development and identity formation. Latino texts are most commonly not incorporated into classroom curricula or, as Delia Poey puts it, “subsumed under the category of magical realism” (7). In other words, Latin American texts that do enter the academic setting are included more for their literary uniqueness than their ability to inspire discussion of real-world experiences. Curricula that include Moraga’s \textit{Waiting in the Wings} and Alvarez’s “Imagining Motherhood” would inspire discussion and increase awareness of the cultural expectation that heterosexual Latinas enter motherhood.

As apparent in the preceding three chapters, cultural notions of femininity, virginity, and motherhood largely influence the Latina teen pregnancy rate. However, merely blaming the statistical discrepancy on cultural differences would not account for many of the other obstacles Latinas in the U.S. face. Another characteristic shared amongst many Latinas, not exclusively immigrants, is that they often exist in an “in-between” or cultural limbo between their ancestral land and present territory in the U.S. The upcoming chapter will investigate this “in-between” as it undoubtedly impacts the personal lives and overall experience of many adolescent Latinas in the U.S.

\textsuperscript{44} Alejandro Portes in \textit{New Second Generation} attempts to challenge the common misconception that the second generation will automatically assimilate to the mainstream culture and shows that there are actually several factors that influence the process (available resources, linguistic exposure, professional opportunities, etc) (3).
The desire to belong is an internal yearning with which people from all different backgrounds and nationalities can relate. Identity is constructed through this process of connecting with others as one individual begins to compare and contrast him or herself with others (Redreaming America 142). Particularly the formation of an adolescent’s identity is based on the presence of two different elements, individuality and connectedness. Individuality is largely based upon one’s separateness or “the use of communication patterns to express how one is different from others” and connectedness on mutuality or “sensitivity to and respect for other’s views” (Santrock 327). Due to the fact that one’s self-understanding is considered a socio-cognitive construction and an “adolescent’s developing cognitive capacities interact with their socio-cultural experiences to influence self-understanding” (Santrock 315), it is quite apparent that a teen living in a world of contradictory messages will have a difficult time establishing his or her identity. Developmental psychologist Erik Erikson highlighted the challenges facing ethnic minorities to maintain and establish identity within the dominant culture (Santrock 327) and the Latino population in the U.S is no exception. The current chapter attempts to investigate the various experiences of individuals of the country’s largest ethnic minority sector and how the notion of existing within this borderland or crossroads of the U.S. and Latino cultures can impact their identity formation and sexual behavior. It is necessary to clarify that the act of assimilating is a difficult and confusing one and will never be exactly the same for any two individuals (Molinary 43). It entails an extremely complex navigation of languages, cultures, value systems, religions, and other aspects that continually shapes one’s self-understanding. Although this analysis devotes much focus to the experience of more recently arrived immigrants, Latinos with ancestors that have inhabited the U.S. for centuries can undoubtedly identify with the difficulty of handling cultural incongruities (as evidenced in the work of Anzaldúa whose family has resided in the U.S. for several centuries). Molinary effectively
summarizes the diverse and multifarious nature of the U.S. Latino with the statement, “We don’t all fit in a box” (174). Certainly every individual Latino has a unique life story that shapes their world view in uncountable ways. Some have lived in the U.S. since birth while others have moved more recently. Some exclusively speak English in their home, others speak only Spanish, while a large portion speak Spanglish (English and Spanish interchangeably). Although it is unrealistic to postulate one particular experience and describe it as representative of every Latino’s experience, it is very possible to seek out common themes that repeatedly emerge throughout different literary works (in both fiction and non-fiction) and draw conclusions based on the findings. The analysis will commence with a general overview of how this cultural entre is described by various authors and will be followed by a more detailed exploration of specific ways in which this interstitial existence manifests itself in one’s life (language choice, behavior, etc).

The immigrant experience in the U.S. has historically experienced its fair share of cultural collisions and racial tension as levels of xenophobia have coincided with job availability and the influx of undocumented immigrants (Portes 4). Ranging from those that were born abroad and recently arrived to those that have an ancestral heritage in the U.S. dating back to pre-Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo era, the majority of Latinos have experienced ostracism from both sides of the border. Ana Chavier Caamaño describes her inability to feel “at home” in either her place of upbringing (South Dakota) or the land from where her family emigrated (Dominican Republic). She explains,

As a child, I wasn’t able to bridge the gap in my mind. The gap that meant I felt at home neither in Aberdeen nor in the Dominican Republic. Things fall into those gaps. Acceptance and Belonging…. Later, I didn’t want to dress up, to explain myself and my family, our customs, where in the world the Dominican Republic was, what language my parents were speaking, what the smell was coming from my mother’s kitchen. (How do you explain tostones, La Bandera Dominicana, or pastelitos45 to a fellow twelve-year-old raised on three-bean salad and not willing to try anything new?) Alternately, what I had craved in the Dominican Republic was a way to go undetected—to be seen as one of their own. (Chavier Caamaño 121)

45 All are foods native to the Dominican Republic.
In the above passage, Chavier Caamaño delivers an insightful glimpse into the life of an adolescent Latina that does not quite fit in anywhere. Her dilemma of existing in two opposing cultural realms while not quite identifying with either is a notion repeatedly echoed throughout Latino literature.

Castillo classifies it as an “in-betweeness” that for new Latinos in the U.S. results in “conflicting identities involving race, ethnicity, assimilation, bilingualism and international hemispheric relations” (8) and as “an unattractive emptiness and no-man’s land” (88). Castillo’s association of this cultural entre with negative implications is reiterated throughout Latina literature. Pat Mora succinctly yet effectively captures this phenomenon of residing in el entre in her poem “Legal Alien”, testifying,

American but hyphenated,
viewed by Anglos as perhaps exotic,
perhaps inferior, definitely different,
viewed by Mexicans as alien,
(their eyes say, "You may speak
Spanish but you’re not like me")
an American to Mexicans
a Mexican to Americans…. (lines 8-15)

Chavier Caamaño and Mora are not the only Latinas to attest to this uncomfortable interstitial existence as Gloria Anzaldúa presents and in-depth exposition of the advantages and disadvantages of residing in this crossroad or “convergence of race and culture” (102) in her 1987 publication titled Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza. The need to continually navigate and process the simultaneous existence within two contradictory frameworks is extremely evident throughout her work. She describes these cultural “shift, collision and choque46” as follows:

Blocks are related to my cultural identity. The painful periods of confusion that I suffer from are symptomatic of a larger creative process: cultural shifts. The stress of living with cultural ambiguity both compels me to write and blocks me. (96)

I walk out of one culture and into another- in all cultures at the same time, alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro, contradictorio, estoy norteada por todas las voces que me hablan simultáneamente.47 (99)

46 crash, collision
47 Soul between two worlds, three, four, contradictory, I’m northed (invented word) by all the voices that simultaneously speak to me.
Cradled in one *cultura*, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, *la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war. ... *un choque*, a cultural collision. (100)

Anzaldúa not only provides these overall accounts of inhabiting the “borderlands”, but also explores specific loci such as food, art, entertainment modems (radio, TV), and language that evidence this cultural collision. The recurring theme of *entre* appears in numerous Latina literary works including those previously mentioned and “Bilingual memories” (Susana Chávez-Silverman), “Child of the Americas” (Aurora Levins Morales), “Annie Says” (Michele Serros), “Becoming Latina” (E.M. Rodriguez), and *Hijas Americanas* (Rosie Molinary). One common theme throughout all these works is that one definite characteristic of the uncertain realm of a cultural interstice is that those struggling to find their way often encounter difficulty in their own self-conceptualization. As they choose to speak a particular language or listen to a specific kind of music, the relationships with the people around them will likely be affected. Adolescent Latinas simultaneously receive contradictory messages and expectations from parents, family members, peers, educators, community members, and society as a whole. Attempting to digest these contrasting perspectives while taking into account their own interests and desires is unequivocally an arduous and vexatious task. Considering that one’s identity is created and developed through his or her personal interactions with others (*Redreaming America* 142), this interstitial existence for adolescent Latinas proves even more difficult as they experience a monumental roadblock in understanding themselves. Although language choice, behavior, music, food and religion are all venues for self-expression, they also can become a point of contention for those residing in a cultural *entre*. While Latinas may opt to utilize certain tools over others to portray their identity, they likely will suffer some sort of judgment and negative reception from either of the border. How these opposing points of view make themselves prevalent in the common Latina’s life will be examined in the subsequent analysis.
One of the most apparent areas in which Latinos experience a cultural clash is in language choice. Language is so important not only because it can reveal one’s geographical background, but additionally because it is the mode through which all human beings interact. Verbal communication is a vehicle used by two Japanese interlocutors to establish a power difference, by a pastor to unify a couple in marriage, or by a teacher to institute discipline in the classroom. A message can be conveyed not only by the way one talks, but also by their language choice. The majority of Latinos in the U.S. are confronted with a difficult predicament as they value English as a key to success while also seeing the importance of Spanish. Levels of language fluency range from only-English to only-Spanish to fluency in both and everywhere in between. The emergence of a fusion language, or Spanglish, has become increasingly evident (as well as controversial), as the U.S. Latino population continues to increase (Morales 9). Ilan Stavans, an acclaimed expert in the area of Spanglish, explains its importance, “Spanglish, a hybrid, is a way of communicating that arises out of life as we live it now... we hear, read, and speak English and Spanish, and make both our own. This is our duty, for full mastery of both languages is a necessity in order for us to succeed. It is the hybrid that is us, now” (xii-xiii). Clearly language is so much more than a mere production of words to Stavans and the Latino population for whom he speaks. The Latino identity is embedded in language and Spanglish is the mechanism which allows for a unique, hybrid existence. In his book Living in Spanglish, Ed Morales explores the importance of Spanglish that envelopes more than just two languages; “Spanglish is what we speak, but it is also who we Latinos are, and how we act, and how we perceive the world” (3). Amongst other descriptions, Morales also explains Spanglish as “the state of perpetual, chameleonlike flux”, “the movement, the message” and a “fertile terrain for negotiating a new identity” (5-6). Morales refutes the argument posed by linguistic purists that Spanglish is a “bastardized” language that poses illiteracy as a threat to its users (4-5). But Morales contends to the innate necessity and validity of Spanglish as a natural and legitimate form of communication of Latinos in the U.S. He quotes Juan Flores to highlight
this point, “Code-switching is viewed as the tragic convergence of two nonstandard vernaculars, and thus is assumed to epitomize the collapse of the integrity of both.... Rather than compensating for monolingual deficiency, code-switching often signals an expansion of communicative and expressive potential” (Morales 113). Stavans, Morales, and Flores are not the only sources to assert the validity of Spanglish. The acclaimed Latina authors interviewed by Kevane and Heredia in Latina Self-Portraits all agree that Spanglish is an important element in their works (15). While some opt to italicize the Spanish words, others feel it will mess up the flow or believe the reader should “pick up a damn dictionary” to discover any unknown meanings (Kevane and Heredia 15). Clearly Spanglish is instrumental not only in the ability to communicate words, but also in the expression of one’s identity. Anzaldúa captures the power of words in her statement “I am my language” (81) in her often referenced work Borderlands: The New Mestiza / La Frontera that continually alternates between English, Spanish, and Spanglish. She identifies so intimately with her language that she is empowered to invent new words such as “nortear” (99). Castillo highlights this intricate connection between language choice and identity with her summary of Oropeza’s “Adelaida” in which the protagonist suffers from identity confusion herself. A native to Mexico but now a U.S. resident, Adelaida often wonders “¿A dónde pertenece?” (Redreaming America 93). Eventually as her grasp of English increases she subsequently relates more with the “Chicano” than the “Mexican” identity (93). Her augmenting usage of the English language is a clear indicator to not only Adelaida, but also those surrounding her, that she is becoming more and more “Americanized” (93). While learning a new language and maintaining fluency in another is certainly no easy feat, the pressure to do so is heavily placed on numerous Latinos around the U.S.

Although the ability to communicate in multiple languages may sound appealing to some monolingual speakers, for Latinos that communicate more comfortably in English than Spanish (or vice-versa), there is a likelihood that that individual will experience some form of judgment. Due to the

---

48 Where does she belong?
interwoven nature of language and identity, an outsider may consider one’s language choice and fluency to be an appropriate measure of the speaker’s affiliation with their home country. For instance one may assume that an ethnically Mexican child is not “really Mexican” based on his apparent ability to respond in English with no foreign accent⁴⁹. Cristina García attempts to counter the negative stigma associated with an English preference that she has experienced as a Latina writer, affirming, “I don’t feel that I should be judged by my lack of perfect Spanish. It’s very hard to be Rosario Ferré, a truly bilingual” (78).

The notion that language ability corresponds directly with one’s cultural identity is also apparent in the personal account by Esmeralda Santiago. She recalls a time in which she was practicing her English pronunciation and her brother challenged her, “Why? Don’t you want to sound Puerto Rican?” (“Sound Puerto Rican” 207). This question insinuates that a strong handle over English sounds signifies a weakening grasp on her Puerto Rican identity. Similarly a strong connection between language and identity is evident in Santiago’s _When I was Puerto Rican_. In preparation for an upcoming interview at a prominent New York art institute, Negi recruits the advice of a few of her teachers. After she responds “Puerto Rico” to their question “Where are you from?” Mrs. Johnson corrects her with “No, Porto Rico. Keep your r’s soft. Try again.” (262). In this passage the young Puerto Rican is corrected on her native pronunciation of her very own birthplace. This brief interaction perfectly embodies the societal expectation that Spanish-speakers must adapt to mainstream linguistic norms in order to increase financial and educational opportunities. This is the first of many incidents that reveals that Negi is slowly being awakened to the notion that she must navigate her own identity in conjunction with the contrasting mainstream societal perspective. Santiago is not the only one who has experienced judgment from within the Latino community on account of her accent. Molinary documents the story of one young Latina in New York, Camille, who receives ridicule from her friends. She remarks, “My friends from school, who are Latino, told me that I sounded like a white girl, a valley girl. I still get that now,

⁴⁹ Elisa García (interviewee of this investigation) suggested that her brother (ethnically Mexican) is “not really Mexican” on account of his English preference and U.S. citizenship.
even from white people. ‘You don’t sound Latina.’ I didn’t know we had a sound” (Molinary 28). Through her continual reception of comments from both sides of the cultural border, Camille consequently undergoes personal battles to establish her own identity. If she does not look white, yet does not sound Latina, where does she fit in? A similar battle is experienced by Latinas that do not display a native-like production of the Spanish language. In the poem “Mi problema”50, Michele Serros expresses that although her “skin is brown” (line 5), she is “unworthy of the color” (7) because she does not “speak Spanish/ the way [she] should” (8-9). She fears that others will assume that “she wanted to be white/ like THEM” (22-3) yet feels the pressure to speak with fluency. She describes her feelings, “I keep my flash cards hidden/ a practice cassette tape not labeled/ ‘cause I am ashamed./ I “should know better”/ they tell me/ “Spanish is in your blood” (25-31). The notion that her speech is indicative of her Mexican identity is made most transparent in the last stanza when Serros writes, “And then one day,/ I’ll be a perfected “r” rolling/ tilde using Spanish speaker./ A true Mexican at last!” (39-42). For Serros the ability to speak Spanish fluently is a desirable goal as it would prove to the other Spanish-speakers that her membership in the Latino community is legitimate. As she writes the poem in English, yet aspires to master Spanish, she exemplifies the challenging predicament so familiar to other Latinas in the U.S.; torn between two languages and two cultures. The desire to fit in and establish their identity is extremely apparent in their relationship with the two languages. Language is an area where the feeling of not fitting in “here” nor “there” is very evident. Because adolescents in general are already vulnerable to insecurity due to their delicate age and physiological changes, the inability to identify strongly with a certain language or culture potentially further enhances Latinas’ feelings of self-doubt and identity confusion. These emotions undoubtedly impact their own self-understanding as well as their relationships with the people around them. This assimilation process will be investigated in greater detail in the section that follows.

50 “My problem”
There are multiple approaches that immigrant families might take as they embark upon the assimilation journey in the U.S. While some families prefer to maintain the native tongue at home, others opt to only communicate in the primary language of their new country in an effort to obtain linguistic fluency. This second option, although perhaps an advantageous step toward fitting in the host society, can subsequently result in strained connections with any remaining family in the mother country. In her essay “Homecoming”, Chavier Caamaño reveals how linguistic failure can damage an individual’s ability to connect with extended family. She describes her visits to Santo Domingo in her personal account. She writes, “The wall of language that stood between my family and me has been a source of frustration all my life” (122). She states that her “biggest regret in life so far was not being able to speak fluently with [her] extended family” (124). The intricate connection between language and identity is when she shares her negative feelings about lacking linguistic competence. She opens up,

There is a little anger in me at my parents for not letting us have that connection to our heritage. They partly regret it. I have seen it in the frustration of having to interpret for us even though we are all grown. I’ve taken Spanish classes. I’ve taken the initiative to learn more than what I absorbed on those childhood visits. The ever-present fear of failing to speak correctly kept me from using it. (125)

Chavier Caamaño’s inability to speak comfortably with her extended family hindered her relationship with them and further led her to question her own identity. Eventually she was able to overcome her self-doubt and establish her Dominican identity, concluding “I could shed my inhibitions, to acknowledge to myself that I could be dominicana without having to back it up with words” (126), but it is not until later after her teenage years that she actually was able to do so. As she and many other Latina writers do not feel comfortable in their own skin until their thirties and forties, the difficulty of establishing a positive self-image as an adolescent Latina seems to be an extremely challenging task. Much like strained relationships with extended family make the assimilation process challenging for
Latinas, similarly linguistic rifts between parents and children can further exacerbate the predicament of existing in el entre.

Although immigrant parents may demand that their children translate for them, they simultaneously may feel threatened by their child’s fluency. Santiago captures both extremes in her autobiographical account When I Was Puerto Rican. Mami puts pressure on her daughter Negi to translate in pivotal situations, such as the welfare office. Negi explains to the social workers that her mother “no spik inglish” (249) and continues to divulge her personal anxieties that arose while faced with such grave responsibility; “I was always afraid that if I said something wrong, if I mispronounced a word or used the wrong tense, the social workers would say no, and we might be evicted from our apartment, or the electricity would be shut off, or we’d freeze to death because Mami couldn’t pay for heating fuel” (249). As her mother volunteered her translation services to other women in the Welfare office, her job not only entailed linguistic services, but accrued a moral element as well. As she realized some of the applicants were lying about their home situation or country of origin, she struggled with what to do. She explains, “To tell the interviewer that I knew the woman was lying seemed worse than translating what the woman said as accurately as I could and letting the interviewer figure it out. But I worried that if people from other countries passed as Puerto Ricans in order to cheat the government, it reflected badly on us” (251). It is apparent that Negi was burdened with multiple adult-like responsibilities at a very young age on account of her bilingualism. Although her mother portrayed her daughter’s linguistic abilities as valuable in the welfare office, she simultaneously viewed them as a threat. One night after Negi arrived home after dark her mother confronted her with an accusation, shouting, “You think just because you can speak a little English you can do anything you like!” (251). In this situation Mami is upset with her daughter over her behavior, not anything she has said. But her deeper insecurities are revealed when she blames her daughter’s “rebellion” on her knowledge of the English language. Her mother’s inability to speak English has resulted in a shift in power as Negi is
placed with important translation tasks. This abrupt accusation highlights her mother’s insecurities as well as the rift that exists between mother and daughter. Negi and Mami’s situation is actually quite representative of the common generational gaps that often accompany the assimilation process.

A clear disconnect arises within the parent-child relationship in immigrant households. Undoubtedly this relationship is likely to experience hardship and growing pains for any ethnicity, but the situation becomes exacerbated for linguistic and cultural minorities as increased opportunities for contradiction enter the equation. Regardless of their birth place, younger generations that identify more with the U.S. mainstream culture than do their parents struggle to find the balance of embracing the new while maintaining the old. As previously explored, many parents react by increasing the strictness of their regulations and attempting to control the adolescent’s behavior. This section intends to focus on this potentially straining aspect of the relationship and how it augments the Latina’s feelings of existing within el entre. Undoubtedly the teenage years for any individual are pivotal in the identity-formation process and extremely pertinent to one’s personal and physical development. The consequences of an unpleasant transition from childhood into adulthood could last a lifetime. For Latinas this time period is even more delicate as their relationship with their parents is likely to experience amplified affliction. Min Zhou thoroughly explores this tension and the potential explanations as to why it arises in Latino families. He affirms, “In the United States, immigrant children often become Americanized so quickly that their parents cannot keep up with them. There is a fear in the older generation that their children will leave them, become like other American youth, and forget about their roots” (83). Some of the causes he enumerates as contributing factors to relational gaps between the parent and child are that immigrant families may geographically be separated for extended periods of time and then when reunited may spend little time together on account of full-time employment (83). Additionally when children serve as interpreters and translator it further challenges the usual parental authority (83-4).
The final element that Zhou presents as impacting the parent-child relationship is the contrasting ambitions each side holds.

Immigrant children and their parents tend to perceive their host society and their relationships with it from different angles. The younger generation tends to focus on current adjustment, paying attention to the external traits of what they have come to define as being “American.” They struggle to fit in based on a frame of reference that they have acquired from their American peers and from television and other forms of mass media. They often find themselves confused by such questions as: How do I fit in to American culture and my own ethnic culture at the same time? Which side should I stay loyal to, American or my own ethnic culture? ...At times, they feel embarrassed by their parents’ “old” ways. Parents, on the other hand, are primarily concerned both with making the best of a new environment and with retaining traditional family life. These parental concerns tend to lead them to focus on the future and to emphasize discipline and scholastic achievement. When children respond to these emphases in an unexpected way, parents puzzle: Why are my children so disrespectful? How can I make my children understand that everything I am doing is for their own good? Can’t they understand that I wouldn’t have chosen a life here if it hadn’t been for them? What should I do to keep my children from losing their cultural roots and from assimilating too much? (Zhou 84)

Clearly the varying ambitions as described above begin to cause ruptures in the parent-child relationships as the younger immigrants focus on “fitting in” to society while the older cling more rigidly to traditional cultural values. These oppositional goals can manifest themselves in different aspects of Latino families, such as adolescent behavior. Rosie, a participant in the publication Hijas Americanas, portrays the repeated verbal interaction between her mother and herself as she asks permission to go out with a non-Latino. Her mother, after much debate, eventually responds, “All right, m’ija... but just remember, you are not a gringa” (Molinary 19). Rosie continues, “Those instructions were an echo of an almost daily reminder she issued. “You are not a gringa” was my mother’s party line, whether it was in reference to going out on a date, sleeping over at a friend’s house, or cruising the mall. Each time she denied my requests with this phrase, I had to come up with a better excuse to give my friends for my inability to do things that they didn’t even have to ask permission to do” (19). Varying perspectives are similarly apparent in Voicing Chicana Feminisms which presents multiple tactics utilized by adolescent Latinas to undermine parental strictness that conflicted with societal trends, such as moving in with a

---

51 my daughter
52 non-Hispanic
boyfriend without telling the parents (Hurtado 59). It is evident that the surrounding societal norms are likely to influence the younger generation’s behavioral expectations and therefore become a source of conflict between parent and child.

Another domain in which these oppositional ambitions present themselves is through language choice. While younger generations, in an attempt to harmonize with U.S. society, may gravitate towards English, some parents may fear that a decreased Spanish affiliation indicates cultural disassociation. Additionally parents may subconsciously feel threatened by their child’s ability to learn the language as it potentially reveals their own linguistic inabilities. The chapter “No Speak English” in The House on Mango Street offers a vignette into the life of an immigrant mother that longs to return to her home country but is prevented from doing so by her controlling husband. She pleads with her husband, “¿cuándo, cuándo, cuándo?” and he answers “¡Ay caray!” We are home. This is home. Here I am and here I stay. Speak English. Speak English. Christ!” (Cisneros 78). The permanence of the “mamacita’s” unwanted situation makes itself evident when her child “starts to sing the Pepsi commercial he heard on TV” (78). She replies with “No speak English... No speak English, no speak English” as she “bubbles into tears... as if she can’t believe her ears” (78). Language choice is more than a mere production of words, it in fact can capture one’s desire to belong or perceived level of affiliation with the new society.

Interestingly, Zhou’s research finds that tension between parents and children are highest in the cases where adolescent females prefer to speak English at home” (85). Although English language preference was a characteristic of parent-child conflict, according to Zhou it is not the only palpable point of contention.

The educational gap between generations is another attribute that leads to conflict with female adolescents and their immigrant parents. Zhou reports, “But among females, conflicts were significantly more likely to occur in families where the mother was less educated and where economic well-being

---

53 when, when, when?
54 Oh good heavens!
was perceived as having worsened, where children felt embarrassed by parents and had nobody to help with homework at home (85). Unquestionably, Latino parents desire for their children to remain academically focused and committed. According to the publication “Toward a Common Future: Latino Teens and Adults Speak Out About Teen Pregnancy” by NCLR, 91% of Latino parents believe that graduating from college or university or having a promising career is the most important goal for a teen’s future (8). Cisneros also captures this is phenomenon in The House on Mango Street when the mother wants a change for her children and advises them to stay in school as she wishes she had done. Although the parents encourage their children to stay in school, as Zhou highlights, the uneducated parents often lack the ability to personally assist in the child’s studies and this incongruity consequently hinders the parent-child relationship. Gándara and Contreras affirm this claim as they insist that “Low-income\textsuperscript{55} and minority parents often lack the cultural capital (knowledge of how the system works and what it values) and social capital (access to important social networks) that are such an essential part of how middle-class white and Asian parents support their children’s academic achievement” (68).

The implications of this relational rift extend further than the handful of years that separate childhood from adulthood. The teenage years are influential in an individual’s growth and may advantageously or disadvantageously influence one’s personal development. In Adolescent Development David Balk asserts that “While adolescence is a separate, indeed unique, period of change in a person’s life, the changes of adolescence point not only back to middle childhood but also ahead to the greater maturity expected of a young adult” (7). Erik Erikson further underlines the importance of adolescence as it is the designated time for an individual to deal with the crisis of “forming an identity” (qtd. in Balk 22). The magnitude of the influential impact adolescence can have on one’s life is apparent as Erikson establishes identity as the “fundamental stake in each stage of development” (qtd. in Balk

\textsuperscript{55} A recent study from the National Council of La Raza, a Latino civil rights organization, revealed that roughly 59% of Latino youth (including both native and foreign born) are growing up in low-income houses, a statistic further emphasizing the significance of this affirmation (qtd. in Greenwell).
22). The fragility of adolescence is relevant to the teenage Latina in the U.S. as it can be a time of contradiction, confusion, identity instability, and cultural anxiety. The contrasting parental perspective that confronts them on a daily basis can further hinder the journey towards self-understanding and acceptance. It may lead the teen to feel isolated and alone. Furthermore they may feel guilt and shame on account of betraying their roots through speaking English and assimilating to the mainstream norms. Unequivocally this is not the case for all Latino parent-child relationships, but the inherent situation that presents itself to the common U.S. immigrant makes adolescence extremely complicated. This generational conflict is possible to resolve, as portrayed in the testimony of Judith Ortiz Cofer below:

I’m culturally an American woman and a native Puerto Rican. My mother is a Puerto Rican who never became culturally an American woman. She’s never happier than when she is on the island doing the things that she thinks are familiar and her way of life, which is very different from me. I love going to the island, but it’s no longer as familiar to me as Georgia…. For better or worse, I’m no longer the same kind of puertorriqueña that my mother is…. I’ve undergone an evolutionary process as has everyone who has left their homeland. (Kevane and Heredia, 122-3)

Ortiz Cofer is clearly accepting of the opposing identities shared between her mother and herself, but much like many other Latina authors, she admits that her contentment with the situation was not confirmed until later on in life. On sharing her adult perspective about being Latina, Ortiz Cofer attests, “I don’t see it as a burden as I did when I was a child because I don’t suffer from the same intense insecurities and identity problems” (qtd. in Kevane and Heredia 121). Ortiz Cofer’s assertion implies that at an earlier age she was more insecure and struggled with the formation of her identity. The fact that adolescence is both a heightened period of physical and psychological maturation as well as a critical stage for exploring one’s self-conceptualization, it lends itself to be a vulnerable age for those falling within the boundaries of el entre. Language choice and age vulnerability are not the only factors illustrating the challenge of the interstitial existence of Latinos in the U.S. as many cultural factors, such as food, music, and entertainment preferences, continually force the Latino community to identify with one side over the other.
Anzaldúa evidences the axiomatic correlation between one’s identity and various cultural elements in her book *Borderlands*. The mere watching of films, an activity described by many as passive, instilled in the author a feeling of connectivity to her ethnic community. She recalls, “Even before I read books by Chicanos or Mexicanos, it was the Mexican movies I saw at the drive-in—the Thursday night special of $1.00 a carload—that gave me a sense of belonging” (82). Her movie experience, however positive for Anzaldúa’s sense of identity, simultaneously aroused negative emotions. She continues, “When watching Mexican movies, I felt a sense of homecoming as well as alienation. People who were to amount to something didn’t go to Mexican movies, or *bailes* or tune their radios to *bolero*, *rancherita*, and *corrido* music” (82). Anzaldúa captures the phenomenon that one’s musical preferences can signal one’s cultural identity in the following passage:

I grew up feeling ambivalent about our music. Country-western and rock-and-roll had more status. In the 50s and 60s, for the slightly educated and agringado Chicanos, there existed a sense of shame at being caught listening to our music. Yet I couldn’t stop my feet from thumping to the music, could not stop humming the words, nor hide from myself the exhilaration I felt when I heard it. (83)

It is highly apparent through Anzaldúa’s personal revelation that various mediums, including music and movies, reveal more than an individual’s personal taste and can actually indicate one’s cultural identity. Considering the recent technological advancements that make these mediums more accessible than ever, it is no surprise that daily communication amongst adolescents often involves references and topics related to current movie and music releases. Latina adolescents, being in this cultural entre, are continually forced to navigate and reevaluate their affiliation with either side. This constant unsettledness, underscored by entertainment mediums, potentially further exacerbates the feeling amongst adolescent Latinas that they exist in a “boundless, floating state of limbo” (Anzaldúa 94).

Another obstacle that Latinos in the U.S. often encounter is the notion of physical displacement; they may have difficult identifying one particular geographical location as “home”. Various Latina

---

56Here she provides examples of traditional Mexican music styles.
works, fictional and non-fictional alike, highlight this lack of belonging. In her book *The House on Mango Street* Cisneros repeatedly captures the desire of the young protagonist, Esperanza, to have a house. Her longing for a house not only indicates dissatisfaction with the physical condition of the home (5), but is also a symbolic representation of her failure to completely relate with the surrounding community. Esperanza, as a Latina born in the U.S., envies her friend’s ability to concretely say she is “from” Guadalajara. She matter-of-factly states, “I don’t have a house. I don’t belong. I don’t ever want to come from here… I never had a house, not even a photograph… only one I dream of” (106-7). This same theme reappears multiple times throughout the young girl’s life as she asks a palm reader “what about a house” (64), relates with trees who “do not belong here but are here” (75), and upon leaving her house on Mango street verbalizes that she “did not belong to the house” and “didn’t want to belong” there (110). Cisneros’s book is not exclusive in that it deals with this interstitial struggle as several authors have similarly identified their personal inability to connect with an identifiable geographical location. In her analytical text *Readreaming America*, Castillo identifies assimilation as a common theme throughout many novels that confront the issue of feeling nostalgic for the home country while juggling a conflicted self-sense of not belonging in the U.S. (100). As stated by Castillo, this conflict arouses a psychological tension between two different geographical spaces resulting in an impediment of the formation of a strong affiliation with either location (100). This occurrence is evidenced through the lives of not only the Latinos in the U.S., but with offspring all over the world that are relocated to a geographical location other than their parent’s birth place. “Third Culture Kids” (TCKs) is a term developed by Dr. Ruth Hill Useem to identify individuals that are raised in this transient lifestyle (http://www.tckworld.com/). Although there are many beneficial characteristics that seem to develop in TCKs (ex. they are more likely than the average person to earn a bachelors degree), there are also high rates of depression and suicide amongst this group (http://www.tckid.com/what-is-a-tck.html#chara). Although it is certainly unfounded to immediately blame teen suicide on transitory migration patterns, the analysis of this
group of individuals reveals that “not belonging” to any particular piece of land can be a troublesome and grievous situation to confront.

In addition to the battles exacerbated by geographical migration, the failure to strongly identify with one particular racial sector can cause considerable discomfort and anxiety for Latinas in the U.S. The mere task of filling out the 2010 U.S. Census, for instance, is complicated for Latinos as the census clarifies that “For this census, Hispanic origins are not races” and then requires the individual to identify both their country of origin and their race (choosing from White, Black, American Indian, Asian Indian, etc) (U.S. Census 2010). Due to the findings that the majority of Latinos have shown a preference towards their country of origin as the main source of self-identification (“Identity” 22) and that most Latinos trace their biological bloodline back to multiple racial origins, the task of filling out a survey can transpire into an arduous and taxing quest. E. M. Rodriguez, a Latina contributor to the publication Windows into My World with her essay “Becoming Latina” shares her personal struggle that dates back as early as elementary school. With a Mexican father and Anglo mother, E.M. was stumped by whether to check off “Hispanic” or “White (non-Hispanic)”. After raising her help for assistance, the teacher advised her to “just pick one” (161). This identity battle continued for several years and reappeared more noticeably during the daunting task of completing college applications. E.M. remembers, “In high school, which box to check again became an issue as I took my SATs and filled out college and financial aid applications. I wanted to identify as Latina, but still wasn’t sure that I had the right to do so. Whenever possible, I would explain my ethnic background and ask if I met the institution’s definition of Hispanic” (162). E.M. is not alone in her struggle to identify with any one race as the ethnic compilation of today’s Latino population is immensely heterogeneous. Additionally, racial implications are not limited to categorical frustrations but may result in the reception of discrimination or increased delinquent behavior. In her study involving working-class adolescent Chicanas in California, Dietrich encounters an obstacle in her research as some girls admit to being embarrassed about being seen with
a white lady (25). She also observes that Latinas will be undesirably accused of “acting white” or “pocha” (a colloquial Spanish term meaning Americanized) for being too innocent (with sex, drugs, etc) (42-3), for dressing a certain way (90), or for surpassing other Latinas in academic studies (90). The girls explained that the perception that one is “acting white” will lead to discrimination and harassment by other Latinos and therefore should be avoided at all costs. One student that excelled in her standard classes was placed in a more academically challenging class only to request to switch back after realizing there were “too many white kids” in the class (87). Although these same obligations are certainly not placed on every Latina in the country, Dietrich’s findings demonstrate that there exists a strong connection between race and behavioral conduct. Latinas often receive messages from their peers about what it means to look, speak, and act “Latina” and react a certain way in order to fulfill (or not fulfill) these specific expectations.

Once again, various Latina writers strive to debunk the myth that Latinas must act or look a certain way in order to confidently self-identify with the Latino community. In Latina Self-Portraits Santiago confesses to experiencing an increased identity discomfort while visiting Puerto Rico. On the other hand, Santiago acknowledges an acceptance in the mainland U.S. of her identity, stating, “At least in the U.S., if I tell people I’m Puerto Rican they don’t say, No you’re not! I’m not going to live in an environment where I constantly have to defend my identity because I’ve already had to do that once in my life and I’m not going to do it at this age” (131). A wide array of Latino literature has been written on account of this contradictory, interstitial, and overlapping existence that not only reveals the potential challenges that arise, but also delineates the coping mechanisms for embracing one’s multi-dimensional cultural identity while residing in the Latino borderlands. “Homecoming”, an essay by Chavier Caamaño, focuses on her incapacity to feel “at home” either in Aberdeen, South Dakota or the Dominican Republic (121). Although as a child and adolescent Chavier Caamaño struggled with bridging the gap between

57 Of course the specific expectations depend largely on a variety of factors (level of urbanization, age, gender, ethnic make-up of peers, geographic location, etc) and will vary for all Latinos.
the two geographical locations, as an adult she learned that “[Her] home is the moment when the cultures cross. The fleeting glimpse of change, and then the constant rock and sway of Midwest and Caribbean customs” (120). Chavier Caamaño eventually realized that home did not have to be a concrete location and in fact could be the creation of a variety of people and places. She continues, “In her simple gesture, Abuela was able to unravel for me a lifetime of the confusion of being “half and half.” I used to think that I had to choose, one or the other. She gave me the feeling that I can create “home” anywhere I choose to be” (126). Anzaldúa captures this notion in *Borderlands* when she attests that one can self-identify as “Mexican” regardless of their geographic location. She explains that “Deep in our (Mexican) hearts we believe that being Mexican has nothing to do with which country one lives in. Being Mexican is a state of soul... not one of citizenship” (84). Anzaldúa proposes that in order to embrace her borderland existence, the *mestiza* must form a new consciousness in which she can depart from Western modes of reasoning and towards divergent thinking with a greater tolerance for contradictions and ambiguity (100-1). Through this new tolerance the *mestiza* “learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else” (101). Anzaldúa declares that although the “new consciousness” is “a source of intense pain, its energy comes from the continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm” (101-2). She further explains the advantageous nature of this new consciousness:

This step is a conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures and religions. She communicates that rupture, documents the struggle. She reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths. She adopts new perspectives toward the darkskinned, women and queers. She strengthens her tolerance (and intolerance) for ambiguity. She is willing to

---

58 Although Anzaldúa uses the term “*mestiza*” (mixed) to refer more specifically to the Mexican heritage than any other country, undoubtedly the application of her theories hold true for several other Latin American nationalities that share a similar hybrid experience in the U.S.
share, to make herself vulnerable to foreign ways of seeing and thinking. She surrenders all notions of safety, of the familiar. Deconstruct, construct. (104)

Chavier Caamaño and Anzaldúa reveal through their own testimonial accounts that a secure identity is feasible even for inhabitants of multiple cultural and linguistic localities. Although many of the aforementioned authors concur that their existence in these borderlands can be traumatizing and painful, many eventually claim to have reached a place of contentment and appreciation for their marginal experience. Castillo suggests the hybrid position to be a “projected sight of creativity” (Redreaming America 89) that produces valuable insights and a double consciousness that most Latinos wouldn’t give up if they could (Redreaming America 188). The personal experiences of these reputable Latina writers indubitably would assist the common Latina in her own quest of understanding and establishing her identity. Only after a college course in which she was introduced to the writing of Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga was E.M. (the Peruvian-American that encountered difficulties completing surveys) finally capable of embracing and appreciating her unique identity. She “learned that [she] didn’t need to be limited by others’ definitions or perceptions…. In class and in [her] daily life, [she] learned that there were a lot of gray areas, or borderlands” (Rodriguez 163). The question therefore becomes not whether or not this literature will be advantageous to adolescent Latinas in the U.S., but whether or not literature is available and accessible to this young population. As will be evident in the subsequent chapter concerning the influence of U.S. societal factors, increased poverty and drop-out rates indicate a decreased access to helpful resources and insightful literature. As E.M. evidenced, college can be a great time of exploration and navigation of one’s identity and self-conceptualization. Unfortunately the research shows that the majority of Latinas in the U.S. never have the privilege of pursuing a higher education and therefore potentially miss out on this critical stage of identity formation. Many of them are caught in the borderlands between the U.S. and Latin America, either in geographical terms, due to physical location, and/or cultural reasons, on account of language choice, food, and entertainment preferences.
Based on the above analyses, it is evident that the concept of *el entre* has been examined and exemplified numerous times by a plethora of Latino authors. This investigation takes these concepts a step further and suggests that residing in this cultural in-between further reinforces the teen Latina’s decision to get involved in a serious relationship. As demonstrated in this chapter, a collection of areas in a young girl’s life can be unstable as a result of her simultaneous exposure to the Latino and Anglo cultures. In an effort to validate her own self-identity, she may look to an outside source (friend, lover) for reassurance and affirmation. A conflicting relationship with her parents might similarly lead her to look elsewhere for connectedness. The inability to personally identify in terms of language choice, age range (childhood vs. adulthood), cultural components (food, music, art), racial categories, and/or gender norms is hard enough when surrounded by one culture, but even more challenging when surrounded by two. Considering that the adolescent period is a critical stage in establishing one’s identity, the contradictory messages transmitted to the inhabitants of *el entre* place on them a heightened desire to search for meaning and purpose. Although it is likely that young Latinas will eventually establish their identity and be comfortable in their own skin, as revealed in the literature analyzed above, this is often an extremely difficult and taxing task that may take years to actualize. It is a balancing act that may leave an adolescent feeling lonely, desperate for love and attention, or insecure about her own existence. The apparent fluidity with which Latinas can travel through the borderlands makes them increasingly susceptible to doubting their own self-worth and thus looking to affirm it in a variety of ways. Although as Castillo points out, looking to affirm one’s cultural affinity can further separate them from the genuine authenticity of that culture, stating, “The more the immigrant self-consciously strives to maintain cultural authenticity, the more inauthentic, the more U.S. ethnic s/he becomes” (145). Castillo continues to show how one’s identity in the borderlands can result in their loss of individuality and uniqueness. She concludes, “In identifying with and residing between two nations, identity seems to slip inexorably into the shadow of the inauthentic, felt as a loss of voice, a loss in moral authority, and
even a loss of self” (146). Abril Trigo also attests to the fragility of identity formation in the migrant lifestyle, affirming “La migrancia no conduce a síntesis, fusiones e identidades estables, sino a una suspensión de culturas en conflicto, siempre en vilo, en las cuales el migrante es un ave de paso enajenada de todas” (qtd. in Redreaming America 17). Navigating through the borderlands requires maturity, confidence, and life experience, three characteristics that many adolescents, let alone adolescents relating with two disparate cultures, have not yet fully developed. Although certainly many positive aspects can be gleaned from residing in the borderlands as previously explored, its inherent difficulties nonetheless confront every young Latina. Alvarez captures the gravity of this formidable situation with her quote of a Críticas editorial, confirming, “We were all adolescents once…. We know how intense and confusing that period is. Imagine adding to that mix two major forces, American culture and Latino traditions, and you might understand why growing up Latina in the United States is shocking and difficult” (Once Upon a Quinceañera 243). So far this investigation has explored the various Latino cultural aspects that may contribute to teen motherhood as well as the extreme challenge of living within the U.S.-Latino borderlands. The subsequent chapter therefore intends to analyze the societal factors within the United States that contribute to the dearth of economic and educational opportunities available to many adolescent Latinas that potentially reinforces the cyclical phenomenon of teen pregnancy.

---

59 “The migratory lifestyle does not lead to synthesis, stable fusions and identities, but rather to a suspension of cultures in conflict, always up in the air, in which the migrant is a travelling bird, insane from it all”
CHAPTER 6

U.S. SOCIETAL FACTORS

Based on the analyses provided in the previous chapters of femininity, virginity, and motherhood, one might conclude that the Latina teen pregnancy rate is high solely due to cultural norms and traditions. Although these factors may indeed contribute to the high rate of teen motherhood, it is apparent that culture alone is not to blame for the phenomenon. Dietrich concluded her study with the affirmation that “It is much more difficult to blame ourselves. We must examine the ways in which our social institutions, whether through benign neglect or through intentional discrimination, produce teen pregnancy” (168). The focus of this chapter is therefore on these social institutions and the impact they have on Latina adolescent motherhood. It is important to note that the bulk of this chapter will focus on the societal factors facing Latinas of the lower socioeconomic bracket as it presents the most economic and educational challenges. One common misperception amongst the middle and upper classes is that the lower class has substandard moral and cultural values that place them in a disadvantaged situation. Along these lines of reasoning, also known as “The Culture of Poverty”, “poor people are poor because they choose not to work” and “girls become single moms because they are sexually irresponsible” (Dietrich 158). Dietrich explains that this justification allows the upper and middle class to blame the victim and therefore not feel any responsibility in the disproportionate distribution of wealth (158). In her investigation of working-class adolescent Chicanas in California, Dietrich concluded that although many of the girls actually shared similar values and aspirations as the middle and upper classes, their life choices were often “constrained or shaped by their social, political, economic, and cultural environments” (3). Dietrich is not alone in this stance as many other researchers and anthropologists have concluded similarly that poor people are not the cause for a failed system, but rather a failed system, if not the cause, is a major factor in keeping people poor. In

60 That is not to say that Latinas of the middle and upper classes do not have their own unique societal limitations.
other words, people of the lower class are disadvantaged to such a drastic measure that they are extremely limited in their economic, educational and occupational opportunities and therefore more prone to getting trapped in the “cycle of poverty” (Dietrich 4). The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the various U.S. societal factors that potentially perpetuate the phenomenon of adolescent Latina pregnancy. It is important to clarify that these factors may not necessarily directly cause pregnancy, but are likely to increase the adolescent’s acceptance and openness to having a child. It will be apparent that teen pregnancy, rather than being the outcome of a moral deficiency, is in large part due to the inaccessibility of alternative educational and economic opportunities.

When dealing with teen pregnancy, there are many alarming issues that require attention, but perhaps one of its most frightening characteristics is its cyclical inclination. In their 2005 study, Promises I Can Keep, Edin and Kefalas found that “on average, children raised outside of marriage typically learn less in school, are more likely to have children while they are teens, are less likely to graduate from high school and enroll in college, and have more trouble finding jobs as adults” (3). These assertions are backed by the findings in various other sociological publications that confirm that the risk factors of teen pregnancy often become the effects as well (Erickson 11-2 and Cherry, Dillon and Rugh 185-90). According to Cherry, Dillon and Rugh, 75% of children of single teenage parents are growing up in poverty (194) and poverty has been proven to be an adolescent pregnancy risk factor (185). School failure is another element that has been documented as both a risk factor of teen pregnancy and a likely consequence for the mother and child (Cherry, Dillon and Rugh 185, 190). Given its cyclical nature and the fact that Latina adolescents have a high teen pregnancy rate and the Latino population continues to grow as the country’s most sizeable minority, it becomes extremely critical to analyze the sociological causes and effects.

An important distinction needs to be made between legal and undocumented immigrants as the situation facing these two populations is often dependent upon their legality. This will be discussed in greater detail where applicable, but it is important to realize that unauthorized immigrants are often the population with the most depleted opportunity for educational and economic advancement.
A plethora of investigations, including those by Dietrich (1998), Erickson (1998), Russell and Lee (2004), and Edin and Kefalas (2005), have found that teen pregnancy often becomes a viable option due to the scarcity of other economic and educational opportunities accessible to the Latina population from low-income backgrounds. Overall these researchers have found that while Latinas highly value educational achievement and economic success, they do not feel as though these options apply to their own personal situations. The standard middle class order of life events in the U.S. is to graduate high school and college, establish economic independence and then look to settle down and have a family. However, many Latina women in the aforementioned studies communicated that they personally cannot relate with these aspirations as they do not consider them to be realistically attainable (Erickson 93-4, Edin and Kefalas 49, 170). Russell and Lee noted in their study of Latina pregnancy that “Blocked expectations may lead some teenagers to value early parenthood as one of the few meaningful adult roles that they can achieve. Many adolescents view higher education, stable employment and a marriage defined by economic security as unattainable” ("Practitioners' Perspectives" 145). Dietrich similarly noted that becoming a teen mother offers little perceived risk to Latinas since “Many girls who become pregnant are often scholastic poor achievers who have a realistic sense of the job opportunities that await them. Pregnancy becomes a way of escaping their scholastic failures and their prospects of a dead end job” (76). Edin and Kefalas also found that although many of their participants realized that young, single motherhood is perceived by society as absurd, “they wonder if the circumstances will ever be “right” for them”(39) and see “little disadvantage”(48) to motherhood as it is “the surest source of accomplishment” (46). The question therefore becomes how and why these educational and occupational opportunities are so scarce for young Latinas.

The availability of academic opportunities is a major factor in the analysis of teen pregnancy as the two factors are highly inter-related. One might attempt to argue that educational failure is a reflection of cultural differences, after all studies show that the quality of education in Latin America
does not compare to that offered in the United States\textsuperscript{62} (“Study Casts Doubt...” 1998). However, this argument does not hold valid when one takes note of the voiced desire of Latinos to pursue an educational career. As evident in the study “Explaining the Attainment Gap”, 89% of surveyed Latinos confirm that a college education is important for success in life (Lopez 1). However, only 48% say that they themselves plan to get a college degree (Lopez 1). In 2009 the overall percentage of youths (ages 16 to 24) not enrolled in high school or college was 41.6%, while the rate for Hispanics surpassed this average with 48.9% (“Education” 46). The potential reasons for this academic disconnect will be explored in the subsequent passage.

One common theory concerning the high Latina drop-out rate is that girls get pregnant and then are forced to let go of their academic dreams. In the questionnaire responses of this study, 100% of the participants responded that they believe young Latinas get pregnant and then drop-out of school. Interestingly, several sociological studies find the contrary to be true. Erickson found that although a good portion (50%) of the Latina teen mothers from her study dropped out after getting pregnant, an even higher percentage got pregnant after dropping out (33, 72), stating that “poor adolescents have little reason to delay childbearing since they’re already out of the higher education loop” (161). Hyams agreed that “Teenage Pregnancy is more often a result, not the cause, of academic failure” (106). Dietrich affirmed a similar conclusion, sharing that “many female dropouts became pregnant to compensate for their educational failure” (103). So if most Latinas get pregnant after dropping out of school (as opposed to before), the reasons behind their decision to drop-out are extremely relative and critical to this investigation.

Several different factors have been identified as adversely affecting the Latina’s ability to graduate high school. Dietrich suggests that the schools are to blame as they offer over-sized classrooms and low teacher expectations (82, 86). Dietrich, along with a large portion of surveyed adult

\textsuperscript{62} This statement is based on a broad generalization of the overall education and does not consider individual differences of academic quality.
Latinos, identifies low parental involvement in the child’s academic affairs as a contributor to school failure (Dietrich 87, Segura 200, Lopez 4). One young respondent from the qualitative research in this study, a college-enrolled Latina, also believes that “a lack of parental motivation is to blame” for the child’s apathy since many Latino parents “don’t have a good education” themselves. Although schools and parents undoubtedly play a significant role in the child’s life, Latino drop-outs do not mention either in their reasons for abandoning school. Almost three fourths (74%) of the drop-outs cite family financial difficulties as their top reason for leaving school (Lopez 6). Students reported having to drop-out in order to free up time to work and make money to financially support their family. The second most common explanation was a lack of English skills (49%), which may help to explain the noticeable gap in reading and math between the Hispanic and non-Hispanic populations (Lopez 2). The next three reasons were that the students couldn’t afford school (40%), did not need more education for the career they wanted (39%) and did not have good enough grades to continue (21%) (Lopez 6). Clearly these reasons are not mutually exclusive as evidenced in the percentage breakdowns, but they reveal a lot about the financial and linguistic restraints experienced by the Latino population. The three most commonly cited reasons for dropping out of school have more to do with money and English than the student’s individual motivation. Gándara and Contreras report the following:

A national study of the characteristics of entering kindergartners found that Latino children are much more likely than white or Asian children to have five risk factors for school failure at the point of school entry: poverty, a single-parent household, a mother with less than high school education, a primary language other than English, and a mother unmarried at the time of the child’s birth. (66-7)

External factors, such as financial instability and linguistic incompetence, are largely determining the student’s decision to terminate academic studies rather than the individual’s own preference. In essence, Latinos are often left with the decision made for them that academic affairs be placed behind the family’s financial needs. It is therefore evident that the high drop-out rate does not arise from the student’s own lack of motivation or laziness, but rather results from a larger financial inequality across
the U.S. society. This certainly explains the gap between their acknowledgement of the importance of a college degree versus their actual ability to obtain one. While this explains the gap for the overall Latino population, more specific concerns need to be addressed for certain factions of individuals.

Undocumented immigrants, who have the highest percentage of educational failure amongst Latinos ("Education" 46), are severely limited by the seemingly insurmountable obstacles to academic and professional success. Currently unauthorized immigrants find it extremely difficult to obtain a bachelor’s degree for their lack of legitimate residency in the country (due to higher tuition rates, inaccessibility to scholarship funds, or outright inability to apply to the school). The DREAM Act is a piece of legislation that would enable undocumented immigrants to receive financial aid for higher education and thus pursue a professional career, but it has unsuccessfully swung in political limbo for around a decade with little sign of progression (Suarez). Unauthorized immigrants, being aware of this difficulty, often find little reason to be motivated and diligent in their studies. One participant interviewed for this study, Elisa, is exceptional in that she is in the country illegally but aspires to “get good grades” and “do the best [she] can” in order “to prove that Mexicans can do great things” (García). She does confirm, however, that many of her former Latino classmates dropped out because school was pointless since they “didn’t have papers”. These papers, or proof of legal residency, represented so much more to her than a mere material possession. For Elisa, “papers” are the key to endless possibilities, so she reports getting angry when legal residents do not take advantage of the possible opportunities laying before them. This young lady, a 15 year old currently enrolled in a Baton Rouge high school, plans to pursue a college degree and thus hopes to “get her papers” before it is time to graduate (García).

---

63 Also termed "unauthorized" (referred to colloquially as "illegals" or "aliens")
64 This piece of legislation in large part confronts the shortcomings of Plyler v. Doe, which fights for a full and equal public education for children brought here by immigrants but does not include higher education (Gándara and Contreras 10).
65 Currently ten states allow undocumented immigrants to receive financial aid through the university (LSU forum).
Another group of Latinos that merit individual attention are those surrounded by or involved in the gang culture. Lisa Dietrich immersed herself in a Latino, working-class, gang-affiliated environment in Southern California. Dietrich found that material resources (jobs, money, etc) were so drastically limited in the Latino neighborhoods that motherhood was understandably an appealing option to many of the young residents (98). She also found the neighborhoods to be so emotionally draining that she decided to commute every day. She recalls, “Going home to my own space was a necessary emotional respite for me. Sometimes I found the reality of these girls’ lives so overwhelmingly depressing that I needed some time away from them and the varrio” (19). For these young Latinas that do not have the privilege of a nightly respite, the environment certainly takes an emotional and physical toll on them. Some look to motherhood as an escape from the hostile environment and independence from gang membership (Dietrich 74). Without a doubt this environment also takes a toll on their academic studies. Dietrich found that her participants designated gang violence as the main cause of academic struggles, followed by drug use, bad attitudes, and financial reasons (84). Dietrich’s study highlighted the fact that in these urban and predominantly Latino schools, students who were affiliated with academic success were also considered “race-less” and accused of “acting white” by their peers (90, 105). Clearly obstacles to academic success are dependent upon many factors and may not be the same for all Latinos. Individual differences, such as one’s legal status or immersion in a gang-populated environment, need to be taken into consideration when working with adolescent Latinos66.

Although generalizations made for the entire population undoubtedly do not apply to every individual Latino, there is a conspicuous need to confront the current obstacles that account for the overall academic gap between proclaimed goals and actual academic achievement. Education is one area that experiences residual effects of teen pregnancy as “children of teen mothers do worse in school than those born to older parents” (“Ten Headlines”). Considering that Latinas account for the highest

---

66 This will be addressed in greater detail in the discussion of the role and responsibilities of educators of Latinas.
teen pregnancy rate, this startling connection between having a teen mother and academic failure is certainly an issue that will persist for many years to come. A famous quote by the late Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget states that “The principal goal of education is to create men who are capable of doing new things, not simply of repeating what other generations have done”. Unfortunately, if a specific population has a decreased chance of receiving an education, the cycle is sure to persist and place its people in grave danger of emulating the past and perpetuating the cycle. The repercussions for academic failure extend further than the mere absence of a diploma as it limits one’s access to professional opportunities and future chances of financial success.

As highlighted in the previous chapters, the Latino culture historically has placed a heavier responsibility on the female to care for the family life and household responsibilities. One third of the respondents in Segura’s study reportedly had been encouraged by parents to stick with school in order to “find a good guy to marry” (203). The overall expectation Segura discovered was that the girls were expected primarily to marry and have children and secondarily to work (202). So long as the professional life did not interfere with or disrupt the family life, then Latinas were allowed to work (202). This cultural expectation certainly impacts the life decisions Latinas choose to make, but the availability (or lack thereof) of professional opportunities indubitably impacts their decision of whether or not to work. Studies have revealed that the percentage of working Latino women is drastically lower than the percentage of Latino men in the U.S. work force (Passel 25). Without a doubt traditional Latino norms expect that the man be in charge of the public sphere (work) and the woman be responsible for the affairs of the private sphere (child care, household maintenance, religion) (“Dilemmas” 224). However these expectations are not the only influence of the woman’s decision to work. Multiple societal factors play a part in limiting the opportunities that Latinas have to find employment. In the past two years the United States as a whole has experienced a colossal increase in the unemployment
rate ("Government Measures Unemployment"). The unforgiving job market is just one of many obstacles that Latinas are forced to overcome if they choose to seek employment.

Money is one of the biggest incentives people have for acquiring a job. However, Latino women have been found to earn less money than non-Latino women, earning approximately $460 per week as opposed to the non-Latina average of $615 (Gonzales 12). Although this disparity may be due to lack of qualifications or inexperience, it nonetheless reveals an important reason as to why Latino women may prefer to stay out of the public sphere. Much like the educational realm, the professional realm is another area in which individual differences need to be taken into account. The foreign-born Latinas statistically seem to be further removed from the labor force than their native-born counterparts (Gonzales 11). Certainly their relatively low levels of education completion have an impact on their access to job possibilities, being that 49% of the foreign-born Latinas have earned less than a high school diploma (Gonzales 10), but other obstacles that have become apparent are cultural and linguistic in nature. Dietrich finds that immigrants see cultural and language differences as barriers to overcome in order to achieve their long-range goals while non-immigrants see them as markers of their identity (79).

The task of having to learn a new language may seem so overwhelming to foreign-born Latinas, especially those that have recently arrived, that staying at home and taking on the wife-mother responsibilities starts to become an appealing option. As if these challenges are not enough, many immigrants are ineligible for any governmentally-recognized form of employment as they are required to have documentation showing authorization to work in the U.S. ("Foreign Workers"). In her personal

---

67 There is variation within the foreign-born population as well as Central Americans have the highest rate of employment (63%) followed by South Americans (61%), those from the Caribbean (52%), and Mexicans (46%) (Gonzales 12).
68 "La noche buena" ("Christmas Eve") by Tomás Rivera captures an extreme case in which a Mexican woman is extremely fearful of the world beyond her front door. As the narrator explains, this mother has never left the house by herself (except for one time in Willmar, Minnesota when she got lost) and her husband is shocked to find out she is attempting to do so. After getting lost and arrested due to her utter fear and confusion, she is advised by her husband to never again leave the property alone. Although certainly this is not true of all Mexican mothers, Rivera's essay nevertheless captures the dependency and reliance that some Mexican women have on their male counterparts.
interview, Elisa also discussed the situation her sister ran into while working in a dentist’s office. The dentist learned that she was an undocumented immigrant and was forced to remove her from her position. The sister was forced to take under-the-table jobs (babysitting, cleaning) in order to pay her college tuition (Garcia). Elisa’s sister is an example of the limited professional opportunities available to foreign-born, undocumented Latinas.

In recognizing all of these financial, educational, linguistic, and legal barriers to overcome, it becomes apparent why the decision to stay at home and start a family is so popular amongst young Latinas. An intensive study of poor, young mothers and their life circumstances and choices that resulted in parenthood was conducted by Edin and Kefalas. Although their participants were not exclusively Latina, the implications of their investigation largely apply to this population as they currently hold the highest rates of poverty and academic failure (Gonzales 14). Their research affirmed that the lower-class and ethnic minorities are predisposed to economic and educational struggles due to the fact that they have restricted access to quality schools (for both themselves and their children), parks, recreational facilities, safe streets, and good jobs (14). They also found that the middle class ideal order of life events is to graduate high school, graduate college, get established financially, get married and then have children (48). Poor women on the other hand, hold a more vague idea of when the “right time” to have kids is because of their limited economic prospects (48). The authors contend that “early childbearing does not actually have much effect on a low-skilled young woman’s future prospects in the labor market. In fact, her life chances are so limited already that a child or two makes little difference” (171). Poor women, they say, are “relegated to unstable, poorly paid, often mind-stultifying jobs with little room for advancement” and therefore “childbearing often rises to the top of the list of potential meaning-making activities from mere lack of competition” (206). They conclude that the most sensible order for women in poverty is to “have children, get established financially, and then get married” (210). Clearly women in poverty have learned to adapt the order of mainstream ideals to more feasibly
accustom their own circumstances. Many Latina women, potentially further displaced from educational
and economic advancement on account of cultural and linguistic barriers, are left with few appealing
options and thus understandably opt to pursue one of the only meaningful available opportunities,
young motherhood. Clearly U.S. Societal factors further reinforce the traditional Latino expectations
that require a heterosexual woman to become a mother.

One subject that merits a brief discussion is that of welfare. Many research studies have shown
that a large portion of Latinas prefer not receive welfare (Maynard and Rangarajan 199). One of the
influential factors possibly affecting this trend is the relatively high personal involvement and financial
support of Latino fathers (Erickson 82). Welfare benefits are also restricted in terms of age and legal
status. Individuals must be 18 or older in order to receive welfare and must be a citizen or legal resident
of the country
69 (“Welfare Information”). This is extremely pertinent to the Latino community as they
compose 76% of the nation’s undocumented immigrant population
70 (“Portrait of Unauthorized
Immigrants” i). Therefore non-legal residents, who already experience educational and vocational
limitations in the U.S., are further disadvantaged financially by not being able to receive government
assistance. Considering all the compiling factors, it is quite evident that bearing a child, however young
the mother may be, becomes a more and more appealing option to many Latinas a path toward
meaning and purpose. This is not to say that teenage Latinas necessarily seek after the chance to be a
mother, but it does indicate less of a negative consequence for those that happen to get pregnant. Edin
and Kefala’s study revealed that although most Puerto Rican women expressed awareness that
unprotected sex could lead to pregnancy, this population was most likely
71 to identify their pregnancy as
an “accident” while admitting to not taking any active preventative measure (37-8). One young mother

69 Undocumented immigrants are eligible to receive benefits from the government-based program “WIC” (created
to provide for the nutritional needs of Women, Infants, and Children) (Erickson 76-77).
70 Undocumented immigrants account for approximately 4% of the total U.S. population according to a 2008 U.S.
Census Bureau estimate but many sources believe this is a drastic underestimation (Portrait of Unauthorized
Immigrants i).
71 as opposed to the African American and White participants
shares her thought process before getting pregnant, saying, “If I get pregnant, I get pregnant... It wasn’t like oh my God if I get pregnant I’m dead. If I did, I did” (38-9). Although “Latino norms may make adolescent pregnancy more tolerable” (Erickson 21), the societal repercussions for the lower class are not as substantial as they are for the middle class and therefore make adolescent childbearing more acceptable.

This chapter reveals that Latino cultural traditions are not solely responsible for the high adolescent pregnancy rate as some may contend. Various physicians concurred that there is a cultural clash in the U.S. movement to postpone pregnancy because it inherently contradicts Hispanic cultural traditions (“Practitioners’ Perspectives” 147). Several years prior to this assertion, Erickson had refuted this assertion by boldly challenging those that blame cultural values, questioning rhetorically “What is Latino about... living in perpetual poverty?” (163) and concluding that “Everything Latino can be achieved without teen pregnancy” (164). In other words, everything about the Latino culture and identity can be attained without adolescent motherhood.

Although cultural values to a certain extent may influence the approval of young motherhood, it is in no way responsible for the U.S. societal factors that severely limit the Latina’s alternative meaning-making opportunities. As apparent in the information examined in this chapter, it is within the context of their disadvantaged economic and educational situation that the majority of Latinas are forced to accept young Motherhood. Edin and Kefalas assert that “As long as they have so few other ways to establish a sense of self-worth and meaning, early childbearing among young women in precarious economic conditions is likely to continue” (219). In her publication Erickson contends that access to educational resources and jobs that pay a livable wage, an end to racial discrimination, access to health care and affordable, high quality child care, paid parental leave, and job security are necessary actions that must be taken in order to discontinue the cycle of adolescent pregnancy (160). These factors, as
well as other important influences over the teenage pregnancy rate, will be explored in the concluding chapter of this investigation.
CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSIONS

One overarching conclusion that can be drawn from the above chapters is that the contributing factors to the high Latina teen pregnancy are multiple and complex. While investigating the various contributing factors to the poor academic achievement of many Latinos, Gándara and Contreras contend that “the situation is far more complex than a simple cause-effect model” (28). The same complexity applies to adolescent Latina pregnancy as a variety of elements influence the high rate. Both cultural values and societal factors play a significant role in perpetuating the cycle of adolescent motherhood. For Latina women to be “feminine”, they are expected to act a certain way, submissive and reticent, while the man, according to the machista outline, is allotted the power and control. The female is also supposed to look a certain way, projecting a womanly figure (hourglass body), while refraining from sexual activity until marriage. Virginity, being an indicator of not just the girl’s reputation, but her family’s worth, is considered an important aspect to protect. Motherhood is the third cultural value that clearly plays a pivotal role in teen pregnancy as it provides an arena for Latinas to establish worth and comply with traditional norms. While it is clear that cultural beliefs are influential over the teen pregnancy rate, one certainly cannot overlook the power of societal limitations. The U.S. societal constraints and vulnerability of residing within el entre place these young women in such a fragile situation that as other educational and economic opportunities appear more distant, motherhood becomes an increasingly palatable option. Some might question whether or not this phenomenon even needs a ‘solution’ as cultural differences are to blame. This investigation aligns with the affirmation by Russell and Lee that “regardless of whether acculturation to U.S. values is universally valued, we suggest that the ability of young people to make the best choices for themselves and futures should be” (“Practitioners’ Perspectives” 148). In another publication Russell and Lee state their own values which also echo the stance of this study, saying, “While we believe that teen pregnancy and
parenthood do not automatically lead to negative outcomes, we do believe that early parenthood limits life options for young parents and their children” (“Latina Adolescent Motherhood” 222). Erickson also confirms that “However happy a child may make a family or how important it may be in a given culture, it still puts the young mother at a socioeconomic disadvantage” (156). In agreement with the preceding perspectives, the current chapter intends to explore the several areas in need of attention and improvement in order to ameliorate the bleak situation facing the country’s Latina youth.

The inevitable question to be confronted is whether cultural or societal factors have more weight in the complex equation of adolescent motherhood. The previous chapter illuminates the considerable disadvantage that poor and/or undocumented Latinas have in achieving economic and academic success. With these highly visible limitations in place, cultural values further encourage young Latinas to put their efforts into motherhood, an accessible goal they know they can accomplish. The dearth of occupational and educational opportunities seems to be the main culprit of teen pregnancy as, regardless of the girl’s personal adherence to cultural values, her alternative options are non-existent and motherhood thus appears increasingly advantageous. As previously mentioned Erickson has suggested changes that need to be implemented before any real changes will occur to the Latino teen pregnancy rate. She confirms that contraception is the not the issue to tackle, but rather social and economic needs, access to medical care, employment and education opportunities, and racism must all be confronted first and foremost (38, 163). After studying a short term program initiated by a hospital in East Los Angeles, she found that “short term programs are not likely going to impact overall change until more opportunities are made available to these women” (154).

While cultural values are not solely responsible for Latina teen pregnancy, they do need to be incorporated into institutionalized programs working with young women. Erickson further concludes from her investigation that “The current types of intervention programs—targeted to individual behavior change, based on middle-class life script norms, institution based and short-term—cannot be
expected to have more than a limited impact on teenage childbearing” (163). She is not alone in her evaluation. In fact, there is a consensus amongst many researchers that several current pregnancy prevention programs are not meeting the needs of young Latinas. Russell and Lee found many shortcomings in these programs, asserting, “Few prevention programs have been developed specifically for Hispanic populations with culturally sensitive programs” and “There is a clear necessity for teenage pregnancy prevention and intervention efforts that are grounded in the unique needs and experiences of Hispanic youth” (“Practitioners’ Perspectives” 142). Erickson clarifies the specific aspects that need to be considered, including “teens’ motivations regarding sexual intimacy, pregnancy, marriage, love, motherhood, and contraceptive use” (163). The University of Arizona, after having noticed the recent increase in statewide Hispanic teen motherhood, launched an investigation into the cultural sensitivity skills that increase communication and better the relationship between practitioners and patients. The study identified that “The ability to understand and speak Spanish, knowledge of important Latino cultural values (with a focus on the strengths of Latino youth and families), a nonjudgmental attitude and openness to the ideas and decisions of teenagers, a focus on providing options and resources, and the ability to connect to and care for young people, and to communicate with their families” were all critical steps in serving the needs of young Latinas (Van Campen and Russell 2). Although the social injustices identified by Erickson cannot be solved overnight, a broader understanding of and an openness to confront such inequalities can help improve the current situation. This applies not only to clinics and physicians, but to all individuals that interact with Latina youth.

Educators, social workers, counselors, employers, school administrators, coaches, and pastors are all examples of individuals that potentially influence the self-identity and behavioral choices of these young women. Considering that the Latina population continues to grow considerably each year, it is obvious that these professionals not only have the option, but obligation, to learn more about the cultural values that shape the Latina experience in order to better serve their needs. Cultural values,
although undoubtedly influential, are not the only aspects that need to be understood by individuals interacting with teen Latinas.

Individual differences, such as nationality, amount of time spent in the U.S., family support, language fluency, parental education, legal status, involvement with the Latino community, economic status, and career and educational aspirations are all individual differences that largely influence the current situation and future available opportunities. For instance, Russell and Lee confirm that the higher the education level of the parents, the more compatible they will be with the goals of pregnancy prevention efforts (145). Additionally, new immigrants will feel more wary about interacting with government employees and people in positions of authority (“Practitioners’ Perspectives” 145), so it is pivotal for these authoritative personnel to appease parental fears and reach out to the Latino community. In relation to the importance of socioeconomic status, Erickson finds in her study that inexpensive health care, child daycare and comfortable and stable living conditions are all elements that many poor young mothers need, but do not have, in order to successfully participate in clinic-led initiatives to confront repeat pregnancies (151). When these individual differences are better understood and addressed by those academically involved with Latinas, high school graduation and college enrollment may become more realistic goals. At the same time, Latinos must not automatically be identified as destined for academic failure. Recent research has revealed that “Low-income and minority students are less likely to gain access to college preparatory, honors, and Advanced Placement classes than other students, and they are more likely than nonminority students to be placed in the low-non-college-bound track, independent of their actual academic achievement” (Gándara and Contreras 31). Teachers can better educate, counselors can more effectively advise, and administrators can implement culturally-sensitive incentive programs to boost Latina achievement when cultural and individual differences are taken into account.
Conducting cultural seminars for all professional personnel working with Latinas would certainly require time, energy, and money. This may be an insurmountable challenge for some school districts, health clinics, and social work organizations that most likely are currently experiencing financial hardships and overworked staff members. Although there may not be sufficient resources to include an entire day or session of cultural sensitivity in the training window, there are simpler, more easily accessible options available to reach the final goal. At a minimum, these individuals, especially those dealing with a considerable population of Latino youth, should be required to read and respond to research articles dealing with cultural differences. Amplifying one’s understanding of the vast diversity amongst Latinos, the unique situation facing this demographic, and the cultural values that may influence their thinking is a key ingredient to effectively serving these minority adolescents. One essential misassumption that was discovered during the qualitative research of this study is that which concerns the relationship between academic failure and teen pregnancy. The ESL teacher stated that many times after a student drops out, word travels through the grapevine that she is pregnant. She then communicated that this explains the student’s decision to withdraw from school (Smith). However, this teacher, joined by 100% of the surveyed teen Latinas (question 8), assumed that pregnancy is the cause of the dropping-out, not the result. As examined in the previous chapter, several researchers have actually found the inverse relationship to be true due to the lack of opportunities following academic failure. This misinformation reveals the crucial need to update and inform both educators and the Latino community to better meet the needs of adolescents. A continual effort to educate and update these individuals will not only better equip and prepare them for handling cultural differences, but also encourage Latina youth to become more aware of the available resources and opportunities.

---

72 Recent publications by the PEW Hispanic Center and other articles such as Van Campen and Russell (2009) and Russell and Lee’s “Practitioners’ Perspectives” (2004) would be solid references in any cultural sensitivity initiative.

73 None of the surveyed Latinas are themselves teen mothers so their responses are either due to observation of the people around them or speculation of what they think is the cause/effect. The reason for their unified opinions is not clear, but it nonetheless is important to note that their responses largely contrast with most sociological findings.
The more enlightened the educators are about the specifics of potential conflicts and constraints, the more informed and educated Latina youth will be in making informed decisions. There is an urgent need to connect with young Latinas on a variety of levels. As evident in the motherhood chapter, many Latino parents are not talking with their children about sexual matters. The qualitative research similarly revealed that the few participants that had spoken with their parents about sex were merely advised to “take care of themselves” and be careful about getting pregnant (Question 10). A more open, thorough communication line must exist between the generations in order to educate the girls on previously taboo topics such as intercourse, contraception, and the emotional implications. An effort needs to be made by all individuals that interact with the Latino community to break the silence that exists between parents and children. The NCPUP has found in several studies that “teens consistently say that parents most influence their decisions about sex (“Ten Headlines”). Yet many Latinas report receiving contradictory signals from their parents, being advised to both refrain from sex and take the necessary steps to prevent pregnancy. Regardless of their personal beliefs on the topic of pre-marital sex, it is pivotal that parents establish open lines of communication with their children, both male and female.

Sex is clearly not the only subject matter on which Latinas need to be better informed. As apparent in the previous chapter, limited economic and educational opportunities weigh in as considerable contributors to the high adolescent pregnancy rate. After facilitating focus groups with sixty ninth-grade Latina students from Northern California, Yvette Flores finds several different steps that must be taken in order to ameliorate the high teen pregnancy rate. She concludes that there needs to be “exposure to college and career planning resources”, “programs to bridge cultural and generational gaps between parents and offspring”, increased parental involvement, the equipping of these young ladies with skills to communicate effectively with male partners, and mentoring programs to connect young and professional Latinas (208-10). These suggestions can appear overwhelming and
perhaps unrealistic in the face of budget crises and an ever-growing Latino population. However, the sooner these efforts are initiated, the sooner Latinas will have increased opportunities for future planning.

The more personally connected educators and administrators are with their Latina students, the more active a role they can plan in the adolescent’s career and college-planning process. First and foremost it would be their responsibility to tap into the pupil’s future aspirations and supply any relevant academic information in order to increase the student’s awareness of the required time and effort. This would be a major victory considering the actual Latino academic success rates fall extremely lower than the stated educational aspirations. Information on educational tracks is notably insufficient as highlighted by Rivera and Gallimore. They found that there is a sizeable gap between career aspirations and educational requirements (117) and that Latina girls too often do not have the necessary access to college preparatory courses (134). In fact, the few participants on a four year college track were those least likely to report having received encouragement from the Latino community (due to a lack of experience and knowledge on the topic) (118). The consequence of this communal ignorance will be a continuance of the cycle of poverty since research has continually proven that college degree holders reap the highest financial rewards (Gándara and Contreras 1). The individuals that are experts in the field of college and career planning must reach out to young Latinas, as well as the Latino community, in order to increase awareness and the potential academic success rate of this population. Educational institutions, including those as early as elementary schools, need to be aware of the unique needs and values of the entire student body in order to more effectively inform and encourage their students. They also must remain intensely up to date on political efforts, such as the DREAM Act, that may directly influence the Latina’s access to higher education. Increasing parent involvement, bridging the cultural and generational gaps, and improving communication within romantic relationships are all
additional responsibilities that the school system could aim to achieve. These goals could also be adopted by religious institutions that serve Latino individuals.

As apparent in the high documentation of religious affiliation amongst Latinos, places of worship would be another possible area to implement the strategies listed by Yvette Flores. Her last suggestion is one that could very feasibly be espoused by the church. Although facilitating interaction between young and professional Latinas would certainly be effective, surely uniting any two Latinas, regardless of age, would enable a more positive self-image and stronger connection between the teen and the larger Latino community. In recent months, I’ve had the pleasure of attending a small Spanish-speaking church in Baton Rouge. There exists at this church a rather remarkable opportunity for young girls to connect with each other and discuss the relevant struggles they experience as Latinas. Elisa initiated the program “DIVAS de Dios” which incorporates biblical principles and encourages discussion of relevant topics such as body-image, identity, language, and academic obstacles. She started the program because she felt a need to connect with other Latinas and help mentor younger girls that might also be going through the same challenges she has gone through. Her method of creating a small group (including around 7 girls on average) is an ideal model for other churches, school clubs, and social work agencies to implement in attempting to serve young Latinas. Inviting Latina professionals and elders as guest speakers would enable these young ladies to have a positive role model with whom they may personally identify. This small-group format would also be favorable to reading and discussing literature produced by other Latinas, such as Mora, Anzaldúa, Santiago, Alvarez, and Serros, to provide these young ladies with literature and authors they understand. Not only might they personally be able to relate with their works, but also they might better understand their own identity, as evidenced in the Julia Alvarez’s testimony in Latina Self Portraits (22). While many of the publications by these writers

---

74 Refer to SHERO program described by Harper et al (142) for more information
75 The incorporation of Puerto Rican reading materials proved successful in facilitating discussion around the girls’ identity and culture in Reyes’s study (165-6).
are progressive and encourage the confrontation of established, patriarchal ideals, these authors are rarely introduced prior to university courses. As highlighted by Skar, the re-defining of traditional female figures, such as *La Malinche, La Virgen María*, and *La Llorona*, remains a pivotal yet relatively unexplored realm for the Latina feminist movement. Therefore the high drop-out rate reduces the likelihood that the average Latina will become familiar with Latina authors and further redefine the traditional significance of these figures.

Various online resources\(^7^6\) are available that could potentially be utilized in order to enable girls to find companionship and connect with other young Latinas across the country in an ever-increasingly technologically-based society. In their publication “Getting Connected: The Expanding Use of Technology among Latina Girls”, Fairlie and London expressed an apparent optimism about the increase in internet access and usage amongst the Latino population which nearly tripled between 1998 (11\%) and 2001 (32\%) (168). The optimism of these researchers proved to be valid as in 2009 Livingston found that an overall among of 65\% of Latinos were connected to the internet. However, an important discovery has recently been made by the PEW Hispanic Center. According to Gretchen Livingston, the Senior Researcher at PEW Hispanic, a drastic difference exists between the internet usage of U.S. native-born and foreign-born Latinos. Livingston’s study revealed that while 85\% of native-born Latinos are inclined to use the World Wide Web, roughly 51\% of foreign-born Latinos are connecting to cyberspace (5). This places the foreign-born population in an even more disadvantaged position as they are potentially disconnected from information about programs and services that are available to non-native individuals. This also widens the cultural and linguistic gap between native and foreign-born Latinos in the U.S. Educational and religious locations, as well as broadcasting modems (TV, radio) may be some of the only points of entry to the unauthorized Latino population (further reinforcing the need to culturally...

---

\(^7^6\) The website “Soy Latina” was created with the purpose of demonstrating the forum-style layout that could be helpful in supplying a space for Latinas to connect and help each other in areas related to their unique experiences. (http://www.wix.com/mbateman07/soylatina)
educate the professionals in these establishments). The challenges associated with reaching the foreign-born Latinos presents a major obstacle in the confrontation of the adolescent pregnancy rate. Due to their potential lack of English skills and fear of government-run agencies (Gándara and Contreras 66), it is absolutely necessary that efforts be made by Spanish speakers, both Latino and non-Latino, to reach out and serve the needs of this potentially withdrawn and/or fearful population.

Perhaps one of the most revealing findings of the qualitative research conducted in this investigation is the hesitancy of many undocumented immigrants to participate in institutionalized programs and surveys. While over a hundred surveys were distributed to Spanish-speaking, female, high school-aged students at Belaire High, less than ten were completed. While the students certainly cannot be forced to participate, their refusal to answer questions likely indicates a fear of sharing personal accounts with unknown individuals. Undoubtedly, the timing of the survey did not support participation as the Arizona controversy had recently spiked national attention on undocumented immigrants. This reluctance to participate in organized institutional efforts certainly makes them more difficult to be reached and is an obstacle that needs to be taken into consideration by any individual attempting to work with Latinos. Although some protests may arise from personal disagreements with serving foreign-born Latinos (particularly undocumented immigrants), the gap needs to be bridged in order to more effectively meet the needs of the country as a whole.

Different tactics have been suggested with the transformation and betterment of the current situation facing young Latinos in the U.S. Multiple authors suggest that the Latino culture and community is one such place in which changes need to occur. Anzaldúa (106) and Ayala (42) both suggest an erasure of the *puta/virgen* dichotomy that socially prohibits Latinas from discussing and exploring their sexuality. Anzaldúa also attests that only after inner changes happen can larger, social changes be possible (109). Others suggest that community support from fellow Latinos goes a long way.

---

77 A law (sb1070) was proposed that would allow police officers to investigate the status of those the suspect to be in the country illegally.
in allowing adolescents to maintain tradition while navigating the surrounding, often-contradictory, cultural and linguistic borderlands (Once Upon a Quinceañera 25, Portes 51). Anzaldúa also highlights the importance of the non-Latino population in the pursuit of social equality. She confirms, “We need to allow whites to be our allies; through our literature, art, corridos, and folktales we must share our history with them... to eliminate racial fears and ignorances” (107). She also calls for an admission of guilt, affirming,

We need to say to the white society: We need you to accept that Chicanos are different, to acknowledge your rejection and negation of us. We need you to own the fact that you looked upon us as less than human, that you stole our lands, our personhood, our self-respect.... you’d rather forget your brutish acts.... To say that you are afraid of us, that to put distance between us, you wear the mask of contempt. Admit that Mexico is your double, that she exists in the shadow of this country, that we are irrevocably tied to her. Gringo, accept the doppelganger78 in your psyche. By taking back your collective shadow the intra-cultural split will heal. And finally, tell us what you need from us. (107-8)

While Anzaldúa’s hopes of obtaining an apology or admission of guilt may never be fulfilled, her point is valid in that expanding one’s knowledge and understanding of the historical and personal journey of different ethnic categories will improve their ability to serve and connect with a diversity of individuals. Indisputably some people will never strip themselves of the racism and bigotry that has clouded their perspective, but for those individuals that work in social or educational institutions that interact with Latinos, an education and compassion for others’ needs is a necessity. As Gloria Anzaldúa succinctly concludes, “We need to know the history of their struggle and they need to know ours” (108). “No hay más que cambiar79” (Anzaldúa 71).

One last element to be considered in this study is the status of Latina youth. More specifically, should the current situation that confronts young Latinas, and that which will face future generations, be considered a ‘crisis’? El Diario/La Prensa series warns, “Latina girls are in a crisis, the time to help is now” and “if we deny it and ignore it, we will doom them with our complacency” (qtd. in Once Upon a

78 ghostly counterpart of a living person
79 “There is no other option, but to change”
Quinceañera 242). To the contrary, Denner and Guzmán’s entire anthology, Latina Girls (2006) was published with the following purpose: “To point out that although Latina girls may face many challenges related to oppression, race/ethnicity, gender stereotyping, and educational opportunities, most are leading happy and productive lives” (236). Both editors felt the need to capture the positive side of Latinas that often gets forgotten and swept aside in light of the high pregnancy and drop-out rates. So the glaringly obvious question becomes, are ‘Latinas in crisis’ or are they ‘doing just fine’? The answer is yes. Although Latinas in general, especially foreign-born, are confronted by a multitude of obstacles and inequalities, they continue to lead productive and positive lives. Unfortunately, while Latinas are remaining resilient and strong in overcoming many obstacles, the bottom line is that they nonetheless have obstacles to overcome. The undeniable fact remains that there still remain several limitations that compound with traditional Latino values to illuminate adolescent motherhood as a propitious option. Until the deficit of available economic and educational opportunities for young Latinas is confronted, the cyclical phenomenon of teen motherhood will continue to plague the lower economic sector of this population.

7.1 Summary of Future Efforts

As apparent in the above findings, many larger, more comprehensive actions will need to be taken before any smaller, Latina-focused clinical programs will prove effective. Certainly Erickson’s stated sociological changes needed to be enacted in order to relieve the educational and economical disadvantages that currently confront minority populations. These changes are not easy as related topics, such as providing aid to undocumented immigrants, continue to remain controversial and heavily debated throughout the nation. However, one area that can easily be implemented and researched for efficacy is education. Individuals that work with Latinas, whether it be in an educational, medical, religious venue (or other), need to be educated and up-to-date on current events and happenings with the Latina population. Sensitivity training would also be advantageous in enabling professionals to
interact with and advise young Latinas while simultaneously remaining cognizant of potential ideological and cultural differences. Latino literature should be more heavily emphasized in educational settings prior to university courses. Identifying with the experiences of Latina authors, such as Santiago, Moraga, Anzaldúa, Alvarez, Serros, and Mora, might potentially reduce their confusion and enhance positive identity-formation. Also, programs that emphasize the importance of and facilitate communication between Latino parents and children will be positive steps towards confronting the silence that currently exists. Parents talking about sex, not just pregnancy, is something that needs to take place in order to confront the high teen pregnancy rate (Yvette Flores 207). Along the lines of communication, Latinas should also be more equipped with skills on how to effectively express their personal desires and opinions in romantic relationships. Challenging the traditionally established machista hierarchy is something in which Latina girls have expressed interest, but are uninformed on how to do so (Yvette Flores 209). Lastly there needs to be an emphasis on the establishment of programs that connect Latinas with other Latinas. Connecting adolescent Latinas with a mentor that experienced similar situations and challenges during their teen years will assist them in their quest to make sense of the conflicting cultural values by which they are surrounded. Lastly, research needs to be done in regards to both the implementation and effectiveness of the previously mentioned programs. Related issues, such as limited technological access of undocumented immigrants and linguistic barriers of non-native English speakers, similarly merit attention. Considering the high pregnancy rate and the fact that these young ladies compose the fastest-growing minority sector in the U.S., there indubitably is a need for increased attention and further research in the area of Latina teen motherhood.
REFERENCES


García, Elisa. High school student, Baton Rouge High School. Personal Interview. 11 Sep. 2010


129


APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORMS

Parent Consent Forms
1. **Project Title:** Investigation of the High Pregnancy Rate Amongst Adolescent Hispanic Females in the United States.

2. **Performance Site:** church, participant’s house

3. **Investigators:** The following investigators are available for questions about this study, M-F, 8:00 a.m. - 4:30p.m.  
   - Mary Krom: 225-454-9928 (mbatem1@tigers.lsu.edu)  
   - Dr. Andrea Morris: 225-485-5768 (aemorris@lsu.edu)

4. **Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this research project is to identify the different potential factors that contribute to the large quantity of pregnancies amongst young Hispanic females. Included in the investigation are considerations of a variety of societal and cultural elements that may be significant to teen pregnancy.

5. **Inclusion Criteria:** Female Hispanic students between the ages of 13 and 20 who are currently enrolled at Belaire High School in Baton Rouge, LA. The study will also investigate the opinions and observations of various adults that interact with this specific population on a daily basis (teachers, parents, pastors).

6. **Description of the Study:** The study will be conducted through confidential questionnaires and/or personal interviews with the researcher. In order to avoid incorrect citation, an audio-recording device will be used throughout the interviews. The investigator will interview the subject at least once about a variety of topics including geographical background, language background (Spanish vs. English), educational experience, future ambitions and the experiences of pregnancy within their social and/or familial network.

7. **Benefits:** The main goal of this study is to increase the current understanding of adolescent pregnancy and introduce potential ideas and/or programs that will encourage young female Hispanics to consider all their future options. The research therefore will potentially inform the content and methods of pregnancy prevention programs for Latina youth. Additionally the investigator agrees to provide participants with certain resources related to academic achievement if needed.

8. **Risks:** The only involved risk is the potential discomfort of the subject during the interview in regards to personal information.

9. **Right to Refuse:** Participation is voluntary and subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study and/or interview at any time. Although the information will be kept confidential, the subject may choose to stop the interview at any point in time.

10. **Privacy:** Results of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.
11. Financial Information: There is no cost for participation in the study.

12. Signatures:

The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. If I have questions about subjects' rights or other concerns, I can contact Robert C. Mathews, Institutional Review Board,(225) 578-8692, mailto:irb@lsu.edu, www.lsu.edu/irb. I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the investigator's obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.

Parent's Signature:_________________________ Date:____________________

Parent’s Signature:_________________________ Date:____________________

The parent/guardian has indicated to me that he/she is unable to read. I certify that I have read this consent to the parent/guardian and explained that by completing the signature line above he/she has given permission for the child to participate in the study.

Signature of Reader:_________________________ Date:____________________

_________________________________________
Minor Assent Form

I,_________________________________, agree to be in a study to reveal the different factors and experiences I or my friends and/or family members have had with teenage pregnancy. I will have to meet with the investigator at least two different times in a location agreed upon by both the investigator and myself. I will agree to answer all questions to the best of my ability and will always have the option to not answer a question. I understand that my answers will be audio-recorded but will remain confidential.

Minor’s Signature:_____________________________ Age:______ Date:__________________
Witness* ___________________________________ Date:__________________

* (N.B. Witness must be present for the assent process, not just the signature by the minor.)
Consentimiento de los padres

1. **Título del estudio**: Investigación del índice del embarazo entre las adolescentes hispanas en los Estados Unidos.

2. **Sitio**: La iglesia, casa de los participantes

3. **Investigadoras**: Las siguientes investigadoras pueden responder a las preguntas del estudio durante las horas:
   - M-F, 8:00 a.m. - 4:30p.m.
   - Mary Krom: 225-454-9928 (mbatem1@tigers.lsu.edu)
   - Dra. Andrea Morris: 225-485-5768 (aemorris@lsu.edu)

4. **El propósito del estudio**: El estudio intenta identificar los factores diferentes que contribuyen a la alta cantidad de embarazos entre las jóvenes hispanas.

5. **Participantes**: Estudiantes hispanas entre las edades de 13 y 20 años que asisten la escuela Belaire High en Baton Rouge, LA. Además se incluirán las observaciones y opiniones de algunos adultos que diariamente entran en contacto con esta población específica (maestros, padres, pastores, etc).

6. **Descripción de la investigación**: El estudio tomará forma de cuestionarios y/o entrevistas personales y confidenciales entre la estudiante y la investigadora. Para evitar las equivocaciones, la investigadora grabará la entrevista. Habrá por lo menos una entrevista en el lugar preferido de la participante. La entrevista servirá para registrar algunos datos biográficos de la participante (como lugar de origen, idioma, edad), y también información sobre la educación, los planes del futuro y el tema del embarazo.

7. **Beneficios**: El meta principal es aumentar el conocimiento del embarazo adolescente e introducir ideas y/o programas para asegurar un futuro abierto para las latinas. Las participantes beneficiarán de considerar el tema del embarazo y cómo afecta a las jóvenes de su comunidad. Adicionalmente, la investigadora ayudará a la participante con sus estudios académicos si es necesario.

8. **Riesgos**: El único riesgo del estudio es la incomodidad de la participante durante la entrevista con respecto a la información personal.

9. **Derecho de terminar**: La participación es voluntaria y los entrevistados siempre tienen el derecho de retirarse del estudio y/o la entrevista. Aunque toda la información se mantendrá confidencial, la participante puede terminar la entrevista en cualquier momento.

10. **Privacidad**: Se mantendrá la confidencialidad de cualquier información relacionada con el presente estudio que pudiera desvelar su identidad o la de su hijo y sólo se haría pública con su permiso o por mandato legal.

11. **Información financiera**: Esta investigación no costará nada para la participante.

12. **Firma:**
Este estudio fue discutido conmigo y tengo toda la información necesaria para entenderlo. Puedo dirigir mis preguntas adicionales con respecto al estudio a las investigadoras. Si tengo preguntas sobre los derechos de la participante o tengo otra cuestión, puedo ponerme en contacto con Robert C. Mathews, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692, irb@lsu.edu, www.lsu.edu/irb. Acepto participar en este estudio y reconozco la obligación de la instructora de darme una copia firmada de este formulario de consentimiento.

Firma del padre (tutor legal):________________________________ Fecha:_________________

Firma de la madre (tutor legal): ______________________________ Fecha: ________________

El padre/guardián me indicó que él/ella no puede leer. Certifico que yo he leído este formulario de consentimiento al padre/guardián y expliqué que al firmar el espacio arriba él/ella ha permitido la participación de su hija en el estudio.

Firma del (de la) lector(a):____________________________ Fecha:____________________
Formulario del (de la) menor

Yo _________________________, acepto participar en el estudio para hablar sobre algunos factores que contribuyen al embarazo y mis experiencias y/o las experiencias de mis amigos y/o familiares con el embarazo. Debo reunirme con la investigadora por lo menos una vez afuera de la escuela en mi lugar preferido. Intentaré responder a todas las preguntas, pero a la vez entiendo que puedo terminar la entrevista si quiero. Entiendo que todas mis respuestas serán audio-grabadas pero se mantendrán confidenciales. También entiendo que la investigadora me proveerá con ayuda de mis tareas si la necesito.

Firma del (de la menor):_____________________________ Edad:______ Fecha:__________________
Testigo* ___________________________________ Fecha:__________________

* (El (la) testigo debe estar presente durante todo el proceso de consentimiento del (de la) menor, no sólo el momento de firmar)
APPENDIX B: QUESTIONNAIRES

Note: I ask that you respond to as many questions as possible. Each response that you write will help me better understand the current situation of Hispanics in the U.S. It’s important to remember that ALL of the information is completely confidential and your name will never be published. Thanks so much!

1. Which language do you speak in your house normally? ______________________________
2. Age _____
3. Where were you born? __________________________
4. Nationality __________________________
5. List all the places where you have lived and how long you were in each place:
   a) In the United States:
   b) Outside of the U.S.: 

6. ¿Where are your parents from? _______________________ ¿Grandparents?

7. Do you know any Spanish speaking individual (friend/family member) that lives in the U.S. and has gone through or is currently going through a pregnancy at a young age? ____ If the answer is yes, please complete the following chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The person’s relationship to you</th>
<th>1.</th>
<th>2.</th>
<th>3.</th>
<th>4.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did the person get pregnant on purpose?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Her age (at the time of pregnancy)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where was she born?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many pregnancies did she have before the age of 18?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did she decide to keep the baby? If not, what did she decide to do?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did she drop out because of the pregnancy?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was her parent’s reaction? (Positive or Negative?)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8. In your opinion, which normally comes first: dropping out of school and THEN getting pregnant or getting pregnant and THEN dropping out?
9. Have you personally experienced a pregnancy?
10. Have your parents spoken to you about sex? _______ (If “yes”, what do/did they say?)_________

11. When did your mother have her first baby (at what age)? _______
12. How many children does she (your mother) have? ________
13. What are the different modes of birth control that you’re aware of?
14. Where did you learn about each method? Who taught you?
15. If you wanted some, to which methods would you have access?
16. If you are currently in a sexual relationship, which method do you use (if any)? Why?
17. a. In the future, how many children would you like to have?
   b. At what age would you like to start having children?
18. a. Are you interested in getting married? ____________
   b. What’s the ideal marriage to get married? ____________
   c. Do you believe it is important to be a virgin when you get married? ____________
19. In your opinion, how much do your parents value each of the following things for you in your life? On a scale from 1 to 10, write a number for each of the following (10 = really important, 1 = not important at all):
   _____ Being a mother _____ Being a wife _____ Staying a virgin until married _____ Focusing on education _____ Having a career
20. How much do you value each of the following things for you in your life? On a scale from 1 to 10, write a number for each of the following (10 = really important, 1 = not important at all):
   _____ Being a mother _____ Being a wife _____ Staying a virgin until married _____ Focusing on education _____ Having a career
21. When you hear the word “feminine”, what do you think about? (Write at least 3 words):
22. Is it important to you to graduate high school?
23. How do your teachers treat you?
24. Do you hope to go to college after high school? _____ (if you said “no”, what are your reasons?)

25. Is there anything else you would like to include or say with respect to Latina adolescent pregnancy?

Thank you so much for your participation, you are helping me SO much!
Nota: Te pido responder a todas las preguntas posibles. Cada respuesta que escribes me ayudará entender mejor la situación de las hispanohablantes en este país. Es importante recordar que TODA la información es completamente confidencial y tu nombre nunca será publicado. ¡Mil gracias!

1. ¿Cuál lengua hablas en tu casa? _____________________________________________
2. ¿Cuántos años tienes? _____
3. ¿Dónde naciste? __________________________
4. ¿Cuál es tu nacionalidad? __________________________
5. Escribe todos los lugares donde has vivido y por cuánto tiempo:
   a) En los EE.UU.: __________________________________________________________________
   b) Fuera de EE.UU.: __________________________________________________________________
6. ¿De dónde son tus padres? _______________________ ¿Abuelos? __________________________________________________________________
7. ¿Conoces a una latina joven (amiga/familiar) que vive en los estados unidos y ha estado embarazada?  ___
   Si la respuesta es sí, por favor complete el siguiente gráfico:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relación de la persona a ti</th>
<th>1.</th>
<th>2.</th>
<th>3.</th>
<th>4.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>¿Fue un embarazo planificado?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Su edad (al tiempo del embarazo)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El país de origen/ la nacionalidad</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿Cuántos embarazos antes de la edad 18?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿Decidió criar al bebé? (si no, que eligió hacer)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿Abandonó sus estudios por causa del embarazo?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reacción de sus padres (¿Positiva o negativa?)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8. En tu opinión, ¿cuál normalmente ocurre primero: abandonar la escuela y DESPUÉS quedar embarazada o quedar embarazada y ENTONCES abandonar la escuela?
9. ¿Has experimentado personalmente un embarazo?
10. ¿Tus padres han hablado contigo del sexo? _______ (si escribiste “sí”, ¿Qué dicen/dijeron?) ____________________________________________
11. ¿Cuándo tuvo su primer bebé tu mamá (a qué edad)? _______
12. ¿Cuántos hijos tiene ella? _______
13. ¿Cuáles son los métodos diferentes de prevenir el embarazo?
14. ¿Dónde aprendiste de cada método?
15. ¿A cuáles métodos tienes acceso tú?
16. Si tienes una relación sexual, ¿cuál es tu método preferido de prevenir el embarazo? ¿Por qué?
17. a. En el futuro, ¿cuántos hijos quieres tener?
   b. ¿A qué edad te gustaría ser madre?
18. a. ¿Algún día quisieras casarte? ____________
   b. ¿La edad preferida de casarte? ____________
   c. ¿Crees que la virginidad sea importante al casarte? ____________
19. Que tú sepas, ¿Cuánto valor ponen tus padres en los siguientes elementos cuando piensan en tu futuro? Escribe un número de 1 (poco valor) a 10 (mucha valor):
   ______ ser madre _______ ser esposa _______ conservar la virginidad _______ la educación
   _______ tener carrera
20. ¿Cuánto valor pone tú en los siguientes elementos cuando piensas en tu futuro? Escribe un número de 1 (poco valor) a 10 (mucha valor):
   ______ ser madre _______ ser esposa _______ conservar la virginidad _______ la educación
   _______ tener carrera
22. ¿Tienes ganas de graduarte de la escuela secundaria?
23. ¿Cómo te tratan los maestros?
24. ¿Quieres ir a la universidad? _____ (si respondes “no”, ¿cuáles son las razones?) ______
25. ¿Hay algo más que te gustaría añadir o decir con respecto al embarazo adolescente dentro de la población latina?
   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________

¡Muchas gracias por tu participación, me ayudas muchísimo!
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Geographical Background:
Were you born in the U.S.? Parents?
What country is your family from?
When someone asks you “where are you from?” what is your response?
Do you identify with one country/culture in particular? Parents differ?
If not, at what age did you move to the U.S.?
How long have you lived in Louisiana? Other states?
Do you plan to live in the U.S. for a long time? Why?

Language Background:
What language(s) did you speak as a child?
Now, do you consider yourself fluent in both Spanish and English?
Which language do you prefer? Depend (if yes, on what)?
What language do you speak in your home? Does this present any issues over parental expectations?
Do you consider either Spanish / English to be more important than the other?

Education:
Do you have any family members/friends that have dropped out of school? Why?
Did you personally agree with their decision to do this?
How did your (their) family react when this happened?
What emphasis (if any) does your family put on the importance of staying in school?
Has school been hard for you (if yes, in what way?)
Have you yourself ever considered dropping out of school?
What has kept you in school?
Are there any current programs that encourage (Hispanic) teens to stay in school?
Is there anything about the current school system that you believe should be changed?
What are your thoughts about going to college (if any)?

Profession:
What are your future plans for employment?
Will college be necessary in order for you to reach this goal?
How does your family feel about this ambition?

Pregnancy:
What type of sexual education does this school provide?
Have your parents ever spoken to you about sex (if so, what did they say)?
What is their opinion about birth control / abortion?
What is your opinion about birth control / abortion?
Do you have access to birth control if needed?
Do / Would you use birth control?
Do you know of any friends/ family members that have had children under the age of 18?
What was the reaction of your/their family (accepting, upset, etc)?
Why do you think Hispanics have the highest rate of pregnancy?
What do you think should be done to offer more opportunities to young Hispanic girls?
VITA

Mary Bateman Krom is a native of Baltimore, Maryland, but currently resides in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Spanish Secondary Education from Salisbury University, an institute in Maryland, in 2006. During her undergraduate studies, Mrs. Krom studied at the Universidad de Málaga, Spain. While in Spain her passion for the Hispanic culture and language intensified and thus inspired her to become a Spanish educator. After obtaining her Bachelor of Arts, Mary taught Spanish as a foreign language at Yongsan International High School, a primarily English-speaking high school located in Seoul, South Korea. After two years at YISS, Mary decided to pursue her graduate studies in Hispanic Studies at Louisiana State University. Mary’s general research interests reside in the Latino language and culture and the particular challenges that confront this population in the U.S. She will graduate in December 2010 with a Master of Arts in The Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures with a concentration in Hispanic cultural studies.