Ethnic Flexibility and Perceptions of Challenges to Future Opportunities: Latino Students in the Transition from Home to College

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From a multicultural framework, we see that the more flexible the minority person is, the more quickly and easily he or she can adjust to the changing environment (Garza & Gallegos, 1995, p. 9).

Traditionally research has focused on various models to explain the disproportionate levels of academic failure and attrition among Latino students (See Solórzano & Solórzano, 1995 for a review). Research has also shifted to examine their success through the academic pipeline (Gándara, 1993; Valencia, 1991); however, it is important to examine how these academically successful Latino high school students make the transition to college. Colleges and universities have not attained equitable access for underrepresented students, particularly among African American and Latino students. In California, Latinos account for 32% of the 10th grade student population but comprise less than 14% of the college student population (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 1999). Academically successful Latino students are likely to experience different challenges in their transition to college due to the fact that they are underrepresented and may not have the chance to develop many Latino role models, mentors, or peer affiliations. Therefore, ethnic identity is likely to be an important factor in first-year Latino college students' transition from high school to college.

Traditionally ethnicity has been conceptualized as a static entity or category that is an ascribed characteristic of an individual or group. In many studies, ethnicity mainly pertains to the geographical origin or ancestral descent of the minorities of a country or cul-

ture (See Eriksen, 1993). There is the assumption that ethnic groups are isolated, static and homogeneous units in which minority ethnic groups adapt or assimilate into the dominant culture. Similarly, ethnic identity has also been conceptualized as an ascribed characteristic that cannot be chosen in the way that other domains of identity can chosen, such as a political or career identity (Phinney & Rosenthal, 1992). These conceptions of ethnic identity are also found among Chicano/Latino students who define their ethnic identity as a "given" due to inherited characteristics such as birthplace, ancestral descent, or the language they speak.

Phinney and her colleagues define ethnic identity as a process, examining the interaction of both contextual and developmental factors. Phinney and Rosenthal (1992) define ethnic identity as (1) a social identity that is embedded in culture and community, (2) related to one's heritage which cannot be chosen in the way one can choose a profession or political identity, and (3) having salience and importance that may vary among ethnic groups and between minority and majority group members. However, there are several limitations to this definition of ethnic identity. First, it is important to take into account the dynamic processes of ethnic identity development by not only examining how ethnic identity is embedded within a culture or community but how one's meanings, awareness, and understanding of his or her ethnic identity may change when one moves to another culture or community (e.g., as first-year college students move away from home to a new college community). Second, it is important not to examine ethnic heritage as a given, but to examine other components of ethnic identity that may explain the diversity within a particular ethnic group, such as phenotype, language, ethnic origin or generation of immigration, and participation in activity settings, customs and values. And third, it is important to examine within-group variability in salience or importance of ethnic group membership.

Although ethnic identity is related to one's heritage, which cannot be chosen in the way one can choose a profession or political identity, the various components of ethnic identity—and how students conceptualize their ethnic identity at individual, relational, and community levels—contribute to its complexity and dynamic nature. In a review of the literature on ethnic identity, Steen and Bat-Chava (1992) identified nine components of ethnic identity. These

included ethnic labels, clarity of identity, group evaluation, group preference, sense of belonging, ethnic behaviors, other-group orientation, political ideology, and importance. The present study examines ethnic flexibility, or the extent to which Latino youth negotiate their ethnic identity across contexts using four ethnic identity strategies: ethnic labels, language, appearance, and ethnic peer affiliations.

Ethnic Labels

Some research has indicated that Latino students are able to negotiate their ethnic identity using various ethnic labels. Oboler (1995) found that individuals of Latin descent choose among a wide range of ethnic labels (e.g., Hispanic, Chicano, Latino, Mexican American, Salvadoreño, etc.) to identify, affiliate, and represent themselves as a member of various ethnic/cultural groups. In a study of African American and Latino youth, Cooper et al. (1995) found that students used over 100 ethnic labels to identify themselves and that many provided multiple ethnic identities when given the option of describing their ethnicity or ethnicities rather than being asked to "check one box." Other studies indicate Latino students use ethnic labels with varying degrees of flexibility. Stephan (1992) found that mixed-heritage Latino college students varied their use of ethnic labels depending on whether they were filling out a formal application, or whether they were in the context of their family, school, peers, or ethnic communities, with 44% identifying themselves using multiple ethnic labels across contexts. Teranishi (1998) found in a study of single heritage Latino college students in California that 54% identified themselves using multiple ethnic labels across family, school, peers, neighborhood, and community contexts.

Language

Another way Latino students may negotiate their ethnic identity is by using different languages or code-switching across contexts. While some Latino youth are less flexible, only speaking Spanish or English, others are more flexible, code-switching between Spanish

and English across contexts (Gumperz, 1983). Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) suggest that Latino students who are monolingual may receive less social support and attain lower educational and occupational success than those who are bilingual code-switchers. They found that English-dominant students developed an oppositional identity to doing well in school, while Spanish dominant immigrant students were not able successfully to integrate into the school system. On the other hand, those who were highly bilingual were able to acquire more institutional support and had higher grades than those who were English dominant bilingual.

Appearance

A third strategy Latino students may use to negotiate their ethnic identity is appearance. The present study examined students' perceptions of their phenotypical characteristics in terms of whether students rated themselves as looking White or Anglo and have the ability to "pass." Because Latinos are mestizos, or a mix of African, Native American, and Spanish heritage, there is wide variability in terms of their skin color and other phenotypical characteristics. While some Latino students have lighter skin color or non-phenotypically distinct facial features that enable them to "pass" and fit easily into the dominant society, others do not have the option to do so if they have dark skin color or distinct facial features. Researchers have argued that race is a socially constructed process that is interactively created by individuals and by groups through their thinking and behavioral practices across relational settings (King & DaKosta, 1995). The present study examines appearance as an ethnic identity strategy in terms of students' perceived ability to "pass" in and out of the dominant culture.

Ethnic Peer Affiliations

A fourth strategy Latino students may use to negotiate their ethnic identity is their ethnic peer affiliations. Ethier and Deaux (1994) argue that one way that first-year Latino college students maintain a stable ethnic identity as they make the transition from

home to college is by developing a new basis of relational support for their ethnic identity. They found that while first-year Latino college students' ethnic identity was initially supported by their family, stability of their ethnic identity was maintained through their affiliation with Latino peers and organizations in college. Gurin, Hurtado, and Peng (1994) found that Latinos with more flexible ethnic identities (defined as more numerous and differentiated identities) had more diverse ethnic peer affiliations with friends, coworkers, and neighbors who were White, African American, Asian, and American Indian, and fewer affiliations with members of their own ethnic group. Conversely, Latinos who had less flexible identities affiliated themselves primarily with members of their own ethnic group and were less likely to have diverse ethnic affiliations. These findings suggest that Latino college students with more diverse ethnic peer affiliations would have higher ethnic flexibility.

Factors Associated with Ethnic Flexibility

This study explores the various factors that contribute to first-year Latino college students' ethnic flexibility, or the extent to which they negotiate the four ethnic identity strategies (ethnic labels, language, appearance, and ethnic peer affiliations) across contexts. Davidson (1996) found that conceptualizations of ethnicity developed at individual, relational, and community levels for high school students: they developed personal meanings of their ethnicity, an understanding of family and peer orientation to ethnicity, and beliefs about the American economic and opportunity structures. Ethnic flexibility, or the extent to which Latino youth negotiate their ethnic labels, language, appearance, and ethnic peer affiliations across contexts, is likely to vary in relation to students' gender, generation of immigration, parental education, the ethnic composition of their friends, neighborhoods, and high schools attended. The present study explores the extent to which these factors contribute to Latino college students' ethnic flexibility. Since there is little research examining ethnic flexibility, the following predictions are exploratory.

It is expected that gender and parental education will be associated with ethnic flexibility. Waters (1996) examined how gender,

race, and social class were associated with flexibility of Black Caribbean adolescents' ethnic identity. In a study of 212 first-generation Black Caribbean adolescents, she found that girls were more flexible in their ethnic identities than boys. Girls were more likely to develop a bicultural identity because they encountered less stigma than boys. Males had less ethnic flexibility because choosing not to identify with their Black identity threatened their male identity. She also found adolescents with higher socioeconomic backgrounds (SES) were more flexible in their ethnic identity than those with low SES. In the present study, gender and parental education are expected to contribute to the level of ethnic flexibility of Latino students' ethnic identity strategies: females are expected to have higher ethnic flexibility than males, and parental education is expected to be positively associated with ethnic flexibility.

It is also expected that generation of immigration would be associated with ethnic flexibility. In an extensive study by Keefe and Padilla (1987), 626 first-, second- and third-generation Mexican-Americans participated in a survey, in-depth interviews, and/or case studies to examine whether ethnic identity decreased in relation to generation of immigration or whether ethnic identity was maintained across the generations. They found that ethnic and cultural behaviors, awareness, and familiarity with the Latino culture declined across three generations. Similarly, Pease-Alvarez and Hakuta (1996) found a loss of bilingualism among Latinos through the generations. These data suggest that recent immigrants and second generation immigrants would have higher ethnic flexibility than later generations.

There is evidence that more successful Latino students are able to "code-switch" between their Mexican values, beliefs, and language at home and their participation with American mainstream peers and clubs at school (Gibson, 1997; Matute-Bianchi, 1991). Gándara and Osugi (1994) found that Latino students developed friendships with White/Anglo students who helped them learn about college. Matute-Bianchi (1991) found that more successful Mexican American students participated in mainstream clubs and organizations consisting of White/Anglo and Japanese peers. Thus, it is expected that students who develop diverse ethnic peer affiliations will have higher ethnic flexibility than those with primarily Latino peer affiliations.

Ethnic composition of neighborhood and high school attended are also likely to contribute to ethnic flexibility. In a study of African-American, Puerto Rican, Filipino, European American high school students, Rotheram-Borus (1989, 1993) found that students who attended a more ethnically balanced school developed more bicultural identities and those who attended a school where African Americans and Puerto Ricans were the majority and Whites were the minority developed stronger ethnic identities. Therefore, it is predicted that those who grew up in diverse neighborhoods and attended diverse high schools would develop higher ethnic flexibility than those who grew up in primarily Latino neighborhoods and attended primarily Latino high schools.

Ethnic Flexibility and Perceptions of Future Opportunities

To understand how Latino college students negotiate their ethnic identity in relation to their perceptions of opportunity structures, ethnic identity may be defined as an adaptive strategy "developed in an interactive response that is strategically [negotiated] within specific contexts as various groups compete for educational and occupational success in a system of structural inequalities" (Matute-Bianchi, 1996, p.2). Ogbu (1987, 1991) contributes to understanding why Latino students develop different conceptualizations of their ethnic identity and perceptions of barriers to opportunity structures. According to Ogbu (1987), voluntary or immigrant minorities (e.g., some Mexican Americans, Cuban Americans) have moved to the United States or any new society in search of greater economic well-being, opportunities, and political freedom. In contrast, involuntary minorities (e.g., some Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans) or caste-like minorities have been incorporated into the dominant society against their will through slavery, conquest, or colonization, and have lived in the United States through several generations of oppression and discrimination. These youth adapt to the American society by developing an oppositional identity in response to the discrimination they have experienced and the limited opportunities available to them through the American educational system in comparison to their Anglo peers. Involuntary minorities feel that they must reject the mainstream culture and maintain strong ties with

their ethnic group in order not to be labeled as "acting White" and not to betray the people in their minority ethnic group (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

Building upon Ogbu's theory, Matute-Bianchi (1986, 1991) conducted an ethnographic study and found qualitatively different ways that Mexican-descent high school students developed their ethnic identities in relation to their perceptions of opportunity structures. *Mexican-immigrant* students were recent immigrants, spoke primarily Spanish, dressed different from the rest of the students, were considered "unstylish," and had primarily Spanish-speaking peers. *Mexican-oriented* students used the ethnic label of "Mexicano" to identify themselves, primarily spoke Spanish at home and English at school, had a somewhat more "American appearance" (distinguished as "preppie"), and participated in primarily Mexican peer groups and organizations at school. *Mexican American* students did not use any particular ethnic labels to identify themselves, code-switched between Spanish and English, and were members of White and Asian peer groups and organizations. *Chicano* students, who were primarily English-speaking second-generation immigrants, identified themselves as Mexican, Mexicanos, Chicanos or homegirls/homeboys. These students rejected being Anglo and did not associate with the Mexican-immigrant or Mexican American groups. *Cholos* used ethnic labels of Cholo/a or Low Rider to identify themselves, used cultural symbols and language that identify them as distinctly Cholo/a and not Mexican or American, affiliating with primarily Cholo/a peers.

Matute-Bianchi found that the Mexican-descent students in her study varied in their perceptions of challenges to future opportunities and in academic achievement. Mexican-oriented students and Mexican American students were academically successful and did not perceive difficulty in attaining their education or higher status occupations. In contrast, Chicano and Cholo adolescents were least academically successful and perceived greater challenges to attaining their future opportunities. They perceived a "job ceiling" that, regardless of education, would prevent them from attaining high-status occupations; in response, they developed an oppositional identity by rejecting the dominant cultural ideologies of educational success in order to maintain their ethnic identity. Matute-Bianchi's findings suggest that Latino high school students negoti-

ate their ethnic identity by varying in their use of ethnic labels, language, appearance, and ethnic peer affiliations in response to perceptions of challenges to future opportunities.

The multiple worlds perspective provides another useful model to illustrate ways Latino students navigate the various goals, values, and expectations across their "multiple worlds" of home, school, and peers (Davidson, 1996; Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1991). Davidson (1996) examined how ethnic minority high school students negotiated their ethnic identity across their multiple worlds and found five patterns of adaptation linked to their conceptualizations of their ethnic identity. Students who perceived *internalized oppression* internalize negative connotations of their ethnicity, and attempt to adapt completely by conforming to mainstream patterns of academic and social interaction at school while hiding cultural patterns of behavior that differentiate themselves from their majority peers, as a means of attaining academic success. A second group was characterized by *biculturalism*: for these students, ethnicity was situational, and they adapted situationally to the values, beliefs, and expectations of their different worlds by conforming to mainstream patterns of interactions when they were in the minority and returning to their home/community patterns of interactions when they were with their families and peers. The third pattern was characterized by *constructive marginality/transculturalism*: these students developed ethnic/cultural identities that transcended conventional categories by blending aspects of their different worlds without hiding or devaluing aspects of their home or community that distinguish them from their peers. Students who developed an *oppositional identity* viewed their ethnic identity as incompatible with their school environment. In congruence with Ogbu's theory (1987), some of these students were not academically successful because they chose to reject the American school system; however, other students who had an oppositional identity worked hard to be academically successful, not only to attain a personal triumph but to make a political statement. Finally, students who developed a *mainstream* identity saw their ethnicity and culture as having no meaning: while these students developed a diverse peer network, they were not able to adapt easily across their worlds.

Reflecting upon the five patterns, Davidson (1996) stated, "While some of these patterns implied flexibility and movement,

others implied rigidity" (p. 25). Students who developed *internalized oppression* or an *oppositional identity* appeared to have less flexible ethnic identity strategies which did not change across contexts and were associated with higher perceived challenges to their future opportunities. Students who developed patterns of *biculturalism* or *transculturalism* appeared to have more flexible ethnic identity strategies associated with lower perceived challenges to future opportunities. For those with a *mainstream identity*, ethnic identity was not important and thus not related to perceptions of their future opportunities. Davidson's findings are congruent with Matute-Bianchi's findings suggesting that ethnic identity is an adaptive strategy that students develop with varying degrees of flexibility in relation to their beliefs about the economic system and opportunity structures. The present study builds on this work by examining first-year Latino college students' ethnic flexibility, the extent to which they negotiate their ethnic identity across contexts, is related to their perceptions of challenges to their future opportunities.

Two primary questions were addressed: What factors contribute to Latino college students' ethnic flexibility? And, how is ethnic flexibility related to students' perceptions of challenges to their future educational and career goals? It is hypothesized that individual factors (gender, generation, and parental education), relational factors (ethnic peer affiliations), and community factors (ethnic composition of neighborhood and high school attended) will predict Latino students' ethnic flexibility. More specifically, it is expected that females, recent immigrants, higher parental education, having diverse peers, growing up in a diverse neighborhoods, and attending diverse high schools will be associated with higher ethnic flexibility. It is also hypothesized that higher ethnic flexibility would be related to lower perceived challenges in attaining educational and career goals.

Method

Participants. Participants were 87 first-year college students (49 females, 38 males) of Latin American heritage, attending a public university on the West coast of approximately 11,500 students. The ethnic composition of the student body was predominantly

White (44%) and Asian American (31%), and 14% were Latino. Participants' mean age was 18 years old (*SD*= .85, Range=18 to 24). Seventy-four percent of the participants were Mexican (*N*=64), 10% were mixed-heritage Mexican (*N*=9), 6% were Salvadoreño (*N*=5), 2% were Colombian (*N*=2), 2% were Peruvian (*N*=2), and the remainder were Guatemalan, Cuban, Puerto Rican, Ecuadorian, and Bolivian. Seventy percent of the students were U.S.-born (*N*=61), and 30% were born in Latin America (*N*=26). For 70% of the students, both parents were born in Latin America (*N*=61); for 14% of the students, one parent was born in the U.S. (*N*=12); and for 13% of the students, both parents were born in the U.S. (*N*=11). Three students did not report their parents' birthplace.

Among the US-born students, 33 were born and raised in Southern California, 18 were from Northern California, and 3 were from the Southwestern states of Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas; 7 did not specify. For a majority of students, the location where they grew up throughout adolescence was the same as their birthplace. Those who moved during their childhood or adolescent years remained in the same vicinity and state where they were born. About two-thirds of the participants were immigrants or second-generation children of immigrants, and approximately 45% of the participants grew up in primarily Latino neighborhoods and attended high schools with a primarily Latino student body, indicating they are comparable to the larger Latino college student population.

On average, participants reported that their parents' highest level of education was some high school and they worked in semi-skilled occupations. There appeared to be a bimodal distribution for parental education and occupation: Approximately 22% had one or two years of college while 13% had a 4-year college degree or higher. In addition, about 13% of the parents were clerical or sales workers while approximately 20% of the parents were higher executives, business managers, and administrative personnel.

Procedures. A list of first-year Chicano (Mexican-descent) and Latino (other Latin-descent) college students was provided by the Office of the Registrar, and all incoming first-year Latino students were sent letters asking to participate in a study of ethnicity and identity. Recruitment and data collection took place in several different settings: the first data collection took place at a college dining hall where they were provided food and Latin Caribbean music,

in a setting where first-year students could meet student leaders and the Director of the Latino Resource Center, in two residential dorm lounges where the residential assistants assisted in recruiting the Latino students to attend a residential dorm meeting hosted with food and drinks, and among the members of Student Union, representing each of the eight Latino organizations on campus. Eighty-seven incoming Latino students participated in the survey. In addition, eight students were selected from the initial sample on the basis of gender, generation of immigration, and ethnic composition of their home community to participate in a focus group interview to provide more detailed reflections on their survey responses.

Measures

The survey assessed demographic information of the students, including age, grade level, college attended, languages spoken and proficiency, family size and structure, socioeconomic status (paternal education, occupation, and annual income), major, degree sought, occupational goals, and cumulative grade point average/narrative evaluations. Other measures assessed the ethnic composition of neighborhood and school students attended while growing up. Students were asked to rate whether the student population of the high school they attended and the neighborhood they grew up in were primarily Latino, Asian American, or White/Anglo, or whether there was a diverse student population.

Ethnic flexibility was assessed through both qualitative and quantitative methods along four dimensions: 1) *ethnic labels*, 2) *appearance*, 3) *language*, and 4) *ethnic peer affiliations*, utilizing the following measures:

Ethnic Labels. Ethnic flexibility of ethnic labels was assessed by examining the number of important ethnic identities students reported across the contexts of family, school, peers, neighborhood, and ethnic community using a measure adapted from Stephan (1992). Participants were provided a list of ethnic labels based on pilot study findings and Latino ethnic identity literature (Matute-Bianchi, 1991; Oboler, 1995), consisting of Latino/a, Chicano/a, Mexican, Mexicano/a, Mexican American, Hispanic, American, and Other. They were given the opportunity to list any other ethnic iden-

Table 1. Frequencies of Ethnic Identities Across Family, School, Peer, Neighborhood, and Community Contexts

	Family		School		Peers		Neighborhood		Community	
	N	(%)	N	(%)	N	(%)	N	(%)	N	(%)
Latino/a	9	(10)	18	(21)	11	(13)	8	(9)	19	(22)
Chicano/a	11	(13)	21	(24)	13	(15)	6	(7)	9	(10)
Mexicano/a	16	(18)	3	(3)	5	(6)	8	(9)	7	(8)
Mexican	18	(21)	9	(10)	10	(12)	19	(22)	11	(13)
Mexican American	13	(15)	11	(13)	11	(13)	12	(14)	14	(16)
Hispanic	1	(1)	2	(2)	2	(2)	1	(1)	2	(2)
American	7	(8)	15	(17)	16	(10)	16	(18)	3	(3)
Other	12	(14)	8	(9)	18	(21)	14	(16)	11	(13)
N/A or Missing	0	(0)	0	(0)	1	(1)	3	(3)	11	(13)

Note. $N = 87$.

tities that were important to them. Students were then asked to circle the ethnic label(s) they used to describe the ethnic group(s) they felt most closely affiliated with across the contexts of their family, school, closest friends, neighborhood, and ethnic community (e.g., church, ethnic group organization, etc.). Table 1 shows the frequencies of ethnic labels students used to identify their ethnic identity in the contexts of their family, school, peers, neighborhood, and community. Next, students were asked to rate the importance of their ethnic identity in each of the five contexts, on a 4-point scale ranging from "Not Important" to "Very Important." Ethnic flexibility of ethnic labels was assessed by summing the number of important ethnic identities students reported across the five contexts rated 3 (quite important) or 4 (very important). Higher scores indicated higher ethnic flexibility of ethnic labels.

Appearance. To assess flexibility of appearance (i.e., perceptions of appearance in relation to other members of their ethnic group), participants were asked to rate the following phenotypical characteristics on 4-point scales: 1) color of skin ranging from "Very Dark" to "Very Light"; 2) facial characteristics from "Very Typical" to "Not Very Typical" of their ethnic/racial group; and 3) physical appearance from "Not Very Anglo Looking at All" to "Very Anglo Looking." A summary score was developed to measure the

extent to which students perceived flexibility of their appearance or ability to "pass" in the dominant culture on a scale from 1 to 4. Cronbach's alpha indicated moderate internal consistency (alpha = .58).

Language. This measure assessed the language(s) spoken across contexts with various people and the proficiency in the language(s) spoken. Students were asked to rate whether they primarily spoke Spanish or English, or spoke both English and Spanish equally when interacting with their mother, father, siblings, and closest friend(s). A measure of language flexibility assessed the extent to which students primarily spoke English or Spanish or used both Spanish and English, code-switching across personnel (scores ranged from 0 to 4). Cronbach's alpha for language flexibility indicated moderate internal consistency (alpha = .58).

Ethnic Peer Affiliations. This measure assessed the ethnic composition of students' ethnic peer affiliations. Students were asked to rate the number of friends they have of various ethnic groups including African American, White/Anglo, Asian American, Chicana/Latina, and "Other," on a 5-point scale ranging from "none" to "many." A summary score was developed to assess the extent to which students had no peers to many peers of diverse ethnic groups. Cronbach's alpha for peer flexibility was .47.

Perceptions of Challenges to Opportunities. Adapted from the Multiple Worlds Survey (Cooper et al., 1995), students were asked to rate the extent they perceive difficulties due to their ethnicity in attaining their educational goals and their career goals on a 4-point scale ranging from "Causes No Difficulties" to "Causes Many Difficulties." These items were highly correlated ($r = .72, p < .01$). Students were also asked to provide open-ended responses to explain their answers in more detail.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations of Key Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1 Ethnic Labels	2.25	1.57	---			
2 Language	1.33	1.24	0.09	---		
3 Appearance	2.66	0.63	.20*	.37***	---	
4 Ethnic Peer Affiliations	3.02	1.95	-0.13	0.06	0.09	---
5 Perceptions of Challenges	2.21	0.87	-.42***	0.14	0.12	0.07

Note. Ns range from 86 to 87. * $p < .05$. ** $p < 01$. *** $p < .001$.

Results

Table 2 presents the overall means, standard deviations, ranges, and intercorrelations of all key variables. On average students utilized two ethnic labels to identify their ethnic identity across contexts (M=2.25, SD=1.57). Approximately one-third of the students (N=29) did not change the language they spoke depending on whether they were speaking with their mother, father, siblings, or friends, reporting that they primarily spoke either English or Spanish. However, on average, students code-switched between English and Spanish across contexts (M=1.33, SD=1.24). On average, students indicated that they perceived themselves to be somewhat to quite flexible in negotiating their appearance (M=2.66, SD=.63), and students had diverse ethnic peer affiliations (M=3.02, SD=1.95).

In order to examine factors associated with ethnic flexibility, four stepwise regression analyses were conducted for each of the four strategies, using gender, generation, parental education, ethnicity of closest friends, and ethnic composition of neighborhood and high school attended as predictor variables. Tables 3, 4, and 5 present the predictors of ethnic flexibility for the significant regression models. Results indicated that (1) having a primarily Latino peers significantly predicted use of multiple ethnic labels; (2) recent immigration, low maternal education, and growing up in a primarily Latino neighborhood predicted use of code-switching across contexts; and (3) recent immigration and low paternal education predicted "passing" into the dominant culture. There were no significant predictors for ethnic peer affiliations.

Table 3. Predictors of Ethnic Flexibility for the Ethnic Labels Strategy

Ethnic Label Strategy Predictor Variables	Partial r	% variance accounted for
Generation	.01	
Gender	.00	
Mother's education	- .05	
Father's education	.03	
Ethnicity of Closest Friends	- .23*	.05
Neighborhood Ethnic Composition	.06	
High School Ethnic Composition	.02	

$R^2 = .23$, $F = 4.61$, $p < .05$. Note. *$p < .05$.

Table 4. Predictors of Ethnic Flexibility for the Language Strategy

Language Strategy Predictor Variables	Partial r	% variance accounted for	% increase
Mother's education	-.30*	.24	
Generation	-.27*	.33	.09
Gender	-.07		
Father's education	-.03		
Ethnicity of Closest Friends	.04		
Neighborhood Ethnic Composition	-.36*	.42	.09
High School Ethnic Composition	-.13		

$R^2 = .42$, $F = 19.61$, $p < .001$. Note. *$p < .05$.

Table 5. Predictors of Ethnic Flexibility for the Appearance Strategy

Appearance Strategy Predictor Variables	Partial r	% variance accounted for	% increase
Individual factors			
Father's education	-.23*	.10	
Generation	-.23*	.15	.05
Gender	-.12		
Mother's education	-.07		
Friendship Network	.09		
Ethnicity of Closest Friends	-.03		
Ethnic Composition of High School	-.10		

$R^2 = .15$, $F = 7.31$, $p < .001$. Note. *$p < .05$.

Table 6. Focus Group Participants' Gender, Generation, and Patterns of Ethnic Flexibility and Perceived Challenges to Future Opportunities

Focus Group Participants	Gender	Generation	Ethnic Flexibility of the Four Ethnic Identity Strategies				
			Ethnic Label	Language	Appearance	Peer Affiliations	Perceived
Challenges							
Christina	Female	2nd	High	Low	Low	High	Low
Leo	Male	2nd	High	Low	Low	High	Low
David	Male	2nd	High	High	High	High	High
Angel	Male	2nd	High	High	Low	High	Low
Lorena	Female	2nd	Low	Low	Low	High	High
Felix	Male	1st	Low	Low	Low	Low	High
Ana	Female	1st	Low	High	High	High	Low
Elias	Male	1st	Low	High	High	High	Low

Ethnic Flexibility and Perceptions of Challenges to Future Opportunities

To test the second hypothesis, profile analysis was performed to examine the relationship between ethnic flexibility and perceptions of challenges to future opportunities. The four ethnic identity strategies (i.e., ethnic labels, language, appearance, and peer affiliation) were transformed into standardized z-scores. The between-subjects independent variable was students' perceived challenges to their future opportunities. Students were divided by a median split into two groups in relation to their perceived challenges to their future opportunities, those who perceived low challenges and those who perceived high challenges. Figure 1 illustrates profiles of ethnic flexibility for the four ethnic identity strategies in relation to students' perceived challenges. Profile analysis revealed that although no individual ethnic identity strategy contributed to students' perceptions of challenges, there was a main effect: Contrary to expectations, higher ethnic flexibility was associated with higher perceived challenges. That is, those who perceived higher challenges ($M=1.54$) regarding their future opportunities reported higher ethnic flexibility than those who perceived lower challenges ($M=-1.04$), Pillais Trace $=.04$, $F (1, 85)=4.18$, $p<.05$.

Qualitative Analyses. Focus group interviews of a sub-sample of eight students showed six different patterns, illustrating ways that the four ethnic flexibility strategies are associated with students' perceived challenges to future opportunities (See Table 6). The first pattern was characterized by two students (Leo and Christina) who perceived low challenges, identified themselves using multiple ethnic labels, were monolingual, had a stable appearance, and had diverse ethnic peer affiliations. The second pattern was characterized by one student (David) who perceived high challenges and who was highly flexible across all four ethnic identity strategies. A third pattern was characterized by one student (Angel) who perceived lower challenges, used multiple ethnic labels, code-switched, had a stable appearance, and had diverse ethnic peer affiliations. A fourth pattern was characterized by a female student (Lorena) who perceived high challenges, used a single ethnic label, was monolingual,

had a stable appearance, and had diverse ethnic peer affiliations. A fifth pattern was characterized by one student (Felix) who perceived high challenges and who had low ethnic flexibility across all four ethnic identity strategies. Finally, a sixth pattern was characterized by two students (Ana and Elias) who perceived low challenges, used single ethnic labels across contexts, code-switched, were able to "pass," and had diverse ethnic peer affiliations. These six patterns are interpreted in relation to Davidson's (1996) patterns of ethnic
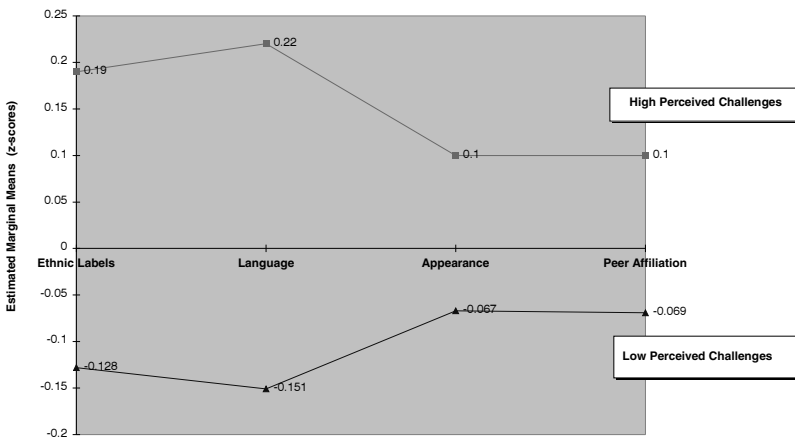
Figure 1. Profile Analysis of Ethnic Flexibility for the Four Ethnic Identity Strategies

identity in the discussion.

Discussion

Although findings from this study are mixed, they help con-tribute to understanding the types of strategies Latino college stu-dents use to negotiate their ethnic identity across contexts and the factors that contribute to ethnic flexibility. They also illuminate the complex relationship between ethnic flexibility and perceptions of challenge to future opportunities utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

Contrary to expectations, first-year Latino college students with primarily Latino close friends were more likely to use multiple ethnic labels across contexts. This provides some evidence in support of Ethier and Deaux's (1994) research that indicated that first-year Latino college students who had a strong cultural background developed strong ties with Latino peer groups and organizations in college, strengthening their ethnic identification. In the present study, the ethnic labels strategy was measured in terms of the number of important ethnic groups students identified with across a list of ethnic identities found in the ethnic identity literature, including Latino/a, Chicano/a, Mexican, Mexicano/a, Mexican American, Hispanic/Hispanic American, and "other" (Oboler, 1996; Padilla, 1996). Findings suggest that having primarily close Latino friends contributes to the of multiple ethnic labels across diverse groups of Latino peers. This may be one way of negotiating ethnic identity that enables Latino students to make a smooth transition from home to college, particularly for those moving to a predominantly White/Anglo university.

As expected, recent immigrants were more likely to code-switch across contexts. These findings are congruent with Pease-Alvarez and Hakuta's (1996) findings, suggesting that recent immigrants are more likely to be more bilingual across the contexts of family and peers, while later generation Latinos tend to value English, or de-value Spanish. In addition, these findings may be linked to the focus group analyses, reflective of a pattern represented by first generation immigrants who had higher flexibility of language, appearance, and ethnic peer affiliation strategies, suggesting that recent immigrants develop higher overall ethnic flexibility.

Contrary to expectations, lower maternal education and growing up in a Latino neighborhood predicted higher use of code-switching across contexts. One explanation offered by Pease-Alvarez and Hakuta (1996) is that mothers who have higher education may value English more and code-switch less. Students growing up in Latino neighborhoods are likely to surrounded by their neighbors, family, and friends who speak Spanish, making it socially desirable for them to speak Spanish (Pease-Alvarez & Hakuta, 1996); this contributes to the likelihood that they will become bilingual, speaking Spanish at home and English at school. In contrast, those living in diverse neighborhoods may not speak Spanish with

their families or peers and may primarily speak English because it is the language spoken in their neighborhood and at school.

Being a recent immigrant and paternal education were related to higher flexibility of appearance or perceived ability to "pass." One explanation that recent immigrants may perceive a more flexible appearance is because they may be coming from a more homogeneous society where ethnicity is not an important aspect of their identity; that is, they never had consciously to think about their ethnicity or about ways their ethnicity might cause them difficulty in attaining their educational and career goals. The experience of a recent male immigrant provided support for this explanation when he was asked, "Do you feel that you stay the same across all contexts or do you change depending who you're interacting with or the situation you are in?" He stated, "I don't think about that." He said,

> I still don't understand about this ethnic thing. I don't want to see things like that, it's a little odd. I was raised until I was thirteen in Mexico. Until I moved up here I never encountered ethnicity or that they called me things cause we looked different…but I don't look different…cause my brother and my sister they don't have the same hair color as me…I think everyone has their own little label, so I just adapt to whatever they want, I'm just a person. I'm just a human being... (Elias, a first-generation Mexican American male)

Thus, it may be that recent immigrants are more flexible in terms of their perceptions of their appearance because they never perceived themselves as looking different from others.

Contrary to predictions, higher ethnic flexibility was related to higher perceived challenges in attaining educational and career goals. One possible explanation is that those who perceive high challenges may develop higher ethnic flexibility as an adaptive strategy to negotiate their ethnic identity across their multiple worlds. Phelan et al. (1991) found that high-achieving minority students saw their worlds as "different" due to differences in culture, religion, and/or socioeconomic status, but managed to make transitions back and forth across their worlds. Another possible explanation is that students who have more flexible ethnic identities may

experience more blatant racism and prejudice due to the fact that they are able to "pass" in and out of different worlds. This is illustrated by a focus group participant who was highly flexible across all four ethnic identity strategies yet he perceived his ethnicity as a challenge to attaining his future opportunities. In talking about his ability to "pass" he said,

> I'm waiting for [people] to say anything that is slightly on the verge of being a little racist, being a little ignorant about culture or something. I kind of look for that kind of thing, just so I can get back at them and you know…correct them…or just have a nice debate. Like if someone were to say something about my race…like that usually happens…as if I am passing off as a White person here…if someone were to say, "those Hispanics or those Mexicans" I say, "Oh yeah by the way…" (David, a second-generation Mexican American male).

Finally, an alternative explanation consistent with Phinney's (1989, 1993) findings is that Latino students who have explored and developed a clear sense of what their ethnic identity means to them are likely to have a stable, coherent sense of ethnic identity across contexts related to lower perceived challenges in attaining their future opportunities.

A limitation of this study stems from the correlational nature of the study. The direction of the relationship between ethnic flexibility and perceptions of future opportunities is unclear. Does ethnic flexibility cause students to experience more blatant discrimination and racism due to their ability to "pass" in and out of their ethnic and dominant cultures? Or is ethnic flexibility a conscious effort made by students to change their identity across contexts in response to perceived challenges or discrimination? The directionality of the relationship between these variables is unclear and claims regarding the causal nature of their relationship cannot be made. Further research is necessary to achieve a better understanding of the relationship between developmental and contextual processes of ethnic identity and how ethnic identity is related to perceptions of opportunity structures.

Focus Group Interviews. Six patterns revealing within-group

variability of students' ethnic identity strategies associated with their perceptions of challenges to future opportunities were represented by the eight focus group participants. These patterns appear to be consistent with Davidson's (1996) five typologies. For example, a second-generation Mexican American woman perceived high challenges, identified herself with a single ethnic label across contexts. This student had dark skin and distinct facial features and perceived herself as having a less flexible appearance. She spoke only English; and her closest friends were White. Her Latino friends called her "white-washed" because of her style of clothing and the music she listened to. This student may be characterized by Davidson's *internalized oppression* pattern due to the fact she reported hiding cultural patterns of behavior that differentiated her from her majority peers in order to attain academic success, and she perceived many challenges due to her ethnicity in attaining her educational and career goals.

A second pattern was represented by a student (David) who perceived high challenges to opportunity structures and showed high ethnic flexibility. Although this second-generation Mexican American student was able to negotiate his ethnic identity across his worlds using multiple ethnic labels across contexts, code-switching, "passing" in and out of contexts, and having diverse ethnic peer affiliations, he had high perceived challenges due to his ethnicity in attaining his future educational and career goals. This student might be classified as having characteristics of Davidson's (1996) *oppositional identity* and *biculturalism* patterns. He stated he developed a Chicano identity and worked hard to be academically successful in order to make a political statement.

A third pattern was represented by a student (Angel) who perceived low challenges to future opportunities, used a single ethnic label across contexts, had a stable appearance, code-switched, and had diverse ethnic peer affiliations. This second-generation Mexican American may be characteristic of Davidson's (1996) *bicultural* pattern, utilizing relational strategies to make transitions across his multiple worlds, associated with lower perceived challenges to future opportunities.

A fourth pattern was represented by two second-generation Mexican American students (Leo and Christina) who perceived low challenges to future opportunities, identified themselves using mul-

tiple ethnic labels across contexts, were monolingual, had stable appearances, and had diverse ethnic peer affiliations. These students may be characteristic of Davidson's (1996) *marginality/transculturalism* pattern in which they developed ethnic/cultural identities that transcended conventional categories by blending aspects of their different worlds. For example, Leo described his ethnic identity as neither Mexican nor American but as a "new ethnicity," while Christina described her most important ethnic identity as "Japanese" because she felt closer to Japanese people, values and beliefs, spoke some Japanese, and lived in Japan during her early childhood and adolescent years.

Three students were first-generation Mexican American immigrants. A fifth pattern was represented by one student (Felix) who perceived high challenges and showed low ethnic flexibility. This student described his ethnic identity with a single ethnic label, Mexicano, perceived himself as phenotypically distinct with dark skin and distinct facial features, spoke primarily Spanish, and had primarily Latino peers. He had lower ethnic flexibility and perceived higher challenges due to his ethnicity in attaining his future opportunities. The sixth pattern was represented by two students (Ana and Elias) who perceived low challenges associated with less flexible ethnic labels, and flexible language, appearance, and peer strategies. These recent Mexican immigrant students were able to "pass" due to their light skin, non-phenotypically distinct facial characteristics, their ability to code-switch between English and Spanish, and having diverse ethnic peers. Being immigrants, they said they did not understand the concept of "ethnicity" and how it affected their ability to attain their future opportunities, which indicates that ethnicity is not important until two or more ethnic/cultural groups come into contact.

There are limitations in conducting exclusively qualitative analyses due to the inability to generalize to the entire cohort, just as there are limitations utilizing solely quantitative analyses due to the inability to detect these rich intricate patterns in the data. It is important to examine how these different methods of inquiry helped to illuminate the complex relationship between ethnic flexibility and perceptions of challenges to future opportunities. Quantitative analyses assisted in making generalizations about the entire cohort, which revealed interesting findings through regressions and profile

analyses while qualitative analyses assisted in understanding six patterns of how ethnic identity strategies are related to perceptions of challenges to opportunities. Although each of these analyses separately were interesting and could tell a story on their own, linking qualitative and quantitative analyses helped put these stories into a context that illuminated the larger picture in several ways. First, linking the survey with the focus group interviews was useful because although there was space provided on the survey for open-ended responses, in the focus group interviews the students were able to reflect upon and discuss in more detail the meanings behind their responses on the survey. Second, examining the focus group interview participants as case studies helped illuminate six different patterns in the way students utilized their ethnic identity strategies in relation to their perceptions of challenges to opportunities. These students displayed patterns consistent with Davidson's (1996) typologies. Linking qualitative and quantitative analyses has been enriching, providing a better understanding of the broad general experiences among these first year Chicano/Latino students and the patterns that emerged through the narratives of the individual students.

Implications for Retention Efforts

To enhance the impact of college retention efforts, it is important to understand how Latino students develop various types of strategies for negotiating their identity across their home and college communities. The present study examined Latino college students' ethnic flexibility, the extent to which they negotiate their ethnic identity across contexts, in relation to their perceived challenges in attaining their educational and career goals. Due to the fact that many first-year Latino college students are moving from predominantly Latino home communities into colleges and universities that are not proportionate to the state ethnic composition of the Latino population, it is important to examine more closely how their peers may serve as a "bridge" in their transition from home to college.

Many of the students in this study maintained a friendship network consisting of primarily Latino peers. Consistent with Ethier and Deaux's (1994) findings, first-year Latino college students' peers may help them develop more positive perceptions of their eth-

nicity in their new college community. Interestingly, 26% of the students reported that their closest friend(s) were Asian American. Rather than developing an oppositional identity and rejecting the school system, perhaps these students are associating school achievement with other high achieving minority groups, such as Asian Americans. Asian American students are associated with a positive stereotype pertaining to academic success, "the model minority myth," a stereotype that assumes Asian American students are smart and academically successful. Latino students develop a positive academic identity by establishing close friendships with Asian American students, shifting the meaning of school success away from the White/Anglo dominant culture to an ethnic minority group with which they can more closely identify. Although Asian Americans have also encountered a history of oppression and discrimination in the U.S., they have demonstrated that ethnic minority students can turn perceived barriers into challenges on the pathway to success.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies should examine the role of cross-ethnic friendships and peer support as first-year Latino college students make the transition from home to college. Further research is also needed with a larger diverse sample, exploring whether recent immigrants are more optimistic in their perceptions of their future opportunities and whether females have more flexible ethnic identities than males linked to more positive perceptions of their ethnic identity in attaining their future goals. As gender roles continue to evolve and as immigrants continue to enter the U.S. in search of the land of opportunity, gender and immigration status will play an important role in Latino youths' perceptions of their future. Second and third generation Latinas obtaining their college degrees may no longer adhere to the traditional stereotypical female roles in the family, which will in turn create more fluid social and ecological boundaries, enabling them to see the myriad of opportunities available to them.

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