University of Nevada, Reno

“Me Da Cuenta:” Sources of Resiliency Identified by Mexican-American Young Men in Kings Beach, CA

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Work

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ABSTRACT

Latino youth are often categorized as an at-risk population, particularly in regards to the juvenile justice system. Overrepresented within the juvenile justice system and misunderstood as a group collectively, Mexican-American male adolescents are a group without a voice in much of the literature describing how minority youth identify, access, and navigate internal and community-based sources of resiliency. Using a constructionist framework of resiliency, this exploratory, qualitative study examines how Mexican male adolescents who have had access with the juvenile justice system describe their experiences as “at-risk” and how they negotiate competing identities generated by a discourse of “illegality” and processes of marginalization. Despite structural constraints generating a very real sense of risk, the participants indicated relatedness/connectedness, when grounded in Mexican cultural values of family, respect, and collectivism, as a pathway to resiliency.
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Thank you to my committee for their support and guidance. Thank you to the young men of Kings Beach, the participants who created and participated in this project. In one of the prompts for the narrative, the question was about seeing all the goodness that is in you. I hope this project has helped to give voice to the goodness that I appreciate in you all. As young men, you have a special light, and I cannot express my gratitude for your willingness to share your experiences and insights with me. Thank you.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Illegality:” Discipline and the Discourse of Deportable/Disposable Identities</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Illegality:” Collapsing Delinquency and Citizenship</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“At-Risk” in the Margins</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“At-Risk:” Deportable Economic Participation</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“At-Risk:” Criminal Economic Participation</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“At-Risk:” Education and Educacion</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk and Resiliency: Constructing a Framework that Works</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design and Purpose</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method of Data Analysis</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural Constraints – A Sense of Risk</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships and Connectedness – A Pathway to Resilience</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For Practice and Policy</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For Research and Social Justice</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion – Transformation</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRB Approval</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample Narrative by Youth Participant</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample Focus Group Notes by Youth Participant</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photographs</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

“The advice that I would have for them is that if they don’t have ‘securities,’ well, what I call having a green card and having a security, you might just try to be the best. Try to show love or respect to your homeboys but...you’re going to look up and realize you have a family...Try to change for them and try to change for yourself and stay out of trouble. That’s probably the best thing I would tell a friend to do.

Everything just comes from the heart.”
- Loco, 17

“Resilient youth take advantage of whatever opportunities and resources that are available – even those we consider negative or destructive.”
(Ungar, 2005, p. 1)

“I’m just gonna be me.” – Ivan, 16

The experience of male Latino adolescents, specifically Mexican, Mexican-American, and Chicano adolescents, is a unique subject position. Overrepresented in the juvenile justice system, broadly defined as “at risk,” these young men often find themselves situated at the nexus of powerful discourses defining “illegality,” “criminality,” and risk. Described as delinquent, Latino youth are at increased risk of a number of factors including poverty, delinquency, depression, substance abuse, and risky behavior (Frank & Lester, 2001, p. 499). What is less clearly described is the way young men are negotiating pathways to resiliency in their daily lives and how processes of marginalization limit their ability to access traditional sources of resilience.

The Risk and Resilience Ecological framework informs the juvenile justice system’s models of prevention, intervention, and practice. Risk factors are “forces contributing to a problem condition” while protective factors, i.e. sources of resiliency, are “internal and external resources for the protection against risk” (Corcoran & Nichols-Casebolt, 2004, p. 212). This framework seeks to find a balance between risk and
protective factors producing resiliency as the outcome. Resiliency then becomes success despite adversity (Ungar, 2004).

Originally developed with a focus on the individual, the ecological framework of risk and resilience becomes problematic when applied to marginalized populations. Without application of a critical analysis, the framework pathologizes these groups, overemphasizing the potentially detrimental impacts of acculturation and minimizing the ways that youth are negotiating resiliency and/or accessing protective factors. It implies that at risk youth are less resilient and ignores the systematic forces shaping these youth’s lives, and access to resources. Their negotiations to pathways of resilience are constrained by limited access to resources, and the manifestations of their resilience are labeled as deviant, delinquent, disordered, and dangerous (Ungar, 2005, p. 1). For the young men in this study, these constraints are implicitly and explicitly related to their identities as Mexican young men.

It is then no surprise that within the juvenile justice system, Latino youth are overrepresented. In a report by the Children’s Defense Fund (2007), a Latino boy born in 2001 has a 1 in 6 chance of going to prison in his lifetime (America’s Cradle to Prison Pipeline, 2007). Latino youth are more likely to be arrested, more likely to be detained, more likely to be detained for longer, and more likely to be sent to a residential placement than their white counterparts (Villarruel, Walker, Minifree, Rivera-Vasquez, Peterson, & Perry, 2000). In California 2006, fifty-one percent of the nearly 15,240 youth in detention were Latino (Children’s Defense Fund Factsheet, 2008). More than 600 youth are arrested every day in California (CDF Factsheet, 2008). As the Children’s Defense Fund asserts, “the most dangerous place to grow up in America is at the
intersection of race and poverty” (America’s Cradle to Prison Pipeline, 2007, p. 15). These are the youth in the juvenile justice system.

Kings Beach, California, where this study takes place, reflects these national trends. A small community with a population of approximately 4,000 residents, Kings Beach comprises 24% of the North Lake Tahoe region (U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 2000); Kings Beach has a large and growing Latino population, estimated at forty-eight percent in the 2000 census. The ethnic representation in the census under-represents the Latino population, which is estimated to be around seventy percent, as indicated by the local Family Resource Center (Personal communication). It is undetermined what percentage of the Latino population is documented, but the estimate is that nearly eighty percent of the Latino population in Kings Beach is undocumented (Personal Communication).

Many of the indices that indicate high risk are present in the local community, particularly risk factors for delinquent behaviors (Schwartz, Pantin, Prado, Sullivan, & Szapocznik, 2005, p. 398), including poverty, educational attachment/attainment, and processes of acculturation across generations. In 2000, nearly 25% of the entire North Lake Tahoe community, resided at or below the poverty line. Individuals who lack citizenship or are undocumented are twice as likely to live in poverty as those who were citizens (U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 2000). At Kings Beach Elementary School, sixty percent of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch (North Tahoe/Truckee Community Report Card, 2007). There are nearly seven hundred students in the local middle and high schools. In the 2007 North Tahoe/Truckee Community
Report Card, less than 30% of high school students felt connected to their school and/or community.

Given the small population, Kings Beach has a disproportionately high rate of delinquency compared to the rest of Placer County, California. The juvenile caseload fluctuates between 50 to 70 cases, the majority of which are formal wardships. Of those on probation, the majority of offenses include vandalism, burglary, gang affiliation/activity, and substance abuse related charges. Placer County did not have readily available statistics on the ethnic make-up of the caseload for North Lake Tahoe; however, the majority is Latino and residing in Kings Beach (Personal Communication). In 2006, with a caseload of forty-four formal probationers, nine were placed in a residential setting (Personal Communication).

This study was designed as a result of conversations that this researcher had with local Latino youth, many of whom reported some form of juvenile justice involvement, ranging from informal to high-level placement. The youth offered insights about their lives, their experiences, and their perspective of what helps and what doesn’t. This study seeks to engage these youth in dialogue focusing on the youths’ articulations of their own and their community’s sources of resiliency and their experiences as “at risk” youth in the community.

Recognizing the ways that the ecological framework of risk/resilience informs the juvenile justice system, this study engages a constructionist perspective of resiliency, with an emphasis on engaging the youths’ perspectives to provide critique to the ways that their resources and access to resources are limited by systematic forces of discourses.

A constructionist perspective of resilience defines resilience as the outcome of “negotiations” between youth and their environment for the resources to define themselves as healthy amidst conditions that are collectively viewed as adverse (Ungar, 2004). Within this theoretical model, risk can be defined as factors that would cause stress to a “normal” individual, while protective factors, or sources of resiliency, are the factors that youth can use to negotiate pathways to health and resilience (Ungar, 2004). By utilizing a constructionist framework of resiliency, this study is able to extend beyond the limitations of an ecological framework to better understand the ways that these youth are engaging in resilient behaviors and accessing sources of internal and external strength despite their involvement with the juvenile justice system.

The title of this research project is “Me da cuenta: sources of resiliency identified by Mexican-American male adolescents in Kings Beach, CA.” The translation of “me da cuenta” means to gain understanding through noticing, paying attention. It literally means “it tells me.” As a figure of speech, it means to gain an understanding or insight. This project is focused on a dialogue with Mexican male adolescent youth in Kings Beach, CA about their experiences of being “at-risk.” The study is exploratory and qualitative, consists of three parts, and provides three different means of expression for the youth participants. These means include personal photographic essay, narrative, and a focus group. The following research questions will be addressed:

- What sources of resiliency do youth identify in their lives and how do they describe the ways that they negotiate pathways to resilience?
• How do youth describe the ways that their negotiations of resilience are impacted by involvement with the juvenile justice system?

• How do youth describe or identify how power and marginalization operate in their lives of by limiting their access to resources?

• How can the juvenile justice system recognize systematic issues of risk and increase alignment with negotiations of resilience identified by the youth?

This project gives these youth a way to share their thoughts, their ideas, their observations and perceptions, about their own experiences, the experiences of their families, the experiences of their peers, and their experience of what it is like to grow up in their neighborhood. This paper examines the youth participants’ self-defined risk and protective factors and how using a constructionist framework of resiliency can inform more effective interventions to address the very real challenges of delinquent behaviors.

The knowledge generated by this study will assist practitioners, policy makers, and service providers in developing services more attuned and aligned with the “real” experience of the youth who are involved in these systems. Recidivism rates are high nationally for juvenile delinquency; and researchers, policy makers, and practitioners appear to be seeking the perfect “equation” of prevention and intervention through evaluations of risk and resiliency. Doing so through a constructionist framework acknowledges the contexts of youths’ negotiations to pathways of resiliency and health to better address the needs of these youth, their families, and their communities, generating more positive, sustainable outcomes, and decreasing recidivism.
LITERATURE REVIEW

The word “risk” is frequently utilized within the literature focusing on Latino youth. Many studies seek to describe and increase the understanding of the connections and correlations between risk and the reality of what many Latino youth experience. What has occurred in the juvenile justice system, particularly with minority Latino youth, is what could be described as a “a preoccupation with deviance” among Latino youth as an at-risk marginalized group, and that this preoccupation has clouded the normalcy present in the ways that these youth are negotiating pathways to resilience and resisting/reacting to the discourses shaping their lives (Ungar, 2004, p. 354).

Much of the current literature is characterized by deficit-based models of acculturation; however, new research increasingly finds that a positive integrated ethnic identity is a factor of resilience in these youth. Likewise, interventions and programs based in cultural values are often more successful. To better develop and implement more truly culturally competent interventions and services, it is important to extend the depth of research around the “Latino” experience to more fully understand the complexity of the Mexican American experience specifically, including an examination of current political and economic policies and media perceptions shaping that experience.

This review of the literature begins with the experience of Mexican-American male adolescents addressing discourse and its power. Discourse can be defined as the daily narrative that shapes and constructs identity and concepts that come to be accepted as fact and “truth.” Foucault (1972) describes the specific forces of discourse as a means by which the state exacts control over its people and more so, specific groups of people.
The experience of the Mexican-American male adolescent is unique and important in relation to the concept of discourse because this group of adolescents, particularly those within the juvenile justice system, find themselves at the nexus of two powerful discourses in the United States, both centering on the idea of “illegality.”

These youth become doubly bound by dual discourses of “illegality,” - -(un/non) documentation of citizenship and deviance/delinquency. In order to better illustrate the identity “bind” in which this group of youth find themselves, this literature review focuses on analyzing the following concepts:

1. Discourse, discipline, and the construction of illegality;

2. The processes of marginalization through these constructions of “illegality” in the context of masculinity and ethnic identity for Mexican-American adolescent males; and

3. The frameworks of risk and resilience as a theoretical model for understanding the juncture of these discourses, the youths’ experiences, and the “systems” prevention/intervention response in policy and practice within the juvenile justice system.

Within the literature, the term “Hispanic/Latino” is commonly used to describe Spanish speaking groups collectively without differentiating for subpopulations and ethnic/nationalistic differences, such as for those groups who may primarily define themselves as Mexican or another nationality. Much of the current literature is missing an extensive examination and understanding of the differences of experience for these various subpopulations. For the purposes of this literature review, the term Mexican and Mexican-American will be used explicitly to highlight the absence of the Mexican experience specifically in the literature and also to demonstrate the reverse generalization of all Latinos as Mexican.
Within the context of racial discourse, using a single term to encompass such a large and diverse group of racial, cultural, and ethnic groups highlights the way that the identity of being Latino (in most mainstream media and discourse implying Mexican) is legitimization of invisibility. The term Latino will be used interchangeably with Mexican and Mexican-American within this analysis; however, this is not to diminish the diversity described by that term and the preference of many groups to describe their nationality before their ethnicity/race.

“Illegality:” Discipline and the Discourse of Deportable/Disposable Identities

The French philosopher Michel Foucault is the foremost theorist on three concepts that are particularly relevant to this discussion and the forces at work in the lives of Latinos: discourse, knowledge/power, and discipline (Foucault, 1977). These three concepts, largely discussed, largely critiqued, and generating a large body of literature, can be described as overlapping to describe the political, economic, and social forces shaping the world around us. The “nation-state,” indicating a sovereign governing body exacting control over its subjects as objects, is the stage upon which people act as agents in the world around them.

What Foucault is describing when he uses the term “concept of discourse” is a production of knowledge and the relationship between knowledge and power. Discourse is the produced and patterned generation, reproduction, and reaffirmation of knowledge and of people as objects of knowledge (Foucault, 1977). Foucault describes knowledge as a “companion” of the constructs that are shaping our world (Ransom, 1997, p. 22). Discourse is the product of “discursive formations…the formation or cluster of ideas, images, and practices that construct knowledge of, ways of talking about, and forms of
conduct associated with a particular topic” (Chavez, 2008, p. 22). The relationship between power and knowledge is that knowledge as a shaping force gives power to those who are generating knowledge about individuals as objects (Foucault, 1977). Thus knowledge does not equal power; but those who have knowledge have power while those who are objects of knowledge have power enacted upon them (Ransom, 1997, p. 23-24).

This knowledge when ascribed with power becomes a network of hegemonic ideology, theorized by Gramsci, as a system of values, attitudes and beliefs that either passively or actively support the status quo, and more importantly, the class interests that dominate it (Gramsci, 1971). These hegemonic ideologies shape common perceptions of and about groups of people and becomes a way to situate individuals within a particular identity.

The knowledge/power relationship connects to discipline in that “the disciplines” are the exertion of power generated by knowledge to systematically categorize and control individuals (Foucault, 1977). Foucault defines discipline vaguely as a force that differentiates individuals and establishes both expectations and measurements according to a “constant of conformity” and is furthermore assigned value according to these comparisons of “normalcy” (Ransom, 1997, p. 17). Foucault (1977) asserts that individuals are produced by discipline, that the disciplines utilize a “plurality of power strategies,” and that in doing so, do not operate in conjunction with the traditional philosophical frameworks of sovereignty that describe power in terms of legitimate and illegitimate through a process of consent (Ransom, 1997, p. 12-24). Operating outside of these frameworks, with a plurality of power strategies, allows the disciplines to be invisible.
Foucault’s critique of processes of power becomes even more salient in today’s increasing diffusion of the sovereignty of the nation-state through globalization and processes of modernity, including the growth of transnational, far-reaching grids of power and multiple power players acting upon the world in addition to the state (Appadurai, 1996). With globalization and processes of modernity, “discipline” has been taken even further through the utilization of space and segmented constructions of identity. Foucault’s conception of discipline is that the goal of the disciplines is to 1) enhance a population’s productive capacity and 2) ensure political docility (Ransom, 1997, p. 40). In other words, the disciplines exert repetitive exercise of control to gradually move individuals towards the “norm” and to serve the state (Ransom, 1997, p. 49).

In the context of what Mexican youth are experiencing, the outcome of the exertion of disciplinary power is not so simple or straightforward. The modern disciplines (specifically the prison complex) has become a way to further routinize delinquency and individuals’ place in the margins of the formal economic processes. The disciplines operate in a way that utilizes knowledge of the western hegemonic ideology to move individuals towards a norm that exists in the margins as delinquent, and in the case of many Mexicans, in the space of the invisible, the undocumented, the “illegal” as a means of control and oppression. Reinforcement of this hegemonic ideal through sociological theory and explanation further disguises the processes at play.

In his article “Migrant ‘Illegality’ and Deportability in Everyday Life,” De Genova (2002) writes a critical analysis of current sociological and anthropological literature addressing the issues and processes of immigration, specifically the “illegality”
of Mexican immigration and academic discourse on this topic. De Genova (2002) highlights a lack of critical analysis of the very concept of “illegality” itself as an unchecked set of policies enacted to further promote the hegemonic interests of the nation state and the maintenance of Mexican migrant jobs as a disposable commodity (De Genova, 2002, p. 433). Academia, the media, mainstream society, and the polity accept the concept of “illegality” as a specific unquestionable identity or judicial truth. “Illegality” is a discourse.

The most important concept that can be taken from De Genova’s analysis of the discourse of illegality is the concept of “deportability” (De Genova, 2002). The concept of deportability and the discourse of “illegality” generating that concept is a lived experience and contributes to the internalization of self as commodity. These youth operate in a reality in which “the space of non-existence bumps up with existence” (Coutin, 2007, p. 3-16). As asserted by Ngai (2004), these youths’ identity and existence is “both at once a political impossibility and a social reality” (p. 58-63). When this happens, the result is a sense of deportability, the knowledge of not just the reality of economic constraints and limited legitimate access to opportunity and resources, but the realization that you as an individual are “less desirable as a citizen than as a laborer” (De Genova, 2002, p. 434).

Leo Chavez takes this idea of “deportability” even further in his analysis of the “Latino threat narrative” which he describes as public discourse that constructs Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, and US-Born Mexicans specifically (and more broadly all Latinos) as the “quintessential illegal alien” (Chavez, 2008, p. 3). The Latino threat narrative constructs a social identity for Mexicans based on their “illegality” thus portraying them
as “illegitimate” members of society, literally outside of the nation-state as noncitizens and with limited to no means of access to legitimacy.

Just as De Genova critiques the hegemonic acceptance of “illegality” as a fixed fact, Chavez’s analysis of this threat narrative breaks down the discursive forces in the media, polity, and constructions of citizenship that generates Mexican immigrants as “illegal aliens” and US-born Latinos as “alien-citizens” (Ngai, 2005). What both De Genova and Chavez allude to is the danger of collapsing citizenship and criminality, that what is actively being constructed through discourse is the illegal alien who is a new legal and political subject, one whose potential for political and social inclusion is both a “legal impossibility and social reality” (Ngai, 2005).

Chavez focuses not just on the discursive power of the polity but more on the media and the discourse generated by media coverage, portrayals, and “threat” headlines. He describes these occurrences as “media spectacles” and indicates that these have productive power. Their occurrence actively constructs knowledge about subjects in our world, much like Foucault’s knowledge production of which Foucault spoke, transforming a worldview into something that is “taken as truth” (Chavez, 2008, p. 5).

Chavez (2008) discusses this space of non-existence and describes the more specific characterization of their existence as “threatening.” The discourse of “threat” related to immigration is not new and is a patterned nationalist effort through history (Ngai, 2004). With forces of modernity and the transnational technology, the ability to generate and disseminate discourse (and the production of a tangible threat) becomes even more powerful.
“Illegality:” Collapsing Delinquency and Citizenship

As the discourse of “illegality” discussed in the previous section asserts, Mexican youth are dually bound by the concept of illegality. They are assumed to be undocumented, non-citizens, their presence alone in the United States criminal, regardless of actual citizenship status. Mexican youth within the juvenile justice system are defined as delinquent and criminal by their ethnic identity. To be Mexican is to either be illegal or affiliated/related to/descended to someone who is (or was) illegal.

The discourse of “illegality” extends to delinquency and ideas of deviance in that “delinquent” acts are similarly shaped by hegemonic ideals and norms, without critique of the forces defining “delinquent” acts, and more so, actively constructs who is “delinquent.” Parallel to the processes creating the concept of “deportability,” similar processes are at work in creating a concept of “discipline-ability.” These processes further marginalize youth through categorization as “delinquent.”

Michael Ungar (2005) discusses the danger of categorizing youth’s behaviors as delinquent and deviant without further examination into the context of the behaviors and the ways that youth with limited access to resources, and legitimacy, engage in strategies to pursue resilience, regardless of whether it is positive or negative. By not questioning the context of delinquent behaviors, researchers permit the reinforcement of discourses of illegality. The assumption is continued and reaffirmed, particularly for Latino youth, that they are criminal, not just delinquent.

The National Council de la Raza, published concerns about the overrepresentation of Mexican/Latino youth in the juvenile justice system (Villarruel, Walker, Minifree, Rivera-Vazquez, Peterson, & Perry, 2000). Using what they describe as “an index of
over representation,” it was found that in comparison to their white peers Latino youth with no prior admission to state facilities had an admission rate of 5 times for violent offenses and an admission rate of 13 times for drug offenses (Villarruel et al, 2000, p. 2). The study similarly found that Latino youth were detained for longer amount of times, with drug-related offenses having detention time almost double that of a white youth (Villarruel et al, p. 3). In other words, Latino youth in relation to the juvenile justice system are more likely to be stopped by law enforcement, more likely to be arrested, more likely to be arraigned upon arrest, more likely to be detained for longer, more likely to get more time for drug related charges, more likely to be charged as adults, and more likely to be imprisoned as adults (Villarruel, 2000, p. 21).

The study raises concern about the importance of highlighting the racial/ethnic disparities as a component of over-representation that occurs particularly at the intake and detention phases within the juvenile justice system. These concerns are also highlighted in a study of the felony defendant data collected between 1990-1996 by the Bureau of Justice Statistics focusing on addressing the gap in the literature about the interactive effects between gender and race/ethnicity on decision making at the pretrial stage (Demuth & Steffensmeier, 2000). Due to the gap in the literature highlighted by Demuth and Steffensmeier, the focus on the pretrial detention stage is important because there is more space for discretion and as Demuth and Steffensmeier assert, “disparity.”

The space of disparity described in the study indicates the potential for the pretrial detention and release stages to provide insight into the ways that discursive forces (and the Latino threat narrative) inform judicial action. While the study focuses on adult felons, the outcome of the data reflects, not surprisingly, the concerns identified by the
National Council de la Raza. The earliest stages of adjudication are all about evaluating the risk of the defendant (risk of flight, risk of re-offense, etc.). Demuth and Steffensmeier (2000) describe how though these early stages are meant to be based on the defendant’s current offense and criminal history. There may be ethnic/racial biases that influence the criminal processing. With little opportunity for provision of extensive background information, one could hypothesize that discourse fills in the informational gaps.

In these early stages, risk assessment becomes racialized and inherently informed by hegemonic discourse. While Demuth and Steffensmeier do not explicitly refer to discursive forces or the Latino threat narrative (Chavez, 2008), what they describe is exactly that. Less lenient pretrial release decisions are more likely to be imposed on Latino defendants than white defendants because of the court actors belief that Latinos are “more dangerous, more likely to recidivate, and less likely to be deterred” (Demuth & Steffensmeier, 2000, p. 226). They further describe how Latinos are more likely to be viewed as “violent-prone, threatening, disrespectful of authority, and more criminal in their lifestyles” (Demuth, Steffensmeier 2000, p. 226). What they are describing is the Latino threat narrative at work.

The disparity among Latinos, it is described as a function of Latino citizenship status in addition to their ethnicity. Noting the disparity acknowledges recent literature that demonstrates that immigrants are perceived as more “criminally involved” with a perception of a “strong link” between immigration and crime (Demuth & Steffensmeier, 2000). What is not described is the racialization of the non-citizen and how for Mexicans (and in some ways all Latinos), their ethnicity defines their citizenship. Their identity is
a threat; thus it should be no surprise that the study concludes that after controlling for both gender and ethnicity/race, Latino male defendants suffer the “harshest outcomes” (Demuth & Steffensmeier, 2000).

While the studies providing these statistics indicate a presupposition of law enforcement and judicial players to assume a more pronounced criminality of these youth, that perhaps because they are Latino, they are more likely to sell drugs, do drugs, be in a gang, and be involved in general criminal enterprise; this does not fully address the scope of the construction of these youth as “illegal” in the broader political, economic, and social context. What is happening in our juvenile justice system is a direct reflection of the larger discourse affecting Mexican youth. Not only are they deportable, but that they as individuals and as a group, are disposable. Upon entering the juvenile justice system, regardless of true documentation, they are presumed to be criminal simply because they are Mexican. Their existence itself is perceived to be “illegal.”

Mexican youth, as a part of the larger Latino threat narrative and as a subject/object of the discourses of citizenship and non-citizenship, are doubly disciplined both as non-citizen (regardless of actual documentation or legal status) and as a delinquent. Not only are these discursive forces informing the common sense of legal players from the moment a Mexican youth is adjudicated, but value is assigned according to models of rehabilitation. If a youth is not identified as “rehabilitative” than deportability and disposability are waiting to come crashing down upon them.

“At-Risk:” In the Margins

Within the literature, Mexican youth are consistently identified as an at-risk, “marginalized” group. The processes of marginalization discussed within the broader
sociological and anthropological literature can be divided into three specific processes, including economic access, educational attachment/achievement, and the processes of acculturation.

Risk Factors are associated with these processes of marginalization related to delinquent behaviors. The ecological framework of risk and resilience assumes that traditional sources of resiliency include employment, educational attachment, and balanced acculturation (Epstein, Botvin, & Diaz, 1999; Frank & Lester, 2001; Hilarski, 2005; Hodge, Cardenas & Montoya, 2002). Conversely, poverty and access to legitimate, gainful employment opportunities have been connected to juvenile delinquency in that deviant behavior is likely to ensue whenever individuals hold low expectations for attaining their achievement-related aspirations…disjunctions between aspirations and expectations exert pressure for deviant behavior as a means of either achieving success or coping with failure…pressure is presumed to be greatest where legitimate opportunity is most limited” (Buriel, 1982, p. 44)

Mexican youth, as a subpopulation at-risk, are marginalized in such a way that their access to legitimate resources (such as employment) are limited and inherently “illegal.” The processes of marginalization are discursively informed. Latino youth are being actively located in the margins as a product of the larger discourse of “illegality,” “delinquent,” and the Latino threat narrative. While the literature tends to isolate these three processes of marginalization as independent of one another, this analysis seeks to understand the intersection of these three processes and the unique experience of Mexican adolescent males. Missing from a discussion of these processes is the lens of gender and ethnicity and how the experience of Mexican boys becoming men at the
intersection of these processes is a specific racialization of masculinity in the context of “illegality.”

**At-Risk: Deportable Economic Participation**

Poverty is a risk factor for delinquency, and legitimate access to employment is indicated as a source of resilience (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). For Mexican youth, the risk of poverty is very real while access to legitimate, gainful employment is not always realistic. The economic processes of marginalization affecting these youth focuses on three specific dichotomous working identities at the juncture of which, many Mexican youth, particularly those whom are the focus of this study, find themselves. These working identities include: documented vs. undocumented economic participation, formal vs. informal economic participation, and “pink collar” vs. “blue collar” economic participation.

The processes of transnational economic dynamics and the accompanying transitory migrant and immigrant labor patterns are the subject of not just novels but volumes and libraries of study and research within the modern academic structure. This literature review, for the purpose of brevity, is selectively focusing on the dynamics of documented vs. undocumented labor, the role of undocumented labor within the construct of our current economic system, and the resulting economic (limited) opportunity for undocumented Mexican youth while understanding that there is much more not being specifically addressed within this analysis.

What comes to mind in public discourse, and what is analyzed in the academic discourse, is the concept of “undocumented labor.” As discussed previously, this notion is important in that Latino youth, especially Mexican youth, are not discursively separate
from the commodity of their labor (De Genova, 2002). The potential for the cheap commodity of their labor is the primary means by which their existence in the space of non-existence is acknowledge, particularly in public discourse (Chavez, 2008; Coutin, 2007; Ngai, 2004). Chavez (2008) describes Latino economic participation as one of the foci of the Latino threat narrative, that they are “taking American jobs” (p. 23). There is an inherent subversiveness to their economic participation.

This subversiveness describes “undocumented” workers employed in economic processes without proper documentation of citizenship, residency, or permission to work, implying the use of invalid social security numbers, working “under the table,” and “off the books.” It describes the processes by which Mexican workers are employed in “illegal” labor practices, criminalizing their economic participation. De Genova (2002) addresses this issue in his article, focusing on the role that migrant economic participation plays in marginalizing these youth from legal economic structures and the resulting socioeconomic marginalization of these youth to low paying agricultural, construction-based, service industry employment.

Mae Ngai (2004) describes the historical processes of Mexican migrant labor and its impact on Mexican youths’ limited opportunity today. Despite the migration of large numbers of Mexican workers through the Bracero Program (1942-1964), undocumented immigrants became cast as criminal, as a group maintained “outside of the conventional definitions of the American working class and that national body” (Ngai, 2004, p. 129). Ngai describes this process as “imported colonialism” a phenomenon descriptive of the way in which new social relations were produced based on the “subordination of racialized foreign bodies who worked in the United States but remained excluded from
polity by both law and social custom” (Ngai, 2004, p. 128). It was the making of Mexicancs as “foreigners” and as disposable. Mexicans as a group were condensed into a one-dimensional commodity. In the discourse, as disposable lab (Ngai, 2004).

Noticeably absent from much of the academic discourse about undocumented labor is an analysis of power regarding why and how Mexican and Latino individuals’ access is limited not just by their documentation status but further by the discourses insidiously informing employers, employees, and these individuals outside of the legal economic sphere. Nor is a solution offered. Rather, it is described as predicated fact -- that these individuals are undocumented thus their economic participation and production could be nothing more than what it is--disposable.

At-Risk: “Criminal” Economic Participation

In addition to the structural constraints of illegality shaping Mexican youths’ access to legitimate employment, socio-cultural factors further marginal Mexican youth from mainstream employment. As a result of gendered ethnic identities, these young men find themselves in the margins of the informal sector. Informal economic production describes more specifically the issue of access in relation to class dynamics beyond just the issue of documentation or (un)documentation. This dichotomy focuses on perceptions of class and employability and the way that these perceptions intersect to not just maintain Mexican labor in the “undocumented” realm; but furthermore, how access to legitimate enterprise is limited because of their socioeconomic status.

This limited access produces “legitimate” means for economic production through “illegitimate” and “informal” channels, including but not limited to the drug industry. It
is important to address this form of informal economic production specifically because it has been demonstrated that one presupposition of the Latino threat narrative at work in the juvenile justice system is the increased perception of Latino youth as involved in some way with illegal drug enterprise. For many Latino youth with limited access to legitimate employment, these informal channels becomes a means of navigating pathways to sources of resiliency, such as respect.

The most salient literature addressing formal vs. informal economic production with an analysis of power is in the form of ethnography generated within the anthropological spheres. In his ethnography, In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio, Phillipe Bourgois (1995) explores the lives of urban, Puerto Rican street drug dealers and their daily experience as they negotiate legitimate and illegitimate means of economic participation and survival. Emerging most poignantly from his ethnography is the racial and socioeconomic marginalization that his subjects experience, an experience that extends broadly to the racialized experience of immigrants, particularly Latino immigrants, here in the United States.

Bourgois describes the subjects of his ethnography as “perched on the edge of the legal economy” in that they have the documentation to work but have access to the “least desirable” work (Bourgois, 1995, p. 115). His analysis focuses on the racialized experience of those who enter into the “legitimate” workforce and the challenges that they confront even when trying to “go legit” (Bourgois, 1995, p. 114-173). Bourgois (1995) utilizes a framework of cultural production theory and describes the oppositional street culture as it founders in the service sectors, the primary sector to which these young men are directed. The most important theme that can be drawn is the way that these
young men struggle to maintain a sense of “self worth” (Bourgois, 1995). As Bourgois (1995) concludes that opposed to working in the legitimate workforce, the underground economy offers a young man is a means of economic production in which he never has to risk the “threat to his self-worth” (p. 144).

It is precisely this “threat to self worth,” that Robert Smith (Suarez-Orozco & Paez Ed., 2002, p. 110-125) examines as he builds upon the themes identified by Bourgois and examines the legitimate opportunities and experiences through a lens of gender. What emerges is the construction of a “gendered ethnicity” and racialization of ethnic masculinity (Suarez-Orozco & Paez Ed. 2002, p. 110). This gendered ethnicity affects the upward mobility of male Latino youth in that their ethnicity becomes racialize. This racialization embeds itself further within processes of marginalization (Suarez-Orozco, 2002). Smith differentiates this process as a phenomenon of pink labor vs. blue labor in which Latinas are better able to maintain their social capital and utilize in industry and occupation not available to Latino males (Suarez-Orozco, 2002). As their ethnic identity aligns with a racialized masculinity, Latino men internalize imposed identities in line with discursively flat definitions of who they are.

**At-Risk: Education and Educacion**

The largest body of sociological literature focusing on Latino youth has been generated through studies focusing on education, academic achievement and attachment. This may be due to the ways that Latino youth are systematically marginalized within the educational system. Concerning is the statistically lower academic performance, higher drop out rates and overall poorer educational performances (usually indicating English as second language issues) for Latino youth (Buriel et. al., 1982; Epstein, Botvin, & Diaz,
1999; Frank & Lester, 2001). Analyzed in examinations of these disparate rates of educational attachment/achievement for Latino youth is the relationship between disparity and processes of acculturation. However, these examinations often lack a critical analysis of structural forms of exclusion and marginalization impacting the ways that Latino youth are able to have meaningful participation in their education. Demonstrated by educational “risks” associated with the experience of being a male Latino youth, particularly a Mexican male youth, is that risk can be explored by a multiplicity of factors: immigration, acculturation, poverty, marginalization, and masculinity.

Portes and Rumbaut (2001), who have generated much of the sociological literature, generally find this disparity as related to dissonant cultural values. There is a need to focus on Latino youths’ pathways to attachment and achievement within the educational system. A deeper analysis of structural constraints to Latino youths’ ability to access pathways of positive educational attachment/achievement would examine how marginalization attributes to Latino youths’ detachment from the educational system, not dissonant cultural values. Latino youth are “at-risk” within the educational system; however, this experience of risk extends beyond what is acknowledged in the sociological literature.

When discussing Latino male youth as a population at risk within the context of education (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), this implies something very specific. School is where children cannot escape confrontation with the identity that is being constructed around and upon them. They spend more time there than anywhere else. The educational system can be seen as the hub, the nexus where these issues of legal status,
ethnic identity, racialized identity, gender, generation, acculturation, and marginalization occur.

Within the criminological literature, there has been an effort to discern what causes delinquency in order to better understand what could prevent delinquency. The issue of education is important to address because it is a well-established correlative indicator of juvenile delinquency, generally referenced in terms of attachment to school and the expectation/aspirations of the future. Youth who are at-risk in the educational system are considered to be at-risk for delinquent behavior by default.

There are three important issues that can be drawn out of the literature focusing on education and Latino youth’s experience within the educational system. The first is the process of acculturation and the two frameworks for comparison: segmented acculturation (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001) and subtractive schooling (Valenzuela 1999). The second is the racialized gender differences that young men and boys experience; and the connection between that experience, marginalization, and the resulting economic mobility discussed in the previous section (Suarez-Orozco & Paez Ed., 2002, p. 110-125). The final issue is the psychosocial impact that these marginalizing processes can have on an individual and the connection between those psychosocial factors and perceptions of the delinquency of Latino youth (Hovey, 2000).

The literature exploring disparate Latino educational attachment/achievement is described through a process of a deficit-based process of acculturation as youth reconcile their traditional Latino values with values of the dominant culture. Culture can be defined as the reflection of “shared world views, meanings, and adaptive behaviors derived from simultaneous membership and participation in multiple settings and situations”
The processes of acculturation describe the adaptation and shaping of one’s cultural identity and interfacing with majority culture in the domains of behavior, cultural identity, knowledge, language and values (Torres, 2007).

Portes and Rumbaut (2001) seek to understand the dynamics of acculturation shaping youths’ outcomes generationally through a process termed “segmented acculturation.” This describes a process of acculturation with three outcomes: dissonant acculturation, consonant acculturation, and selective acculturation (Rumbaut & Portes editors). This describes acculturation as a process in which youth negotiate external factors as well as intergenerational patterns to achieve an ultimate goal of upward social mobility, generally through a ability to be bicultural (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001, p. 306). The sense is with educational-based values and family support, Latino youth of the second generation will achieve upward social mobility.

This model fails to account for differences as connected to documentation and issues of citizenship and illegality. Noticeably absent from the segmented acculturation model is potential impact of perceptions of documentation and an awareness and/or subconscious internalization of criminality, illegality, deportability, within the context of citizenship and belonging. It does not encompass how larger forces of discourse shapes and informs possibilities (and impossibilities) of belonging, citizenship, and national identity. For Mexican youth, and many Latinos grouped as a “people of color” group, the American identity is not accessible. Their ethnic identity exists outside of US national boundaries.

Patterns of lower achievement across generations for Latino youth may be less about acculturation and more about the internalization of majority group perceptions of
immigrant/minority youth. For many non-first generation Mexican youth, efforts to make positive attachment and achievement in the educational system may not matter with the racism confronting them. Incorporating a critical analysis of systematic marginalization within the educational system, Valenzuela (1999) describes a “subtractive” process occurring for Latino youth in school, implying that through the schooling process, these are actually divested of important social and cultural resources.

When Valenzuela focuses on generational attainment, she reveals the “invisible ceiling” for Mexican youth who are in the third generation and more in opposition to the historical European immigrants (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 4). In her analysis of models of segmented acculturation, Valenzuela (1999) identifies drawbacks related to the acceptance of differences in educational attainment as priori, not as a larger part of social eradication, and the fact that schools do not just reinforce, but produce minority status (p. 30). Describing a process of subtractive assimilation, Valenzuela (1999) discusses how Latino youth are divested of important cultural resources through their education in American classrooms.

A process of subtractive assimilation is based on the idea that “assimilation is a non-neutral process and that its widespread application negatively impacts the economic and political integration of minorities” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 25). Primary identification of at-risk occurs at school; however, school can be a place in which youth are situated and actively negotiating resiliency. While schools are agencies of acculturation, students often oppose schooling in a way that becomes (however self destroying) a form of resistance and a way of opposing not just the historical and institutional oppression shaping their ethnic identity but also in opposition to the routes to success available to the
dominant group, which are often unavailable and a source of exclusion to these youth (Valenzuela, 1999).

An analysis of these youth at within the educational system demonstrates the two sidedness of actual risk and perceived risk and the outcome for young people when they are aligned. The psychosocial impact of this process of subtractive acculturation for Latino youth generate very real detrimental effects on the health and well-being of these youth and their ability to negotiate pathways to resiliency in settings such as educational institutions and the juvenile justice system. In response to the forces of discrimination described by Valenzuela (1999), it is understandable that these youth would seek to develop strategies to respond to the multidimensional layers of acculturation and experiences of discrimination and prejudice. The experience of discrimination often shapes an individual’s sense of self over time and can lead to an internalization of the negative stereotypes presented by the dominant culture. By retaining traditional cultural values, Mexican American youth were able to develop a stronger sense of identity and expectations of the future to insulate themselves from the Anglo-American prejudice that often precipitates delinquent behaviors (Buriel et al, 1982, p. 50).

Youth who do not feel engaged with their education are more likely to drop out, more likely to use substances, more likely to report indices of depressive symptoms, and more likely to engage in delinquent behaviors (South & Lutz, 2003). There are fewer opportunities for legitimate, gainful employment for youth who have not obtained higher educational objectives, such as graduation from high school, and that a “deficit of legitimate opportunities for attaining success is likely to generate high rates of delinquent behavior and drug use” (South & Lutz, 2003, p. 8).
For Mexican-American male adolescents the intersection of educational opportunity, economic opportunity, and a sense of hope for the future are explicitly and implicitly linked to these youths risk levels for engaging in risky and delinquent behaviors. The process of marginalization often places these youth thoroughly on the fringe. For many, delinquent behaviors including property crime, theft, and gang activity, become mechanisms to access similar prosocial goals of income, respect, and access to opportunity. These delinquent behaviors are a negotiation of oppression and of identities “at risk” as culture and race are collapsed.

*Risk and Resilience: Constructing a Framework that Works*

The power of discourse, particularly the Latino threat narrative and constructions of illegality and non-citizenship, articulate the experience of Mexican youth and their daily, lived experience. While there is no unifying theoretical model that addresses the needs and experience of these youth, what is most commonly utilized in the juvenile justice system is an ecological framework of risk and resilience. Given the powerful discursive forces shaping the “illegality” of Mexican youth, particularly male adolescents, it becomes important to understand how this model is both shaped by and reaffirms the discourse of illegality and the Latino threat narrative and the detrimental impact that this has on setting the trajectory for Mexican youth once they bump up against the “system.”

The theory of risk and resilience is a commonly applied framework for understanding the complex interaction of factors at multiple levels that affect delinquent behaviors. It is the terms in which “risk” and delinquency are discussed. The most widely utilized model of risk and resiliency defines resiliency as “positive adaptation in
response to adversity” (Holleran & Waller, 2003, p. 339). Adverse experiences include a youth’s exposure to “risk factors” that threaten positive adaptational outcomes or are considered “psychosocial adversity or events that would be considered a stressor to most people and that may hinder normal functioning” (Arrington & Wilson, 2000, p. 223). Protective factors are often described as “buffers” between individuals and risk factors. By acting as a buffer, the model indicates that protective factors are able to facilitate positive outcomes for youth, despite exposure to adversity.

Risk and protective factors reach across multiple systems. It is important to understand the theoretical framework of risk and resilience as it informs policy and practice. The traditional model of resilience focuses on individual attributes that increase a youth’s likelihood of contact with the juvenile justice system, the risk of “delinquent” behaviors, and the risk within the juvenile justice system for recidivism. It does not maintain a mechanism to provide a critical analysis to systematic forces shaping individual’s use of protective factors and expression of resilience.

Defining risk becomes predictive when paired with frameworks of prevention and intervention, constructing an identity of risk for those youth identified. The literature about risk is extensive and describes “at risk” youth, specifically Latino “at risk” youth usually as experiencing higher rates of poverty, educational challenges, substance abuse, depression, and acculturation challenges. This traditional model becomes problematic in that it tends to pathologize these youth and attribute individual character flaws as the root of “behavioral problems.”

Risk assessment tools are addressed specifically by the National Council de la Raza, as a potential tool of bias, indicating that detention and judicial decisions are
grounded in subjective factors that one could argue are clearly informed by the Latino threat narrative and discursive forces about the danger of Latino youth in particular. Risk, when informed by discursive forces, measures not just the risk of re-offense, of depression, of substance abuse, of recidivism, but for Mexican adolescent males, measures the threat of who they are, of their racialized ethnicity and masculinity, and legitimizes their existence in the space of illegitimacy, of illegality, and of delinquency. It at once both relegates these youth to the margins and reifies their location there.

The conception would seem to reasonably attribute to Latino youth’s overrepresentation in the juvenile justice system (Villarruel et al, 2000). They are more likely to be stopped, more likely to be detained, more likely to be in detention for longer, more likely to go to placement (Villarruel et al, 2000). Having this identity as an “at risk” youth, a minority youth, a delinquent youth, particularly in the context of the juvenile justice system. Being perceived as a threat and the discrimination shaping that threat places Latino youth at increased risk of low expectation/aspirations for the future, and risky behaviors (Pollard & Hawkins, 1999).

Michael Ungar (2004) critiques the gaps in knowledge associated with the positivist risk/resilience model. He points out the ways in which the models of risk and resilience put forth a two-sided coin argument; that resilience exists because adversity exists but has been unable to depict a clear picture of the interaction of these two concepts or to encounter the equation of how many protective factors it takes to offset a risk factor, etc. While much more complex than the flip of a coin, Ungar (2004) further acknowledges the limitations of the ecological risk/resilience model to account for the
diversity of experience of marginalized youth and how risk and resilience may look different for those youth.

The underlying assumption of the model of risk and resiliency is that there are detrimental psychological effects for risk factors and that protective factors mitigate those to improve mental health and functioning. However, when taken in context, what might be considered a protective factor for middle class white adolescent male may not have the same benefits or favorable outcomes as an undocumented socioeconomically marginalized Mexican adolescent male. Nor would a marginalized youth have access to the same structural resources as non-minority groups, such as gainful employment, meaningful participation in school, and the valuing of their cultural identity. What the model lacks is a means to understand not just the context of the experience of the individual “at risk,” but more so what both the context and his or her negotiation of the context means to the individual.

The fundamental question that the model of risk and resiliency poses and seeks to answer, however misguided by discursive forces, is an important one. Why do some kids make it and others don’t? It is in a sense the question at the foundation of the juvenile justice system and is what guides the pursuit for that cost-benefit analysis to up the odds through a combination of preventions and interventions to reduce recidivism, deter crime, and at its most altruistic, help youth change their course.

A new model of resilience defines resilience as relational, in that in the processes of resilience, both protective and risk factors, should be defined within a constructionist framework (Ungar, 2004). A constructionist approach to resilience reflects a postmodernist foundation rather than the positivist ecological and systems based risk and
resilience framework. A constructionist model of resilience defines resilience as the outcome of negotiations of an individual within a particular context to maintain a sense of health that is contextually collectively defined (Ungar, 2004, p. 342). This model acknowledges the way that the hegemony of western middle class norms has shaped researchers’ perceptions and definitions of resilience, particularly among minority youth, and indicates a need to recognize this inherent bias to traditionally defined risk and protective factors.

Resiliency becomes not just defined by a negotiation of pathways to subjectively constructed identities of health and success but in the socio-political context becomes the construction of an identity of resiliency. The (re)construction of identity, particularly the perspective of an individual actively negotiating their resilience re-affirms not just the subjective meaning of resilience but has the potential to become an empowering process, a form of resistance. A constructionist model of resiliency recognizes the fundamental tension that exists between the system that uses a discourse of individual risk and pathways to resilience while at the same time engages in the re-construction of identities of risk without recognizing youth’s daily negotiations to pathways of health and resilience in the reality of their communities and as discursive subjects.

Valuing context of resiliency and the diverse ways that minority youth negotiate protective factors as individuals and collectively provides a framework to understand how “culture interacts with psychological development and adversity so that people experience risk differently” (Arrington, 2000, p. 226). Experiencing risk differently implies the context of marginalization, and the interaction of culture with psychological development indicates the ways that a positive ethnic identity is a source of resiliency for
minority youth, particularly Latino youth, as they combat discourses of “illegality”
imposing identities upon them. A strong sense of identity helps to “organize and give
meaning to one’s experiences, and to guide one’s decisions and behaviors, whereas a
fragmented, confused, or poorly structure sense of identity may render one especially
susceptible to external events” (Schwartz et al, 2005, p. 393). Thus, cultural identity is
both a protective and risk factor in varying contexts, most importantly as defined by the
youth.

Initial research suggest that “traditional values and beliefs continue to figure
prominently in identity formation for Chicano/a adolescents, despite risks associate with
minority status, economic deprivation, and fragmentation in some families and
communities” (Holleran & Waller, 2003, p. 336). In a qualitative study with Latino
youth in the southwest, Latino adolescents report values of familismo (family closeness
and loyalty), fidelidad (loyalty), and religiosidad (religious worldview) as sources of
resiliency and as components of their cultural identity (Holleran & Waller, 2003).
Religiosidad as defined by the youth describes a worldview in which “acceptance of
hardship, suffering, and death as inevitable and integral parts of life” and in which there
is a “close connection between such sacrifices and the possibility of redemption or
transformation” (Holleran & Waller, 2003, p. 339).

The youth also reported that the values of familismo and fidelidad placed an
importance on loyalty that “is so valued as to be worth inflicting or incurring physical
harm” (Holleran & Waller, 2003, p. 341). Many youth report that in their community, in
their peer group, and in their interface with the broader society and discrimination and
marginalization, they “viewed high risk behavior and violence as necessary and
unavoidable parts of becoming an adult in their barrio” (Holleran & Waller, 2003, p. 342). While adhering to many of their traditional Mexican American values in a “maladaptive” response to marginalization, many youth view gang life as “transformative, leading to a reevaluation of priorities and commitment to prosocial life goals (a protective factor frequently cited in the resilience literature)” (Holleran & Waller, 2003, p. 342).

Through the intersection of risk and protective factors as defined by the youth and their cultural identity, these youth were able to achieve some of the same resources of resiliency through their “delinquent and disordered behaviors” (Ungar, 2004, p. 354). To effectively engage these at risk youth in any sort of meaningful change process, it would be necessary to examine “how race, gender, class, ability, and other factors affect not just access to health resources but, at a more fundamental level, our definition of resilience itself” (Ungar, 2004, p. 360).

Using a constructionist model of resiliency, particularly focused on the potential risk/protective factor of cultural identity will assist researchers in identifying previously unrecognized patterns, authenticated by the youth with whom they are engaged, and will provide better insight into how youth engaged in these behaviors and systems view their own behaviors and their “own perspective on their culturally embedded pathways to resilience” (Ungar, 2004, p. 359).

This provides important implications for potential practices and policies related to the juvenile justice system. Consistently through the literature, it has been found that Latino youth (particularly male adolescents) report higher substance use, higher rates of depression, and higher amounts of risky behavior. They are more likely to be arrested,
detained, put in placement, adjudicated as adults, and to be imprisoned as adults (America’s Cradle to the Prison Pipeline, 2007). Despite these findings, there is a severe gap in research into more culture specific factors correlated with these findings including subpopulation differences such as ethnicity, racialized identities, legal status, level/degree of acculturation, gender, and systematic forms of oppression and prejudice affecting this population.

In order to design effective strategies to identify some of these traditional risk factors as well as unique experiences such as (il)legal documentation, researchers need to shift away from prevention and intervention strategies based on traditional models of resiliency and on deficit based models of cultural identity and the processes of acculturation. Though Latino youth’s perspectives of their own experience of delinquency and risky behaviors are generally marginalized in research, some qualitative research is increasingly finding that a positive integrated ethnic identity is a factor of resilience for these youth.

Interventions and programs based in cultural values are often more successful in preventing delinquency, addressing community/youth/and familial needs, and reducing recidivism. Developing and implementing more truly culturally grounded interventions and services such as programs and policies focused on Mexican-American values of familismo, reliosidad, and fidelidad as defined by the youth will be more effective and provide an increased degree of service to the youth.

It is therefore important to expand the depth of research around the “Latino” experience to more fully understand the complexity of the Mexican American experience specifically, including an examination of current political and economic policies and
media perceptions shaping that experience. A constructionist model of resiliency combined with qualitative research methods that engage these marginalized youth in a discursive process will demonstrate that “an understanding of juvenile correctional institutions from the client’s point of view may hold valuable information about how young men use their treatment to change delinquent attitudes or behaviors” (Abrams, 2005, p. 64).

As the juvenile justice system seeks to aggregate Mexican youth as figures in a cost-benefit analysis, a model of risk takes on a larger meaning within the context of an analysis of power. As the individual youth is assessed in the broader context of the Latino threat narratives, the youth is perceived not just for an individual delinquent act, but also is perpetually on trial for the risk that the youth poses to the nation-state as a part of a threat discourse and the hegemonic construction of criminality by non-citizenship. This amplifies the perception of risk and justifies punitive responses, both through immigration and juvenile justice systems.

In his discussion of “virtualism,” Leo Chavez (2008) discusses the process of representations taking the place of real lives. The identities of Mexican youth have become generalized and typified abstractions tied to statistical information of risk informed by the Latino threat narrative that shapes policy and practice in response to this perception of threat (Chavez 2008, p. 5-6). A constructionist model of resiliency can engage Mexican youth in a research methodology that gives voice to their every day experiences and to articulate their own perspective of the ways that they are actively negotiating the discursive forces constructing identities of “illegality,” the socioeconomic
and racialized processes of marginalization, and to demonstrate the way that these forces and processes are impacting these youths’ lives.
METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Purpose

This study is at its heart about relationships, about insight, and about hope. Living and working in the Kings Beach, California for nearly five years, this investigator has had the opportunity to build trust and relationships within the community and particularly with an extended peer network of Mexican male adolescents who have had some form of contact with the juvenile justice system. Using a model of grounded theory, the study was designed out of a series of informal conversations with these youth and of the observations of these youths’ experiences as they negotiate not just the juvenile justice system, but the discursive forces that are shaping their daily experiences.

What seemed to emerge in discussion with these youth is that the sources of resiliency that they identify and the ways that they view their negotiation to pathways of resiliency seem to not be identified or incorporated into the framework of risk and resiliency that the juvenile justice system uses. Instead, what seems to occur is that their experiences become flatly articulated, evaluated, and categorized in terms of risk in regards to “illegality” and “delinquency.” These young men were often defined as “at-risk” but rarely as resilient, despite the daily efforts they described making to get by.

This research design is about developing resistance, a counter-construction of identity. It is about giving those who are pushed to the margins an opportunity to provide their own narrative of experience and how they negotiate the larger discursive forces at work in their lives, specifically the Latino threat narrative and the way that this informs the juvenile justice system. It is qualitative and exploratory.
Using a constructionist theoretical framework of resiliency, this design explored the ways that these youth are negotiating pathways to resiliency within their community. It is an effort to give voice to their experience and to use that voice to inform. In other words, taking into account the discursive context that these youth are daily negotiating, when given a chance to say something, what will they say? And how will this provide insight into the way that discursive forces in the larger polity are affecting these youths’ daily experiences and negotiations to pathways of resistance as they maneuver within and around the juvenile justice system.

The study design consisted of a focus group, short written narrative, and an informal interview based on photo voice activity with each participant. Participation was voluntary and the inclusion/exclusion criteria for participants were:

- Male
- Between the ages of 14 and 20
- Self-describes as Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicano, Latino, and/or Hispanic
- Per self-report, have had some form of contact (formal or informal) with the juvenile justice system

There were approximately 15-20 participants, a sample size sufficient for a qualitative, heuristic study of male Latino youth in the community who are often described as “at risk” by educational institutions, community agencies, and specifically the juvenile justice system. In addition to participating in the study, the sample size was a group of young men who regularly spent time together in school, in the community, and with their families. The number of participants at any given stage of the research design varied due to the adjudication, incarceration, placement, and deportation issues reflective of the challenge that these youth experience negotiating double bind of illegality and delinquency.
Having an existing relationship with many of the participants, this investigator was able to the research design with the participants prior to the study. The youth contributed anecdotal information about their experiences, positive and negative, with the juvenile justice system in conversation with the student investigator. Because this research design utilizes a framework of grounded theory, the qualitative information is analyzed thematically and among patterns that emerge across the experiences and perspectives shared by the participants.

**Recruitment**

Each youth participant was provided an informational flier by the student investigator. The student investigator was available to answer any questions about the research design and/or participation requirements. After reviewing the informational letter, participation proceeded with verbal consent from the youth participant and parent/guardian (if under 18 years old). Signed consent was not obtained due to concern about confidentiality and protection of these youth if documentation of signed consent is tied to a youth’s description of experience of being undocumented or having undocumented family members. Verbal consent is sufficient to avoid any possible legal consequences for those participants and their families who are undocumented by providing identifying information about their legal status.

**Research Design**

The research design was three part, providing youth participants varying levels of participation. The focus group was an opportunity for the youth to come together as a group and engage in general dialogue about their community and their perceptions about their community. The focus group was facilitated by the student investigator and was
based on nine catalyst questions developed by the International Resiliency Project (Ungar & Teram, 2005), a collective of international researchers focusing on increasing the qualitative body of knowledge about resiliency among youth. The nine questions were:

1. What would I need to know to grow up well here?
2. How do you describe people who grow up well here despite the many problems they face?
3. What does it mean to you, to your family, and to your community, when bad things happen?
4. What kinds of things are most challenging for you growing up here?
5. What do you do when you face difficulties in your life?
6. What does being healthy mean to you and others in your family and community?
7. What do you, and others you know, do to keep healthy, mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually?
8. Can you share with me a story about another child who grew up well in this community despite facing many challenges?
9. Can you share a story about how you have managed to overcome challenges you face personally, in your family, or outside your home in your community?

The focus group was approximately 2 hours in duration and food was provided. An independent observer was present to document physical body language and interactions between the youth participants and between the youth participants and the student investigator as they discuss the nine catalyst questions. The participants provided feedback about the questions. Many of the participants did not understand how the formality of the questions related to their lives. The richer data was obtained outside of the focus group, processing the questions, discussing what the term “community” means, and through the narratives. Many of the participants indicated a disconnection from the word community. They described feeling a stronger connection to “Crown Town” or Kings Beach, to their families, and to their friends and people in their lives with whom they have strong relationships.

Some participants completed a short written narrative as a response to a prompt. The participant could choose to answer one or all of the following prompts:
1. Tell me about one time when you felt proud.
2. Tell me about one time when you felt trapped.
3. Tell me about one time you felt worried for yourself or someone else.
4. List three things you like about where you live.
5. List three things you would change about where you live.
6. List three reasons you “bang.”
7. Tell about one experience in which you felt discriminated against.
8. List three things I would see in you if I saw all the goodness in you that there is to see.
9. List one thing you would want a teacher, probation, or a judge to know.

Each participant had approximately twenty minutes to respond and was able to respond to as many of the prompts as they chose. The participants seemed engaged in this process and seemed to feel more connected and related to the prompts. Originally designed to be completed prior to the focus group, the narrative was done after and seemed to be a way for youth to further process some of the ideas that were discussed within the group.

The photovoice portion of the research design was the most powerful. Each participant was provided a disposable camera and given the instructions, “If I asked you: what is it like to spend a day (24 hours) in your shoes, what would be important for me to know, see, or understand? Please use this camera to show me.” The participant was originally given approximately one week to take his pictures and return it to the student investigator.

For many of the participants, the student investigator met with the youth multiple times, describing the instructions emphasizing the youth’s perspective of his community, the things that he values/feels are important, the things that matter to him, and what he likes/would change about his community. The student investigator continually encouraged the participants and re-affirmed the value of their participation, of their
perspective, and whatever it is that they had to say. Even with this encouragement, participants took between 1 week and 2 months to take their pictures.

After developing the pictures, the student investigator interviewed each participant individually with an informal conversational interview format, based on the photographs taken by the youth participant. Each interview was approximately 60 minutes. Generally, the interview began by discussing the participant’s experience taking pictures and his method or process for deciding what pictures to take. It was from this initial opening that student investigator was able to discuss the pictures taken, and those not taken.

Each part of the process built upon the other and added a new layer to the research in that participation varied for each part of the design. No participant completed all three parts of the design. This provided each participant to provide a unique voice and perspective to the process and to shape the direction of each part.

Method of Data Analysis

Using grounded theory, some general themes began to emerge that were reflective of processes identified in the literature review as systematic forces shaping and daily impacting these youth (Charmaz, 2006). After interviewing five of the participants, a group of young men whom had been most integral in the development of this project, particular themes emerged through their discussions of their community and their place in it. This developed a guiding framework for the remaining interviews. As themes were noted, a coding structure was developed to draw comparisons between each participants’
interviews and from these codes which gradually conceptualized into an interpretation of the data.

Themes were noted during the focus group, particularly what ideas and conversations seemed to resonate with the participants. These particularly powerful thoughts were what drove the theme of the narrative. In the focus group, being a man, being a good man, and negotiating manhood seemed to especially resonate with the young men and in how they relate to one another. Respecting the front of invincibility common to young men, the focus group felt angrier, more frustrated and the young men seemed to feed off of one another’s energy.

The photovoice interview was far more intimate and conversational. The interview felt vulnerable, at turns sad and happy, particularly with shared memories or observations about conocidos (mutual friends/acquaintances). Many of the participants allowed themselves to talk about painful experiences related to racism and poverty, looking down at their feet and hands, resting their heads on the table, or picking it an unseen stain. Some participants became tearful when talking about their mothers, their siblings, and their younger cousins and family members. The young men described feeling at once frustrated, powerless, and powerful as they navigated the different spheres of their lives: in town, at school, involved with probation, with their friends and with their families.

Using the qualitative research software, NVivo, I was able to draw comparisons between interviews, in addition to reviewing audio recordings of the interviews and making notes about particular themes that frequently were identified by the participants. Themes were also drawn and cross-compared between the individual interviews and
group discussion that occurred during the focus group. Thematic analysis of manhood and definition of “manhood” was coded to include the individual narratives also completed during the focus group.

Respect. Respect was discussed multiple times within each individual interview and during the focus group. Being a good man means having respect. Being a good son means giving respect. In order to get respect, you have to give respect.

Visual comparisons were drawn between photographs and the photographs that each participant chose to take. Most of the participants took pictures of their families, of local taggings, of their families, and of the local Boys and Girls Club. Not one boy took a picture of Lake Tahoe, one of the most widely photographed locations in the world.
FINDINGS

Before discussing some of the themes discussed and identified throughout this research methodology, it is important to discuss the dynamics of the group of participants and how their experiences throughout the five months of the study demonstrate the concerning dynamics of Latino youth in the juvenile justice described in the literature and highlighted by the both the National Council de la Raza and the Pipeline to the Prison campaign by the Children’s Defense Fund (2007). There were approximately twenty-two participants who were provided informational flyers and who gave verbal consent for participation.

Anecdotally through self-report by the participants, the following was observed about over the course of the five month study:

Juvenile Justice Involvement:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Count</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ICE deportation/detention</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incarcerated for more than 30 days</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violation or New Charge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juvenile Justice Involvement</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Approximately four participants reported having either successfully or unsuccessfully terminating juvenile probation, two participants reported no current or past juvenile justice involvement, and sixteen participants reported current formal/informal probation involvement. As evident in the chart above, many of the youth with current probation involvement continued to experience challenges during the course of this study. Over two thirds received more than one violation of probation and half received new charges. Three participants, including one with past probation involvement but no current, reported involvement by U.S. immigration.

Of the original group of twenty-two, twenty were given cameras for participation in the study. Approximately one third of the participants took pictures and participated in individual interview process. Challenges to full participation became apparent as many of the young men went in and out of detention, were confined to their homes, and/or were in relapse, which made it difficult for them to follow through and/or fully participate. Of the original group of twenty-two, one third participated in the focus group, with an additional three young men who had not participated in the photography portion of the study, either because they chose not to, were not available or unable to participate. Nearly half of the original twenty two were able to participate in the narrative portion.

As the study progressed, it became apparent that so much of the research extended beyond the conversations about photographs or the focus group discussing resiliency at the community level. What emerged was an almost ethnographic relationship with these young men as our interactions and relationship crisscrossed through intersections of service provision, research, mentorship, and neighbors. Conversations were had in multiple settings and while this discussion section focuses primarily on the
understandings gained from the original research design, these conversations and relationships continue to inform this researcher’s understanding of these youths’ experiences as young Latino men growing up in the North Lake Tahoe area.

This in itself speaks to one of the main goals of this study, about the importance of relational research when engaging youth whose experiences of marginalization, discrimination, and who have discursive forces constructing identities around/on them. While these young men, especially those who find themselves navigating the juvenile justice system, frequently find themselves engaged in what many described as “fake” relationships with various adults and service providers, including but not limited to probation officers, therapists, social workers, teachers, law enforcement officers, etc. One of the messages that was most clearly articulated by almost every participant in the study was a desire to interface with adults in their life, “who take the time to listen” and “who actually care.”

While this is not necessarily new information about this population “at risk” or really of teenagers in general, it is notable for purposes of best practices, that even these kids who are often described as the most at risk, as the least attached, and the least connected are really looking for someone to hear them; that they are looking for someone to listen to them; and do believe that they have something important to say.

The participants did have something to say, and not surprisingly, many had similar observations when it came to perspectives of their community, and more interestingly, their place in it. After continually experiencing challenges in engaging youth to take pictures of their daily life “in their community,” I began to become aware that perhaps it was this phrasing that was so difficult. As one youth adamantly told me
almost 2 months after I gave him his camera and still he had not taken any pictures, “I don’t have anything to take pictures of. There’s nothing.”

How he could take pictures of his daily life in “his community” if he is invisible in his community? Is this difficulty finding significance in his life because he feels insignificant in life? In contrast to this, many of the youth participants who were able to more readily identify sources of resilience in their life, did not appear to struggle with this prompt, in that they, through some negotiation, were able to carve out a place of visibility through specific activities and through their connection with their family and peers. These experiences though less connected to the larger “community” became the space of actualization for these youth, that they found health in a space visible to those with whom they are connected, even if not recognized, viewed, or valued by the larger community.
DISCUSSION

Structural Constraints – A Sense of Risk

Illegality

“I was working and they asked me, ‘where you from?’ And I was like, KB (Kings Beach), and they were like, ‘no…before?’ I was like, ‘I’m Chicano. My parents were born in Mex, and I was born here.’ They said, ‘oooh you’re native.” What kind of shit is that?” – Ivan, 16

“Doesn’t matter what good we do or how much good stuff you do, they’re still just going to treat you like a fuck up” – Kike, 16

In discussing their daily experiences, it quickly became apparent that these young men feel daily confronted by the concept of “illegality” and by a sense of criminality. These young men indicated feeling very well not just of their own legal status and the legal status of their family members and friends but also the perception of their legal status. One participant described his sense of deportability through an awareness not just of his undocumented status but of what that means for him within the juvenile justice system, “I mean cause I wasn’t born here and I’m 17 about to turn 18 and, I mean like, I get in trouble, and I go to juvey or something like that, something happens to me like I’ll stay away from my parents and like what would I do?” (J.C., 17). This sense of deportability is compounded by the knowledge that their families are constantly at risk. When asked how often he thinks about immigration, Jorge (15) replied “pretty much every day because all the time you hear about people getting deported…mostly from my friends…I just think to myself what about if it were my family member.”

These young men are aware of the place in which they are situated, a place in which criminality and culture are collapsed and what that means for them, as Mexican
young men. When describing a picture of his blond haired, blue eyed cousin, one young man told me, “it’s good to be a gringo because immigration won’t do nothing to you” (Bachas, 15). What is articulated is a sense of risk, risk of deportation and of assumptions, that they are criminals no matter what.

Their awareness of these assumptions often seem to prevent their willingness to engage in programs offered by schools and by juvenile probation because of a described feeling that “it won’t matter anyways” (Skinny Black, 15). This seems especially pertinent to expectations/aspirations related to education, such as finishing high school, pursuing higher education, and pursuing a skilled career or trade. For example, when describing a program offered about work and education and how it matters for the future, Ernesto (14) spoke animatedly until he was asked about the possibilities of such a program for his future employment and education. He quickly replied about whether it mattered or not, “not for me it doesn’t. I’m not a citizen.”

Being confronted daily about one’s sense of illegality continually reinforces these young men’s awareness of how legal status constricts potential pathways of resilience and how they are able to gain what is important to them, such as respect, despite the constraints of illegality. This awareness also highlights the very stark reality of the ways that pathways and access to pathways of resiliency are severely constrained by legislation dictating legality, illegality, documentation, and (un)documentation.

As these young men describe the sources of resiliency related to respect, manhood, and an ability to use hardship as a means of transformation. Immigration and a status of illegality (whether perceived or actual), becomes a clear barrier in accessing
these sources and in “getting through” the experience of legal involvement, juvenile justice, and juvenile probation.

Racism

“You can just tell the racists. It’s like the way they look at you, like they’re not really seeing you.” –Victor, 17

“They’re the ones that look at you like you’re nothing.” –Bachas, 15

Consistently, towards the end of each interview, after the pictures had been discussed, each young man began to share about his experiences of racism, of discrimination, and of prejudice. What is notable about the “timing” of this conversation, as an addendum to the visual representation of their world that was discussed informally, is that even as these young men described their lives, they seemed to have no way to visually represent these experiences of discrimination or to articulate their place in their daily life. As one young man struggled to articulate his experiences, he shook his head, saying “I can’t explain what I see or been through. I don’t know, I can’t explain. I can just tell by their actions. For some reason, I can’t explain.”

When they were able to find their words, they described the Latino threat narrative. Through describing the Latino threat narrative, these young men verbally articulated the internalized experiences of racism. Izzy (17) stated clearly his perspective on whether or not he would go to college or find a career someday, “You never see a Mexican go to college…what good thing did you ever see a Mexican do?” Internalizing the racialized virtualisms as described by Leo Chavez (2008), these young men describe ethnic identities that are racialized caricatures. One day while waiting for one of the
participants in an area of town that is predominantly Mexican, Josie (20) asked “You’re not nervous being around all these Mexicans? Make sure you lock up your shit.”

Beyond the caricatures, this internalization of these negative stereotypes becomes dangerous when it becomes a justification for unsafe behaviors, particularly as youth seek out self destructive and/or unhealthy strategies to negotiate pathways to resilience. Ivan, a 16 year old who explains why he sought out the gang life, “it’s like the violence is just in you and you just, like, look for it because you had to take it…I think it’s a Mexican thing”

It seemed to be difficult to find ways to express or describe the way that power is operating in their lives. This, of course, is not surprising given the invisible ways that power operates in marginalizing these young men. How would they take a picture of the discourse of the Latino threat narrative or of legislation discussing the “immigration problem.” While not articulating these experiences through their photography, these young men described each incident in a very visual way, as though the imprint of that experience is guarded closely to their hearts.

_Invisibility_

“What am I supposed to take pictures of? Who would care about what we think anyways?” – Troll, 18

Also significant was the absence of photographs of sources of resiliency that the young men verbally identified in their community and in their lives. This is not to imply the young men did not indicate ways that they are negotiating resiliency in their lives; rather, outside of family members, girlfriends, or a few friends, these pathways existed in the community, and were more difficult to capture. There may be many reasons for this.
The young men may have felt uncomfortable taking pictures openly because they are teenagers, because they are “tough” young men, and/or because they are not used to having a camera or taking pictures. These reasons may have all been factors.

Given the dynamics of space and place in the community, these young men can feel connection to places in the community and access them as they negotiate pathways of resilience; and yet, as youth in the community often relegated to the space of non-existence, their participation exists in both an invisible and visible way. The majority of pictures could be generally indicated as within close proximity to each young man’s home and specific street. Pictures out in the community, with the exception of the local Boys and Girls Club, were predominantly of “taggings,” of gang-related graffiti.

While this could be attributed to the aforementioned reasons (comfort level with cameras, adolescence, etc.) or simply to gang allegiances, it could also be quite significant qualitatively. As one respondent said when speaking about graffiti, “they do it because they can; because no one can stop them but themselves,” it is of note that the majority of community photographs were of taggings. Taggings could be argued to be ways that these youth are asserting their place within the community, in which they are literally ascribing visibility within the spaces of their community, asserting themselves, and in the process, negotiating pathways of resilience to identities of existence, respect, and assertiveness.

The other community location that was repeatedly identified, discussed, and photographed was the Boys and Girls Club. The Boys and Girls Club was consistently one of the only “community” locations photographed by the participants. As one young man said, “That’s where you go there. You stay there and you stay out of trouble.” In
other words, that’s where you go to stay safe. What this indicates is that the Boys and
Girls Club is a place of belonging for these youth, where they feel they are active
participants and make a meaningful contribution by their participation. Having a place of
belonging in the community is having a place to stay out of trouble in the community.

Relationships and Connectedness – A Pathway to Resilience

“Where my mom came from in Mex, she had to work had to get here, and it’s…like, I
don’t know, it’s my race.” – Ivan 16

“I look up to them because they want me to do good. They think I can do good.” –
Ernesto, 14

“If you aren’t going to keep yourself out of trouble, keep your brother out of trouble.
Keep your brothers and sisters out of trouble and that’s the best way you can do.”
– J.C., 17

Contrary to issues of acculturation and ethnic identity as risk factors, conversation
with these young men quickly demonstrated that the ways these youth are able to
negotiate pathways to resilience are grounded very firmly in a positive ethnic identity and
many of the traditional values associated with being Mexicano. As the youth participants
spoke about ways that they negotiate resiliency, they described relational pathways to
resilience that lie in their ability to have mutual experience, to share in one another’s
story, and to be a part of a story larger than just themselves.

By simplifying risk and resilience to “objective,” quantifiable individual
characteristics, not only do we as researchers lose sight of the structures of power shaping
pathways available to these youth, but also one of the most powerful ways that youth
localize resilience within the context of their daily experience: in their relationships, their
shared memories, and their ability to identify themselves as a part of a story larger than
themselves. It is almost as if pathways of resilience do not end in successes; rather, the
direction of a pathway to resilience lies in the individual’s ability to make connection (and feel connected) within the context of a collective well-being. A youth becomes an active agent in his own story when he operates relationally to someone else. Sources of resilience for these young men are tied to a positive ethnic identity and their cultural values: the family, respect, and collectivism.

Family

“Family comes first.” – Ernesto, 15

“Well, I put my grandma because she is a very special person to me” – Victor, 17

“I’m there for them and they’re there for me.” – Jorge, 15

Throughout the interviews and emerging from the focus group was an emphasis on the family as a source of strength and protection. The strength is the unity of the family and the ability of the family to not just be together but to “survive” together. For many of the participants, the person with whom they felt closest was an immediate family member, usually their mothers, their siblings, and their cousins. There was a strong sense of reciprocity between family members, emotional and physical. As Ivan (16) described he and his mother’s relationship, “my mom. She’s special. We’re that close that whatever she gets I get. When her knees hurt, my knees hurt. When my stomach hurt, her stomach hurts. I don’t know. It’s been like that since I was born.”

Beyond their relationship with their family members, the value of “holding up your end of the bargain” (Tony, 16) of everyone doing their part was an important value identified. The young men described their desire to be good men and to make healthy choices as a reflection of an unspoken family agreement, of an understanding of the ways that their actions are impacting their family members, particularly their mothers and
younger siblings. Many of the participants described a sense of responsibility to be good role models for their younger family members. Ernesto, 14, talked about his worries for his younger cousins, “They [younger cousins] shouldn’t be learning about that stuff (gang affiliation)...I want to be someone that they look up to.”

Respect

“I’m respecting them. They should be respecting me.” – Ivan, 16

On gang involvement... “They do it because they want love. They want respect when they’re with each other. I show respect to you and you show respect back. I show you love and you show love back. You see?” – Loco, 17

Respect is a concept that was most frequently identified across the research design and across multiple areas of the young men’s daily life. Respect is a pursuit that exists in their daily life: respect at home, respect in the streets, and respect at school and work. In clarifying what respect means, particularly in the context of the community and interfacing with institutions, respect indicates an ability to stand up for yourself and your family, to not take “disrespect,” and to be assertive. Israel, 17, put it simply, “you can’t just take it.”

Many of the young men clarified that standing up for yourself and your family, is a code to which they adhere. Jorge, 15, explained it more clearly, “you like, need to stand up for yourself and your family. I’m not just going to let someone disrespect me or my family.” J.C., also 17, shared that respect is important and that there are some things worth standing up for, some things worth letting go, but that “messing with my family is a different thing.”
Respect is also defined within the context of home, family, and relations. This is the context within which respect and care converge. It is also the balance to the assertiveness, some might term aggressiveness, projected in the community and becomes a foundation of the man that these young men become in the relationships in their lives, and in their relationship with the broader community. This is of note that within the context of a relationship, respect takes on an additional dimension --“respect in your family means, like, caring for each other and doing what you are supposed to do” -- Ernesto, 14.

Giving respect and getting respect is in part, what defines being a good man, it is in part the culmination of boy’s educacion (Valenzuela 1999). Victor, 17, talked about what being a man is to him, “I mean, I’ve got things that I want to do and I want to work and earn money and help my family out…I want to be a good man.” Manhood is a focus for many of these young men and more so the ways that they are negotiating the kind of man that they want to become. Masculinity is closely interlinked with the previously mentioned values of respect, the family, and collectivism --“Being a man is just doing what you need to do. It’s working hard and helping your family.” – - Ortega, 18

As they negotiate the process of becoming men, it is important that they are able to draw upon the resources of those values in shaping their masculinity. Becoming men is a process in which these young men are actively engaged, and one in which they are invested. Many of these young men described feeling constricted by their juvenile justice involvement in negotiating this manhood process. Becoming a man is how they face hardship – as Ivan, 16, said in response to, what do you do when you face difficulties in your life? -- “Man up and face it. I do what I’m supposed to do.”
Collectivism

“My friends are my family. Like who I know and how I know them.” – Ivan, 16

“It’s good to be close to everybody.” – Skinny Black, 15

In response to, What do you, and others you know, do to keep healthy, mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually?
“We share stuff.” – Jorge, 15

Collectivism can be described as a cultural value that focuses on a mutual empathy and an emphasis on the welfare of the group over the individual (Holleran, p. 335). It also has been indicated as a foundational component of Chicano/Mexicano values and provides a sense of belonging. This value of collectivism was often identified relating to their peer group and the sense that collectively, these young men feel that they are “messing up.” Many of the young men felt a responsibility to their peers, “I told him, I told him. I just don’t understand why they don’t listen and like he just keeps fucking up” (Ivan, 16).

The importance that they place on helping one another and offering advice becomes a means for their own pursuit of resiliency. Many of the participants offered insights into one another’s struggles, expressing their concern about the struggles that they observed their peers experiencing and their own frustrations in not being able to help more. Loco, 17, explained, “I try, I guess, I do the best way I can but hopefully he’ll learn at some point and listen to me.”

Beyond offering advice, receiving advice from people who care is an important part of the educacion that boys need to become young men and good men. Becoming tearful, J.C. described one of his friends that helps him to stay out of trouble, “I appreciate, I mean I never told him that I appreciate that he tries to get me out of trouble
or focus me on what I should be focusing on.” Just as being a role model and offering advice, receiving advice from elders, giving respect, and trusting in those who care about you to give you good advice. Ivan, 16, identified the only people that he looks up to as his three older brothers, “my older brothers…they were like my dads and best friends, I would, like, go to them when things were bad or after an ass-whooping and they would just play around with you and make it better.”

The bond between these young men and their families connects to the value of collectivism discussed above, particularly when related to the peer group as it consists of an extended kinship network. Josie, who is 20, described his regrets as the oldest cousin, “I found out that me, Izzy, Skinny Black, and Flaco, are all locked up. That’s kind of sad, we are all cousins.”

These young men are motivated by the perceived investment of their word, of their role in the family, and an expectation to fulfill their role, particularly when that role is as an older sibling or role model. It is a sense of fulfillment that many of these young men described as with a sense of pride, of giving them a place, and of value. In being role models and in contributing to the well-being and general health of their family, many of the young men indicated a feeling of strength and purpose.

It is important to consider the potential detrimental impact of restricting contact through non-association orders and the resulting sense of not just of isolation, but in powerlessness to engage in the collective act of reciprocity, of advice giving, and of learning not just from their own mistakes, but more from the mistakes that their peers make. In describing what “helps,” the young men very clearly articulated the value of an emphasis to work together to “get on track, “ owning individuality of mistakes and
providing each other advice and feedback. These young men indicated an investment in succeeding collectively, and feel empowered by their ability to use their own skills/stories to contribute to the change they hope for their friends.

For example, gangs. Affiliating, claiming, representing, are all ways that these youth negotiate resilience within the contextual experience of their daily life, one labeled maladaptive, deviant, and delinquent. Granted, gang life is no easy life and perpetuates a cycle of violence and poverty, often more starkly mirroring larger society disparities in power and capitalist enterprise. However, it becomes more than just a “shelter” as described by one participant, it becomes a source of resiliency, of protection, and in some ways (as odd as it may sound) health, particularly when integrated into a positive ethnic identity in resistance to racism and processes of marginalization. As one participant described, “us Gangs. We help each other out…the Farmeros. For our reason, I’m trying to help him out too…because he’s making us look bad.”

It is time for researchers to recognize the functionality of these gangs and of other ways that these youth are seeking out, expressing, and defining their cultural values, connection to their positive ethnic identity, and making connections with positive relationships in their lives. It is not that they are not resilient, but rather that their access to resources within their homes, schools, and communities are limited in such a way that constraints their ability to demonstrate their resilience in positive ways.
LIMITATIONS

There were several limitations to this study. The small sample size as well as the inconsistent participation across the three parts of the research design indicates a need to expand the number of participants as well as engage an increased participation in all three parts of the research design. Incorporated into future research designs would be a way to more consistently follow youth and engage them throughout the span of the study. Information provided from participants while in custody, involved with immigration, etc. would clearly provide a higher level of insight into these youths’ experiences.

This would also strengthen the validity of the responses of the youth and add depth to the thematic coding structure by better being able to cross-compare responses not just between participants and between the three parts of the design, but also to compare each participants responses across and throughout the research design. The focus group, though contributing to the qualitative data, may have been more effective using pre-screened series of questions. Despite using a validated research tool by the International Resiliency Project, the questions did not seem to resonate with participants or connect with their daily speech or descriptions of their life and/or community. This study was exploratory in nature and raised a number of themes and areas to pursue in further research.
IMPLICATIONS

Implications for Practice and Policy

“I don’t know what else to say, but thanks for being a good person that actually cares.” – Chewy, 20

What does all of this mean? Why was this study important? And what does this mean for social work? The question really being asked is, so what do these young men’s experiences tell us? What does it show about the communities in which they live? And what can we as social workers do to mitigate the micro, mezzo, and macro forces impacting these young men’s ability to negotiate pathways to resiliency, particularly as they intersect with the juvenile justice system?

Interventions focused on Mexican youth within the juvenile justice system need to utilize the identified cultural values of collectivism, familismo, respeto, manhood, and a belief in transformation to better engage these youth in a process of change and redirect maladaptive behaviors using these values as strengths. This can be achieved by doing the following:

1) Nurture natural relationships between youth and people in their lives, such as family members, parents, siblings, grandparents, cousins, nieces/nephews, and with their peers
2) Utilize family based interventions with a focus on identifying common family values and ways that each family member is able to collectively express/respect those values
3) Engage youth in group interventions in which there is an emphasis on the benefit of the whole and in which youth are given an opportunity to make meaningful contributions to their community
4) Develop interventions grounded in these cultural values that promote a model of change emphasizing youths’ definitions of manhood
5) Frame interventions within a belief that hardship is an opportunity for transformation and that legal system involvement can be a chance to make positive life changes
6) Practice a philosophy of “educacion,” a form of training emphasizing the ability to live in the world as a caring, responsible, well-mannered, and respectful human being (Valenzuela 1999)

7) Engage in respectful, reciprocal relationships and respect the unique subjective standpoint of these youth

By grounding practice within the cultural values of these youth and their families, the juvenile justice system would better be able to align with the natural pathways of resiliency identified by these youth and not just work towards terminating juvenile probation and system involvement but work towards a mutual goal of becoming good men for the benefit of their families and communities.

Implications for Research and Social Justice

There is a need to utilize a framework of risk and resilience that includes a critical analysis of structural oppression and recognizes not just the ways that youth are seeking to negotiate pathways to resilience within their community but also ways that those pathways are constrained through a discourse shaping their ethnic identities. This is particularly important for the juvenile justice system, which has a strong focus on identifying and mitigating “risk.” The following issues should be addressed in order to add a critical lens to the theoretical framework of risk and resiliency as it is applied to the juvenile justice system:

1. Use research methodologies that are ethnographic and narrative-based to engage the unique subject position of these youth and to increase an understanding of forces of economic, political, racial, and gender marginalization affecting these youth and their system involvement
2. Increase both recognition and understanding of diversity of experience for “Latino” youth, this includes differentiating not just by country of origin but also examining differences for generational and legal statuses
3. Examine pre-arrest, pre-trial, and pre-adjudication stages of juvenile justice in order to increase understanding of factors influencing judicial decisions and the influence of the concept of “illegality” in ascribing criminal identities upon Mexican and Latino youth
4. Engage in a critical analysis of the concept of “risk” and how silent processes of discrimination and prejudice are legitimated through its application.

5. Incorporate information about acts of resistance into this framework in order to more fully identify youths’ strengths within context and to recognize their daily negotiations of pathways to resiliency.
CONCLUSION

Transformation

“I learn from people. Being on the streets, I don’t know, I see everything happening. It’s like watching a movie over and over again. It’s your movie. You can change it.”
- Ivan, 16

“That’s what I try to do… the best thing I’m hoping for myself is just to try to stay out of trouble, you know?” – J.C., 17

“You know when people talk about having those turning points in life, I think this is mine.” – Jose, 20

While these young men did not use the word transformation, the process that they described, the view that they hold about things happening for reason, what to do with the hardships in life, and how to become something beyond what has happened to you in the past, speaks to process of transformation. It also becomes a way for these young men to internalize the multiplicity of events and experiences going on in their life and make sense of it; and from that, move towards something beyond those hardships --“I think there are better things in life than that” (Victor, 17).

In developing a positive ethnic identity and ascribing to the above-identified values, an inherent assumption is the ability to engage in transformation, in a process of growth, and process of positive change. What would seem important for the juvenile justice system as it seeks to engage these youth in a process of change, would be to frame this transformation within the system, in a way that system involvement not only precipitates change, but is a meaningful part of the change.

Throughout the study, these young men described their place and experiences in their community, identifying openly the challenges that they face, and the ways that they
face those challenges. It is clear that a positive ethnic identity and an adherence to their
cultural values are a strong source of resiliency for Mexican youth, a source that is often
not just overlooked, but under-minded when these youth become involved with the
juvenile justice system. It is important to recognize risk in these youths’ lives, the very
real risks of poverty, marginalization and discrimination; however, it is even more
important to critically examine the way that the framework of risk and resiliency is
applied to the experiences of these youth.

These ways in which these youth negotiate pathways to resilience or often labeled
as deviant and/or delinquent. What seems to happen using this construct of risk and
resilience is that delinquent youth, those who are deemed more “at risk” are also defined
as “less resilient.” The juvenile justice system needs to recognize these youths’ need to
“create powerful and influential identities” for themselves and to recognize the ways that
these youth are demonstrating strategies of resilience, given the resources they have
available (Ungar, 2005, p. 1). The question for systems then becomes, how to address the
context within which youth are negotiating resilience and to nurture resilient identities.

By working within a framework of resilience that recognizes these cultural values
and the resilience of a positive ethnic identity, the juvenile justice system will be better
able to accommodate the diversity of experience, challenges, and limits to the ways that
these young men are able to negotiate resilience within their community and access the
resources associated with the construction of a positive ethnic identity. This seems to be
connected a perception of illegality, racism (experienced and internalized), and
invisibility. The occupation of a marginalized space within their community results.
The effect that their belief in their ability to go through a process of transformation that seems to be so intrinsic to their motivations at they navigate manhood, and resiliency. This is important, particularly for the juvenile justice system, in seeking ways to engage youth and use their juvenile justice involvement as a process of transformation, as a process of becoming good men. These young men experience acutely their place of marginalization in their community, both local and national, and...what this means for their legitimate opportunity to find a meaningful place (employment, citizenship, etc.) in their community. What is the question for these young men? What do you do when you face difficulties in your life?

“Get through it and be a better person afterwards.” – Rene, 17
References


Gramsci


