Mexican American Women Pursuing Counselor Education Doctorates: A Narrative Inquiry

Tamara J. Hinojosa and JoLynn V. Carney

The authors used narrative inquiry and Anzaldúa’s (1999) borderlands theory to understand the cultural experiences of 5 Mexican American women in doctoral programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. Results indicated that participants navigated multiple cultural spheres and that the doctoral program culture affected their professional identity. Implications for counselor education include engaging Mexican American women in academic activities congruent with their ethnic identities.

Keywords: Mexican American, women, doctoral, professional identity

The Mexican American population in the United States, particularly in the Southwest, is the fastest growing group in the nation. Although currently estimated to be 33 million and approximately 65% of the entire Hispanic population, individuals from this group struggle with academic degree completion (Motel & Patten, 2012). Moreover, data from the National Survey of Earned Doctorates in U.S. universities from 1990 to 2000 indicated that Hispanic women are underrepresented compared with all other female doctoral recipients (Watford, Rivas, Burciaga, & Solorzano, 2006). Actual numbers of Hispanic graduate counseling students and faculty from the 2014 Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 2015) annual report are so insignificant that it is necessary to combine the population as Hispanic/Latino/Spanish American. Together, members of this population make up only 7.75% of counselor education students and just 4.84% of counselor education faculty.

Although demographic data count Hispanic graduate students and faculty, their perspectives on graduate education have not been fully studied. A more in-depth exploration is needed to understand Hispanic women and their interface with the world of academia to capture their in-depth experiences in doctoral programs (Contreras & Gándara, 2006), as well as their willingness to be counselor educators (Watford et al., 2006). Thus, we turned our focus solely on Mexican American women’s experiences because they are the most underrepresented subgroup among all Hispanic subgroups in doctorate production. The aim of the current study was to expand the research on minorities by...
focusing on Mexican American women in counselor education and supervision (CES) doctoral programs accredited by CACREP. Furthermore, research has suggested that Mexican American female graduate students report feeling as though they are living in two different cultures: their culture of origin and the culture of academia (K. P. González et al., 2001). This dual cultural navigation has been referred to as a “border crossing phenomenon” (K. P. González et al., 2001, p. 578) and as “crossing boundaries” (Vera & de los Santos, 2005, p. 107). Anzaldúa’s (1999) borderlands theory provides an appropriate framework in which to explore these experiences.

**Borderlands Theory**

Borderlands theory is a means to acknowledge the experiences of women navigating many different cultural expectations and ways of knowing, while challenging academic conventions. The theory highlights the complexity of navigating these cultural ambiguities (Orozco-Mendoza, 2008). The theory consists of four concepts: *nepantla* (space that is in between), *coatlicue* (space of contradictions), *coyoxauhqui* (space of integration), and *la conciencia de la mestiza* (the conscience of the mestiza). Borderlands theory is a lens well suited to the women in our study whose cultural life experiences are often neglected in academia (Delgado Bernal, 2006).

**Nepantla**

*Nepantla* is a Nahuatl (the language of the Aztecs) term meaning “in-between space” (Keating, 2005, p. 1). According to borderlands theory, it represents living in the spaces between borders. During nepantla, fixed classifications based on gender, social economic status, or race diminish as women recognize the multiple yet related aspects of their identities. Boundaries start to become permeable, and women begin transcending rigid identity categories. This can be a painful process, but it can also facilitate identity transformation (Keating, 2005). For example, a Mexican American woman who encounters racism for the first time may be led to reflect on her ethnicity. Although this initial reflection may be painful, it can also begin a process of growth, thus spurring a new sense of identity. We viewed the Mexican American female participants in this study as tasked with transitioning identities while navigating the borderlands of a doctoral program, Mexican American culture, and other cultural realms.

**Coatlicue**

*Coatlicue* is a Mexica (a Nahua people) earth mother goddess of both creation and destruction (Lara, 2005). The space she represents is one of contradictions, or the fusion of opposite forces (Anzaldúa, 1999) in which individuals begin to recognize the positive and negative aspects of their multiple identities. Mexican American women entering CES doctoral programs try on various new roles (e.g., coinstructor, researcher). However, they may not feel comfortable discussing these new roles with their family out of concern that family members might not relate to their experiences. Thus, Mexican American women may develop a contradictory identity—they may
feel proud of their new roles and simultaneously ashamed of them because their education places distance between them and their families. This recognition of contradictory identities can be difficult, and it may cause some women to deny or repress pieces of who they are (Lara, 2005).

Coatlicue can be a painful space because it also promotes a difficult progression toward crossing another border. Anzaldúa (1999) explained, “Knowing is painful because after it happens, I can’t stay in the same place and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before” (p. 70). The process encompasses what Mexican American women may endure as they pursue academia. The knowledge they gain may make them a different person and may make them appear foreign to their home cultures.

Coyolxauhqui

Coyolxauhqui is a Mexica warrior goddess who was dismembered by her brother, Huitzilopochtli, the god of war. After dismembering her, he banished her to the sky to live there eternally as the moon. This space of Coyolxauhqui represents an attempt to put the dismembered body together again. Coyolxauhqui focuses on how Mexican American women create a whole new sense of self. Within this framework, we were interested in how participants attempted to integrate the different, and sometimes contradictory, features of their identities (Anzaldúa, 1999).

La Conciencia de la Mestiza

Mestiza literally means a woman of mixed ancestry (Delgado Bernal, 2006). In our study, la conciencia de la mestiza represents the culmination of all the challenges and growth that Mexican American women experience as they navigate through nepantla (space that is in between), coatlicue (space of contradictions), and coyolxauhqui (space of integration). La mestiza encounters cultural collisions, but learns how to be comfortable with contradictions and ambiguities inherent in the varying cultural expectations placed on her. Anzaldúa (1999) suggested that la conciencia de la mestiza is not merely putting pieces together or balancing opposing messages, but rather a synthesis that creates a third element: a new consciousness. This new consciousness cultivates new ways of knowing. La mestiza creates her own language and uses her voice to define herself (Orozco-Mendoza, 2008). She finds strength in this multilingual, multicultural identity.

Relevant Research in Higher Education

Several researchers have provided general implications for research and practice by specifically examining experiences of CES doctoral students. For example, Hughes and Kleist (2005) used grounded theory to develop a model of the first-semester experiences of CES doctoral students. Lambie and Vaccaro (2011) compared doctoral students’ perceptions of research within different years of their CES doctoral programs and found that research self-efficacy was influenced by their interest in conducting research. These studies were composed of primarily European American participants; they also did not focus on social or cultural factors that can influence the research experiences of CES doctoral students.
Results of a large-scale, Internet-based qualitative study by Protivnak and Foss (2009) found commonalities that demonstrated the complexities of the CES doctoral student experience. Themes revolved around positive and challenging experiences related to departmental culture, environment, and interpersonal relationships. The theme mentoring involved positive mentoring relationships with advisers and faculty outside of the participants’ departments, as well as frustration with faculty who were too busy to help students or who viewed students as competitors for limited resources. Support systems were another significant aspect of the experience, with advanced classmates being vital supports for the participants. Also, many participants reported losing friends, relationships, and critical time with family because of the intense demands of their programs. They reported neglecting their health and lacking energy to persist. A lack of finances for living and academic expenses was also an issue. Of the 141 participants, 100 were European American.

In contrast to the preceding studies, we found two studies about the experiences of ethnic minorities in counseling programs. Baker and Moore (2015) conducted a qualitative study investigating the cultural competency of CES doctoral programs to provide an inclusive program climate for racial/ethnic minority counselor education doctoral students. They interviewed 19 ethnically underrepresented CES doctoral students. Although the themes were similar to those found by Protivnak and Foss (2009), their findings highlighted the distinctive experiences of ethnic minority students. Participants masked ethnic identities to fit in and discussed working twice as hard academically to be considered equal to their European American counterparts. Voice was also a critical theme. Voice had two facets: (a) participants’ ability to express themselves in their programs and (b) ethnic representation within the CES profession. Ethnic diversity within a given program helped participants feel represented, whereas its lack initiated participants’ desire to pursue CES doctorates to bring diversity to the field. Yet only two of the 19 participants were Hispanic. Olive (2014) conducted a phenomenological study focused on Hispanic master’s-level counseling students. Unique factors not described elsewhere included a lack of family role models who attended college, spiritual values that influenced the decision to pursue graduate education in counseling, and a desire to use one’s counseling degree altruistically.

Similar themes such as family influences and a sense of isolation have also been reported in research about Mexican American female doctoral students in other higher education disciplines besides counseling. Mexican American women earning doctoral degrees in various disciplines rely on family for emotional support (K. P. González et al., 2001). Yet family support is fraught with difficulties because family members may not have attained higher education and therefore do not understand the doctoral process (J. C. González, 2006). Academic demands also restrict family time. Mexican American women report feeling conflicted as they attempt to balance family, gender, and academic expectations (Gloria & Castellanos, 2006; Hurtado & Sinha, 2006). Regardless of the conflict, they report persisting in their doctoral programs with the hope of giving back to their families and communities (K. P. González, Marin, Figueroa, Moreno, & Navia, 2002; Murakami-Ramalho, Piert, & Militello, 2008).
Therefore, we wanted to focus on two different cultural contexts facing Mexican American female CES doctoral students: their culture of origin and the culture of the institutional/academic context. Two questions were used to explore participants’ cultural experiences and actions: (a) How do Mexican American female doctoral students navigate their cultures of origin and the academic cultures of their CES doctoral programs accredited by CACREP? and (b) How does this cultural navigation affect how students feel and act within their cultures of origin and within their academic CACREP-accredited CES doctoral cultural realms?

**Method**

**Narrative Inquiry**

Narrative inquiry is defined here as the study of stories. Many types of qualitative research methods incorporate narratives. In narrative inquiry, however, narrative is both the method and the phenomenon of study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). We examined the content participants revealed within their stories as the phenomenon of study and also explored how participants chose to tell their stories (e.g., how they began and ended their stories, the language they used). Exploring both the content and how participants told their stories allowed for the emergence of the meaning participants attributed to their experiences and the fluid connections they forged between the past, present, and future (Riessman, 2003). The goal was to attain an in-depth understanding of how participants comprehended their experiences, not to verify their reported life events.

**Recruitment**

We used purposeful criterion and snowball sampling to gain participants for exploring their lived experiences (Patton, 2002). Inclusion criteria were ethnicity (Mexican American), gender (female), education level (PhD program), and type of doctoral program (CACREP-accredited CES program). Mexican American women who either were first-generation U.S. born or had moved to the United States as children were recruited. This inclusion criterion was important because the women potentially experienced a lifetime of navigating U.S. and Mexican cultures. The bicultural experience was critical because this type of experience, in addition to navigating a CES doctoral program, seemed to highly affect participants’ identities.

Strategies to recruit participants included recruiting at professional conferences and working with key informants who could provide access to information or access to individuals who would otherwise have been unavailable to us. We used this network to connect with faculty in CACREP-accredited CES doctoral programs in the United States who then helped distribute recruitment information. Six women contacted us, and five met the inclusion criteria. Follow-up phone calls to potential participants were used to further explain the study, verify inclusion criteria, and schedule interviews. Prior to the interviews, all participants were e-mailed informed consent forms, which were reviewed, signed, and returned.
Participants

Researchers using qualitative methods to explore the lives of students of color in higher education have often used small sample sizes of two to six because of the limited size of the population under study (K. P. González et al., 2002; Hughes & Kleist, 2005). We also used narrative inquiry, which is appropriate for smaller samples (Fraser, 2004; Riessman, 2003), and sought depth rather than breadth with our five participants. Three participants attended universities in the southern United States, but none attended the same university. This offered heterogeneity among doctoral programs. All of the participants identified as Mexican American, but three participants had stronger preferences for other ethnic labels: Hispanic, Latina, and Chicana. When reporting findings, we used the terms they preferred, as well as pseudonyms.

Martina was 32 years old, identified as Mexican American, was completing her 2nd year in her doctoral program in the Midwest, was married, and had no children. Helena was 27 years old, identified as Hispanic, was completing her 2nd year of her doctoral program in the southern United States, and was preparing to take comprehensive exams. Helena did not offer to discuss her relationship status and had no children. Lucia was 30 years old, identified as Latina, was in her 1st year of her doctoral program in the northern United States, was in a relationship, and had no children. Marisol was 37 years old, identified as Mexican American, was in her 6th year of her doctoral program in the southern United States, and was writing her dissertation preproposal. She was married and had two children under the age of 3 years. Carmen was 30 years old, identified as Chicana, was in the 3rd year of her doctoral program in the southern United States, was completing her final supervision internship, and was preparing to write her dissertation preproposal. She was in a relationship and had no children.

Data Collection and Trustworthiness

After receiving institutional review board approval, we conducted individual semistructured interviews with each participant. The interviews were digitally recorded. To facilitate participants’ narratives, we used an interview guide. Interviews began with a broad, open-ended question to encourage detailed storytelling. We asked,

Can you tell me the story of what it is like for you to be a Mexican American woman in a CACREP-accredited CES doctoral program? Please include everything you find relevant about your experiences and add as many details as you would like. I am very interested to learn about who you are.

The interview guide included three additional interview questions meant to add to the depth of our understanding about how participants’ experiences influenced their personal and professional identities and to allow them an opportunity to add any last thoughts not yet shared during the interview. Interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hours. One participant was interviewed over the phone, and another was interviewed via Skype. We conducted three interviews in person at locations preferable to the participants.
We used several methods to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the data. We kept journals to note our thoughts and feelings about the interviews and the overall process, as well as to monitor our objectivity. The journal contained specifics such as interview setting, our emotional reactions, and pertinent experiences used during the data analysis. Respondent validation was obtained by sharing individual transcripts or drafts of findings with respective participants and asking for clarification (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). One participant requested that we change two words, and another clarified her use of laughter. The feedback did not alter the final categories we established.

**Researcher Lens**

Our research lens was influenced by our gender identification as women whose shared research interest included experiences as ethnic minority women in CES doctoral programs. The first author, a Mexican American woman who was completing her CES doctorate, was extremely dedicated to raising awareness about the experiences of Mexican American women in academia, and given her ethnic, gender, and professional identities, there was significant room for bias. The second author, who is a long-time counselor educator, has shared the doctoral educational journey with women of color and realizes their unique experiences. She is not a woman of color, although her own background includes being the only person in her extended working-class family to receive a PhD. She identifies her biases as being shaped by her own experiences and those of women with whom she has the privilege to know. Because both authors were highly connected to the research, research journals and investigator triangulation were used to increase the credibility of the data collection and analysis. The use of journals helped us gain awareness and bracket biases that could influence data collection and analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). To conduct investigator triangulation, we informally reviewed our research memos and codebooks with a colleague outside of the CES profession, who identified as Mexican American and was earning her doctoral degree in education. Her ethnic identity helped her provide insight about our research. Because she was not immersed in CES, she was also able to bring an outsider’s perspective to our study (Patton, 2002).

**Data Analysis**

We used Fraser’s (2004) four-stage process to perform the data analysis. The first 3 phases—listening to narratives, transcribing and interpreting individual transcripts, and searching across different fields of experience—were conducted with individual transcripts. These three phases of analysis fostered an in-depth exploration of each participant’s unique story. The fourth phase of analysis, which consisted of exploring differences and commonalities among the participants, was conducted by comparing and contrasting all five participants’ transcripts. This process provided a breadth of knowledge about the participants’ experiences (Fraser, 2004).

Transcripts included not only participants’ spoken words, but also their silences and verbal utterances (e.g., laughter). This detailed transcription helped us capture the storytelling style of the participants and provided insight into their identities (Fraser, 2004). We divided individual transcripts into smaller
stories by searching through the transcripts for plots to establish the smaller stories within the transcripts. Next, we identified the plots by separating events that seemed meaningful to the participants. We looked for beginning and ending phrases, such as “It all began . . .” or “That was the end of it” (Fraser, 2004). An example of a plot is Marisol’s description about taking breaks from her doctoral program to have children. The plots were considered smaller stories within the participants’ overall narrative. Each researcher separately identified plots to decrease researcher bias. Finally, we met to review the data and our notes until we reached full consensus on the plots.

Sentences and stories within individual transcripts were numbered to increase the organization of the data. We also named stories based on story topics or by using quotes from stories. Numbering sentences and stories helped when referencing and using particular sections within the transcripts (Fraser, 2004). Story number and lines numbers were also used with participant quotes. We grouped stories within individual transcripts based on their similarities. Each researcher separately grouped stories, and we met to compare notes, redefine groupings as necessary, and name the groupings. These groupings helped create codes based on story topics and highlighted how we chose to categorize stories (Fraser, 2004). An example code is stories about crossing boundaries within an academic context. After stories were coded within each individual transcript, we worked together to compare and contrast stories between and among transcripts. Four common categories were developed across all transcripts that enabled us to develop a more textured understanding about the cultural spheres of CES doctoral programs and participants’ cultures of origin.

Results

We arrived at four categories in the final stage of our analysis (see Table 1). The first category, related to Research Question 1, was navigating cultural realms and included four subcategories (i.e., integrating family and academia, borders between family and academia, integrating ethnic and academic identities, and borders between ethnic and academic identities) that emphasized the various cultural spheres participants navigated. The other three categories—enhancing professional development, developing a professional identity, and persisting in academia—revolved around academia. There were two groups of responses among the participants. Whereas Carmen and Martina perceived their doctoral programs positively, Helena, Lucia, and Marisol indicated that more challenges existed in their programs. This division among positive and negative academic experiences underscores the impact that academic culture may have on doctoral students’ persistence and professional identity.

Navigating Cultural Realms

Participants’ narratives seemed to indicate that they were attempting to either integrate their family's culture, their ethnicity, and academia or separate them from one another. As a result, they seemed to live between and within the borders of these varying cultural realms. This category was composed of four subcategories.  

Integrating family and academia. Carmen and Helena appeared to be integrating their family and home lives with their academic lives. In discussing
### TABLE 1
Categories, Subcategories, and Examples of the Study Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category and Subcategory</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Navigating cultural realms</td>
<td>Strategies to navigate the cultural realms of family, academia, and ethnicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrating family and academia</td>
<td>“I was actually thinking, ‘What would it feel like to be in that moment, being hooded and seeing my family?’ They’re doing it with me, like they’re also graduating.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borders between family and academia</td>
<td>“I think my mom, to this day, probably still doesn’t understand exactly what I’ll be doing. Not too long ago, I said, ‘Well, Mom, I’m going to be a counselor educator. She’s like, ‘That’s it?’”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrating ethnic and academic identities</td>
<td>“I did my case scripts in Spanish and [my clinical supervisor] went out of her way to find another professor who would translate my case scripts for her so she could understand it.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borders between ethnic and academic identities</td>
<td>“I was lacking the most confidence in the beginning of the [doctoral] program . . . for being a woman of color and not seeing a lot of people who looked like me.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhancing professional development</td>
<td>Strategies to excel as a counselor education and supervision doctoral student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using faculty as resources</td>
<td>“[Faculty member] really provides opportunities for me . . . grant opportunities, other experiences. I know her on a different level, more of a mentor versus an adviser. She’s really helped my journey right now.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking advantage of academic opportunities</td>
<td>“I just tried to become involved with as many . . . articles and things that are going on. For instance, I wrote a couple of pages for one professor’s book that’s getting published.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing a professional identity</td>
<td>Strategies to enhance or reject a professional identity as a counselor educator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrating research into professional identity</td>
<td>“When I first started [the doctoral program] I was just into wanting to teach and be a professor. Now, I feel a lot different. That’s an element of it, but it’s not all I can do. . . . [I can] research and show leadership through that research.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepting the counselor educator professional identity</td>
<td>“I met somebody who had graduated with a degree in counselor education and supervision and she was telling me what it was like and I looked into it and that’s how I ended up applying for this program. It’s the best decision I’ve made.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejecting the counselor educator professional identity</td>
<td>“In my future . . . I don’t see myself as a counselor educator.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persisting in academia</td>
<td>Strategies to persist within counselor education and supervision doctoral programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using voice to protect self</td>
<td>“I really have to advocate and push and be persistent about sending things to professors, e-mailing them, calling them. This has been really hard for me because I’m an introvert and so I really have to step out of my comfort zone and be assertive.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using silence to protect self</td>
<td>“I feel intimidated when I go around the [campus] clinic. I want nothing to do with the clinic unless I absolutely have to. In class, I am completely uncomfortable. I don’t want to talk.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fighting to finish</td>
<td>“I owe over $50,000 to this institution and I have no other alternative but to finish, because I’ve entertained other ideas about transferring to another program, but I just have to finish.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
her dissertation topic, which involved exploring the experiences of Mexican-origin deportees, Carmen said, “I have tried to look for something that connected my school life with what I saw when I got home . . . and I’m like, ‘[dissertation] is the perfect opportunity.’” Carmen’s mother also encouraged her to use her academic skills to give back to her community and told her, “Don’t forget where you came from.” These examples highlight the integration Carmen began as she merged her research with her home life. Helena also seemed to be merging family with her academic life, especially by stating that when she graduates, “it will be like [my family is] also graduating.” Helena’s family openly admitted that they “don’t know exactly what it feels like” for Helena as a doctoral student, but they valued her academic goals. Their support was also evidenced in the language they used to forge their own connection to her academic experiences, such as using “master blaster” to describe her master’s program and using the term “el libro [the book]” to refer to her dissertation.

Borders between family and academia. In contrast to the integrative processes of Carmen and Helena, Lucia, Marisol, and Martina appeared to perceive boundaries between family and academia. The drawing of boundaries decreased how much they communicated with their families about academia. Lucia’s mother encouraged her to pursue higher education, but expressed concern because Lucia chose to attend school out of state. Lucia explained, “My mom makes comments every now and then that she doesn’t like that I’m so far away. So, I don’t really feel that I had [her] support a 100%.” Although she felt comfortable at home, Lucia said that in her academic culture “I can’t really be myself.” These borders caused Lucia to decrease how much she told her family about her doctoral program. Marisol also recognized borders between family and academia. Marisol explained,

I feel like I have to argue with my husband or with my mom because they accept everything. . . . I’m at a place where I’m, “Why are you accepting this? You have to question everything.” . . . I get incessant about . . . sexism on TV . . . I feel like I see something that nobody else sees and it makes me . . . not the most favorite person to be around during family gatherings. . . . I think, to some degree, being a doctoral student has also made me . . . disgruntled and intolerant of . . . things that are sexist and misogynistic and . . . unjust.

The differences Marisol perceived between herself and her family caused her to do “check-ins” to filter what she said around her family. In Martina’s case, she did not discuss academia with her family. She explained, “I don’t come from a family that values education . . . the culture does not embrace or understand [higher education].”

Integrating ethnic and academic identities. The subcategory of integrating ethnic and academic identities emerged only with Carmen, who felt supported by her mother and faculty members to merge her ethnic and academic identities. Carmen and her mother used their experiences and Carmen’s education to give back to the Mexican immigrant community. Carmen also worked at her university Hispanic Center and conducted counseling practicum with Spanish-speaking clients. Carmen credited faculty with helping her reconnect with her Mexican culture. Carmen, Marisol, and Martina were all planning
to conduct dissertation studies about the Mexican American community, but only Carmen forged connections between her ethnicity and academia.

**Borders between ethnic and academic identities.** Martina, Lucia, and Marisol perceived borders between their ethnic culture and academia. Martina expressed a belief that many Mexican American women must overcome the cultural pressures to “conform” and “drop out” of school to succeed in higher education. She admitted that “I have a rebellious side to me, not wanting to always follow what I’m supposed to do . . . culturally,” which has helped her excel in academia. These examples demonstrate the borders Martina perceived between academia and the expectations of her ethnic culture.

Lucia described herself as being proud of her Latina culture, but her stories about her academic experiences prompted her to think about ethnic authenticity. She began questioning how to outwardly show her ethnicity when in her academic environment because many of her peers and faculty said that she did not look Latina. She explained, “Am I supposed to act White, quote unquote, because I’m in a space with predominantly White people? . . . Am I supposed to leave my culture behind when I’m [on campus]?” Marisol’s narrative focused on being a Mexican American woman in a predominantly European American doctoral program. She said, “That’s when I was lacking the most confidence . . . being a woman of color, not seeing a lot of people who looked like me.” Marisol described her bicultural identity as a coping mechanism:

I don’t think that . . . if you’re a person of color and you don’t accept bicultural identity that you can be successful in a doctoral program because that would mean to negate who you really are. So, you accept who you really are, but you also accept that you have to shift and be a certain way, in a certain context.

**Enhancing Professional Development**

Participants’ narratives seemed to indicate that strategies were central to their sense of professional development. Having the ability to use faculty as support and having the potential of working collaboratively on projects seemed to make a vital difference. This category was composed of two subcategories.

*Using faculty as resources.* This subcategory is based on statements from Martina and Carmen, who expressed positive academic experiences in their doctoral programs. They focused more on faculty relationships than on peer relationships and indicated that faculty members fostered their academic success by increasing their access to scholarly opportunities. Carmen stated, “[Faculty] are so encouraging and they’re the reason why I think that I’ve pushed myself so much. Because they’re always . . . inviting us to do things.” Martina and Carmen seemed to have positive experiences with all of the faculty members in their departments and worked on projects with faculty outside of their departments.

*Taking advantage of academic opportunities.* Martina and Carmen enhanced their professional development by taking advantage of every possible academic opportunity. Martina explained, “The more that I can participate and the more I can have a variety of opportunities to really just see how the publishing goes, the better it’s going to be for me.” Carmen also discussed her motivation: “I know that not everybody has the chance to [earn a doctorate]. . . . That’s why
I always take advantage of opportunities that are given to me.” Martina and Carmen had differing reasons for pursuing these opportunities, but the result was the same; they conducted independent and collaborative research projects, presented at professional conferences, and published articles.

Helena, Marisol, and Lucia chose not to take academic opportunities for varying reasons. Helena desired to be more “genuine” and pursue projects only within her research area. In describing students who work on projects outside of their research interests, Helena said, “You’re doing it for the wrong reasons, just so that you could... be famous.” Lucia and Marisol believed that their professors were intentionally not offering them academic opportunities. Lucia stated, “I see that others are getting opportunities to write book chapters, teaching classes, and... getting invited to conferences by professors and that’s not happening for me. I want to know why that’s not happening for me.” Marisol discussed the lack of faculty support while writing her dissertation proposal: “You know what? It’s really they [faculty] don’t care. They don’t care... that’s how I feel at the end of the day.” Whereas Helena purposely limited her academic opportunities, Lucia and Marisol seemed upset that professors were not reaching out to them.

*Developing a Professional Identity*

Participants’ narratives seemed to indicate that simply studying in a CES doctoral program was not enough to develop a professional identity as a counselor educator. Individual differences, such as integrating research into their identities and their motivation for originally seeking a doctorate, were important. This category was composed of three subcategories.

*Integrating research into a professional identity.* Martina and Carmen were merging research into their professional identities and ascribed this new development to the culture of their programs. Carmen acknowledged that she began her program with a desire to be a professor at a teaching institution, but the support of her faculty motivated her to pursue a career at a research university. She explained, “After working with all of [the faculty members] and they’re so patient about teaching you methodology... statistics... [research] is not as scary to me.” Carmen’s focus on research was also evidenced by two qualitative research projects she independently conducted within the first 2 years of her program. Martina also discussed entering her doctoral program with a focus on teaching, but then decided that she wanted to pursue a career as a professor who demonstrated “leadership” through research. She attributed her new emphasis on research to being in a research-intensive doctoral program and further emphasized, “It’s not ‘I do research’; it’s ‘I’m a researcher.’”

*Accepting the counselor educator professional identity.* Carmen and Martina strongly identified with the professional identity of counselor educator and expressed wanting to pursue academic careers as counselor educators. Carmen initially wanted to earn a doctorate in counseling psychology, but selected a counselor education program, which she described as “the best decision I’ve made.” Martina explained that her mom does not understand when she tells her that she is going to be a “counselor educator,” but Martina hopes that more Mexican American women pursue careers in counselor education.
Rejecting the counselor educator professional identity. Helena and Marisol did not identify as counselor educators. Helena explained, “I don’t see myself as a counselor educator. I see myself more as . . . a clinician.” She wanted to start her own private practice after graduating. Marisol stated, “I’m a clinical social worker in a counseling program.” This difference in identity made her feel like an “outsider” and a “stepchild” in her program. Marisol did not plan to pursue a career in academia; instead, she wanted to work in a college counseling center.

Persisting in Academia

Participants’ narratives indicated that they protected themselves by either using their voices or using silence. These strategies enabled them to continue to completion and were critical to persisting within their programs. This category was composed of three subcategories.

Using voice to protect self. Lucia, Helena, and Marisol reported more challenging experiences within their programs and seemed to use their voices to speak up and protect themselves. Lucia described using her voice to defend herself against a racially discriminatory comment directed at her: “So, I felt that I needed to step in and speak up and say, ‘This isn’t right.’” Helena used her voice to “politely” say no when feeling pressured by faculty and peers to take on additional projects and described this as “not taking people’s crap.” Marisol, on the other hand, described using her voice to dispute “strange comments about diversity” that were made during class discussions. She stated, “I didn’t care. . . . I said what I needed to say. I thought, ‘If I don’t say anything, I’m going to regret it.’” Marisol also described having to use her voice to state what she needed from faculty during the dissertation process. She explained, “I really have to advocate and push and be persistent. . . . I’m an introvert and so I really have to step out of my comfort zone and be assertive.”

Using silence to protect self. Lucia and Marisol initially used their voices, but when they started encountering negative consequences for speaking up, they began using silence as protection. Lucia perceived being “punished” for speaking up against the racially discriminatory comment, so she used silence to protect herself against further ramifications. Lucia explained, “[In class] I don’t want to say anything because I don’t know what might be taken out of my mouth and used against me.” Marisol “gave up” talking during class because nothing changed. Marisol stated, “I felt like every week I was speaking up [in class] and it was useless . . . [so] I just stopped talking.”

Fighting to finish. Helena, Lucia, and Marisol shared an internal drive to persist and to complete their doctoral programs regardless of challenges. In describing a harsh presentation critique from her professor that made Helena self-conscious about her learning disability, she said, “I don’t know how I went back [to class]. . . . I just have to finish.” Lucia also demonstrated this motivation to finish even though she felt uncomfortable in her program. She explained, “I got here by my own accord, my own hard work, and I’ll be damned if these people push me out. I’m going to . . . continue with what I started.” Marisol stated, “I owe over $50,000 to this institution and I have no other alternative but to finish.”
Discussion

Our findings increase awareness about factors affecting the persistence of Mexican American women in CES doctoral programs and demonstrate how CES doctoral program culture can influence the professional identity of Mexican American women. We address each category separately.

Navigating Cultural Realms

Regarding Research Question 1, the participants discussed navigating many different cultural realms, including family, academia, and ethnicity. Pursuing academia seemed to divide Martina, Lucia, and Marisol from their families. This phenomenon aligns with coatlicue, a concept in Anzaldúa’s (1999) borderlands theory, which represents the transformation that may occur when crossing cultural borders. Martina noted her family’s cultural expectations of her, which contradicted her academic goals. Because many of her peers and faculty members stated that Lucia did not “look Latina,” Lucia began to question whether she had to perform her ethnicity when in an academic environment. Marisol, on the other hand, viewed her bicultural identity as a way to permeate these boundaries. Martina, Lucia, and Marisol also seemed to perceive a harsh division between their ethnic identities and academia. In support of this finding, Olive (2014) found that cultural factors interacted with the studies of Hispanic counseling graduate students. Olive’s findings also highlighted the impact that a lack of familial role models seeking higher education had on the students’ decisions to seek graduate degrees and how their spiritual beliefs interfaced with their career choice in that the students viewed counseling as a way to fulfill an “altruistic motivation” (p. 80).

Professional Development and Professional Identity

When asked how they felt and acted within their cultural realms, participants differed in their sense of professional development and professional identity. They reported variations in professional development in how they used faculty as resources and took advantage of academic opportunities. Supporting these findings, Protivnak and Foss (2009) found that faculty mentorship and access to academic activities played significant roles in facilitating CES doctoral student success. In our study, Martina and Carmen actively engaged faculty and academic opportunities, whereas Marisol, Helena, and Lucia did not seem to participate in academic activities, thus potentially hindering their satisfaction and persistence in their programs.

Dollarhide, Gibson, and Moss (2013) proposed that professional identity plays a critical role in the eventual career choices of CES doctoral students. Some of our participants struggled to develop a professional identity as a counselor educator, which seemed to influence their occupational trajectories by leading them away from careers in academia. This finding is pertinent to Helena’s and Marisol’s persistence in their doctoral programs, but it is not unique to our participants. In support of this finding, Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) found a key theme of academic match that influenced CES doctoral students’ attrition. Not perceiving a good academic match between their career goals and their
program’s focus on teaching, practice, and research may have significantly affected Helena’s and Marisol’s persistence in their doctoral programs.

Participants seemed to be enacting la consciencia de la mestiza by learning how to overcome and be comfortable with contradictions inherent in the varying cultural expectations (Anzaldúa, 1999). Specifically, the women in our study demonstrated la consciencia de la mestiza as they faced challenges, such as losing their voices, yet they found strength and strategies to persist. Baker and Moore (2015) also found loss of voice in their study of racial/ethnic minority students in CES doctoral programs, whereas J. C. González (2006) found that Latinas in doctoral programs either found or lost their voices. Latina doctoral students who found their voices appeared more motivated to pursue careers in academia. In our study, Carmen and Martina discussed positive experiences within their doctoral programs and did not appear to lose their voices or to use their voices as protection. However, Lucia and Marisol both quit using their voices to avoid unwanted consequences, and neither discussed pursuing careers in academia. They appeared to silence their voices because they felt powerless and feared speaking up during class. They silenced themselves because they received criticism for their viewpoints, were characterized as trying to cause dissension among their peers, or had the sense that faculty did not appreciate their input. Other CES studies (e.g., Protivnak & Foss, 2009) have found that doctoral students described transitioning from a collectivist framework to an individualistic mind-set and self-advocating to survive within their doctoral programs. In our study, it appeared that Lucia, Helena, and Marisol all used their voices to self-advocate and persist within their programs.

Helena and Marisol expressed a disconnect between their professional identities, culture, and the academic focus of their respective doctoral programs. By contrast, Martina and Carmen described how faculty mentors exposed them to scholarly opportunities, which motivated them to pursue careers as counselor educators. Their experiences demonstrate how the CES professional identity development of Mexican American female doctoral students appears to be multifaceted and connected to the culture and focus of specific programs.

**Implications for Counselor Education and Research**

We drew from these findings that navigating cultural realms is an inherent and challenging part of the doctoral process for Mexican American women. Validating these experiences can be extremely helpful. All of our participants, for example, wanted to learn about other Mexican American female CES doctoral students to find encouragement. The outcome of such efforts can help increase the Mexican American woman’s role in counselor education and promote more diversified training that Mexican American and other students of color would value. Further research is needed on Mexican American women’s navigation of cultural expectations throughout the different stages of their doctoral programs.

In addition to scholarly mentorship, our findings suggest that culturally empowering professional experiences are needed. Carmen mentioned working with Spanish-speaking clients in her counseling practicum, and
almost all of the participants were planning on writing dissertations that aligned with their ethnic identities. Previous research has also emphasized the importance of academic mentorship that increases Latina/o students’ exposure to scholarly opportunities while empowering them to conduct research pertinent to their ethnic identities (Torres, 2004). CES faculty should seek strategies that foster research workshops/symposia and informal student–faculty gatherings to promote networking. Such culturally empowering professional experiences have the potential to increase the persistence of Latina/o students in doctoral programs (Torres, 2004) and would likely have a positive impact on Mexican American female CES doctoral students, who were the focus in our study.

The lack of Mexican American women in CES faculty positions seemed to affect participants’ sense of professional development and identity. Both Lucia and Martina discussed the need for more Mexican American women as counselor educators. Participants in Baker and Moore’s (2015) study also noted the lack of racial/ethnic diversity among CES faculty and the need for increased racial/ethnic diversity among CES faculty. The importance of their concerns is reflected in statistics (U.S. Department of Education, 2006–2007) that demonstrate the severe lack of Latinas in the professoriate overall. This is a critical deficiency to overcome because increasing the number of Latina/o faculty may aid in the persistence of Latina/o doctoral students and may encourage Latina/o doctoral students to pursue academic careers (Contreras & Gándara, 2006).

Counselor educators may want to analyze their courses to ensure that all students are given a voice. First, counselor educators should ask themselves how they can create a space for all students to speak without fear of negative retribution. Counselor educators need to provide an environment in the classroom that protects, values, and honors the voices of all students. Some participants in our study struggled because they believed that this space did not exist for them at all within their programs. Second, counselor educators should ask how their course assignments promote or silence different voices. Increasing the number of students who engage in classroom activities by encouraging and using creative course structures can help Mexican American women feel heard. Unique assignment options (e.g., free-writing journal entries, autobiographical narratives) may also create a safe space for expression, thus affording opportunities to feel heard and have one’s voice valued. For our participants, this creative optional assignment may have meant a great deal to their sense of being understood by a fair and caring faculty member. Third, counselor educators should ask how they can make their classroom a lively learning place where Mexican American women can thrive with their voices intact. Finally, counselor educators should ask what all students stand to gain by creating an inclusive classroom.

**Limitations**

Because of our sample demographics, we remain specific about extrapolations (Patton, 2002). First, our findings are limited to our unique sample
of Mexican American women. Second, the primary focus of our study was on the institutional/academic contexts and the cultures of origin of the participants; therefore, other cultural contexts relevant to our participants (e.g., socioeconomic status, disability) may have been missed. Another limitation is the use of interviews as self-report. However, we addressed this limitation by incorporating respondent validation and investigator triangulation (Patton, 2002). Finally, and importantly, this was a qualitative study, which has its inherent strengths, but also limitations, such as our presence during data gathering that may have affected participants’ responses to some degree. Although we used currently held guidelines to mitigate these limitations, our personal biases and idiosyncrasies are still a part of the research process.

Conclusion

Helping Mexican American women strengthen their voices as doctoral students can decrease their need to “fight to the finish,” as did some of our participants. The development of a strong voice will also have positive career implications if they pursue careers in academia. Having all students share in a productive classroom environment allows everyone to gain multicultural competence and will afford all with supportive colleagues within academia. All doctoral students would benefit from an inclusive CES program climate. In particular, our findings indicate that enhancing the professional identity development of Mexican American women would improve their doctoral experiences by allowing them to feel connected to their future careers, encouraging them to pursue academic careers, and facilitating their success in academia.

References


