A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE
LIVED EXPERIENCES OF HISPANIC FEMALES IN ADVANCED PLACEMENT
COURSES IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HIGH SCHOOLS

by

Laura Christine MacKenzie

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

Liberty University

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ABSTRACT

This transcendental phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of Southern California, Hispanic female high school graduates who were enrolled in AP courses while in high school. The life experiences for Hispanic women have been largely ignored by the literature, with much of the research on Hispanics primarily focused on the achievement gap, dropout rates, or giftedness. Although they may excel academically, many high-achieving Hispanic women do not reach their full potential. Often high-achieving Hispanic females find it difficult to reconcile the discrepancy between the culture, familial expectations and roles, and their own personal ambitions. The following four research questions framed this study: “How do Hispanic female graduates from Southern California high schools describe their experiences in AP classes?, How do participants describe the role their family culture, cultural heritage, and American culture has in their academic experiences?, What relationship do participants describe between their gender and their academic experiences?, and How do participants describe the intersection of class, gender and culture as impacting their academic experiences? A Chicana feminist lens and Bandura’s social learning theory were used to examine the findings. Findings of this study showed three themes: high-achieving Hispanic women in high school AP classes experienced a bi-cultural conflict between Hispanic culture and American culture, the familismo, and the environment of the AP courses themselves played a significant role in their academic success.

Keywords: Hispanic females, Latina, high achieving, advanced placement, Chicana
Dedication

This dissertation is first dedicated to all the students I have loved and taught, but most especially to the Brawley Union High School AP English Literature Class of 2013, who challenged me to pursue my dream of a doctorate. Second, to my high-achieving Hispanic female students who inspired this research study, thank you for challenging and motivating me to be a better teacher and person.
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I would like to first thank my husband and my children for their support and encouragement throughout the past several years. I would not have started, nor been able to finish, this degree without my husband’s support, encouragement, and belief in me. I love you.

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Finally, I want to thank my participants for sharing their experiences so openly with me. Ladies, your strength, your drive to accomplish your dreams and succeed despite all odds, humbles, amazes, and inspires me. Thank you for trusting me to tell your story to the world.
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Advanced Placement (AP)

Advanced Via Individual Determination (AVID)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Culture, heritage, and one’s ethnic identity impact a person in multiple ways; these factors can impact students’ attitude and motivation toward academic success (Aguilar, 2013). One of the largest growing ethnic and cultural populations in America is the Hispanic population (Census Bureau, 2010; Gutierrez, 2011). Estimates based on the 2010 census place the Hispanic population in Southern California as surpassing any other race or ethnicity (Census Bureau, 2010; Gutierrez, 2011). The growth of the Hispanic culture has presented many challenges that have resulted in changes in American culture, with the American education system particularly challenged with this change in the population and power of the Hispanic community (Aguilar, 2013; Gutierrez, 2011).

The terms “Hispanic,” “Latino” and “Chicano/a” have different political roots, with “Hispanic” and “Latino” used broadly as ethnic identifiers for anyone with Spanish-speaking ancestry, although they personally may not necessarily be Spanish speakers, while “Chicano/a” is specifically used interchangeably with “Mexican” or “Mexican-American.” In addition, the terms “Hispanic,” “Latino/a,” and “Chicano/a” are also often used interchangeably (Blea, 1994; Hipolito-Delgado, 2014). Because this research study was centered in Southern California where Mexicans comprise the largest “Hispanic” ethnic group and are the largest population group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics & Gandara, 2015), the terms “Hispanic,” “Latino/a” and “Chicano/a” were used interchangeably throughout this research study.

Ethnic stereotypes may be the most powerful force that affect people groups (Niemann, 2001). For Hispanics in America, more often than not, the stereotype they face has been negative
Hispanic females have faced many challenges as their gender, race, class, and culture intersects (Castillo, 1994; Cotera, 1977; Garcia, 1997; Lopez, 2013). American-born Hispanics face various American stereotypes and expectations of their culture, either confident, mysterious, and sexy (Lopez, 2013; Ortiz Cofer, n.d.), or lazy, immoral, unintelligent, promiscuous, and submissive (Lopez, 2013; Niemann, 2001). Many Hispanic females have been expected to be this stereotype and nothing more (Castillo, 1994; Lopez, 2013; Ortiz Cofer, n.d; Niemann, 2001).

As the U.S. Hispanic population increases (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), Hispanic females have more than just their own cultural expectations to battle in their struggle for success; they also contend against stereotypes and their own preconceived ideas of identity (Blea, 1992; Castillo, 1994; Cotera, 1977; Lopez, 2013; Niemann, 2001; Roscoe, 2015). This chapter describes a brief background of high-achieving Hispanic females in high school, my role and philosophy as researcher, the problem and the purpose of the study, and finally, a brief summary of the research questions is discussed.

**Background**

Young Hispanic women striving for academic achievement, post-secondary education, and advanced degrees defy the traditional roles such as that of submissive wife, mother, and caretaker of the family that have long been ascribed to this group of women (Enoch, 2004; Harklau, 2013; Lopez, 2013). Chicana feminist writers such as Martha Cotera (1977), Ana Castillo (1994) and Alma Garcia (1989) argued for change in both American and traditional Hispanic cultures, defining the needs of Hispanic women and the goals of Chicana feminism. Defined and bounded by the traditional subservient roles of the obedient and inferior gender for too long (Cotera, 1977; Enoch, 2004; Garcia, 1989), Hispanic women have had many obstacles
to overcome in the intersectionality of race, class, and gender (Blea, 1992; Cordova, Cantu, Cardenas, Garcia, & Sierra, 1990). Hispanics, the original inhabitants of the Southwestern United States (Gratton & Merchant, 2015), were ignored and oppressed by both the United States and Mexican governments and were relegated to a second-class citizen status in both countries for many years (Gratton & Merchant, 2015; Gutierrez, 2011). Hispanic females were relegated to an even lower status because of the pervasive “machismo” attitude in their culture (Enoch, 2004; Garcia, 1989).

However, after many years of enduring systematic racism (Chavez, 2013; Powers, 2014), with the advent of the Chicano movement in the 1950s and 1960s, the Hispanic voice was finally heard in American culture, its power and influence carrying from the fields, to the legislature, to the education system (Chavez, 2013; Gutierrez, 2011). Despite these advances for this Hispanic population, many Chicana feminists felt the Chicano movement neglected to properly attend to the needs of a vital part of its success: the women involved in the movement (Castillo, 1994; Garcia, 1989). In 1971, the first national conference of Chicanas was held in Houston, Texas (Vidal, 1971) wherein the women enacted resolutions articulating their struggles and demands (Garcia, 1989). An outcome of these resolutions were poems, essays, and novels documenting Chicana women’s “testimonios” and experiences. Tired of being ignored and unheard (Garcia, 1989; Venegas-Garcia, 2013), and by deciding to join forces with the feminist movement, Chicanas demanded their rights and became a powerful force politically, economically, and, pertinent to this study, academically (Venegas-Garcia, 2013).

In the education sphere, the Chicana movement enabled a group of women who were a previously ignored population to have a pathway to a successful future (Venegas-Garcia, 2013). Because of the Chicana movement, Hispanic women were suddenly afforded opportunities to
succeed academically, and they began in earnest to strive for more (Cuadraz, 2005). The 1970s saw more Hispanic women enrolled in secondary education, with the 1980s being called the “decade of the Hispana” as more Hispanic women gained professoriates, and research and academic scholarship on Chicana feminist issues emerged (Cuadraz, 2005). Hispanic females are often high achieving (Harklau, 2013; White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics & Gandara, 2015). Although in the past they may not have had opportunities to succeed academically, yet because of the Chicana feminist movement, many Hispanic females of today do; currently, Hispanic females enroll in higher numbers than Hispanic males in AP courses (College Board, 2015; Hinojosa, Robles-Piña, & Edmonson, 2009; Moore & Slate, 2008; White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics & Gandara, 2015). For high-achieving students, the Advanced Placement program, administered by the College Board, is the standard for academic rigor in high school and is considered necessary for college readiness.

The College Board was initially started to expand access to high education to students attending college post World War II; it currently administers various standardized tests such as the SAT and PSAT and programs such as Advanced Placement to high school students across the United States (College Board, 2016). Advanced Placement (AP) programs provide students the opportunity to take rigorous, college-level classes while enrolled in high school (College Board, 2016; Godfrey, Wyatt, & Beard, 2016). Because students can potentially earn college credits and skip introductory college courses by taking the AP tests, which are administered at the end of each AP course (College Board, 2016), many high-achieving students register for AP courses, with over 32 million students in the United States alone taking at least one exam (College Board, 2015).

Nationwide, school participation in AP courses increased by 40 percent in the decade
between 1990 and 2000 (Klopfenstein, 2004). The uptick in participation in AP courses was due to an increase in both state and federal funding for additional AP courses (Klopfenstein, 2004). However, additional teacher training, additional course materials, and often hiring additional AP teachers can make expanding AP course offerings costly to districts and schools; as a result, many lower income area schools were not expanding the AP programs at the same rate as other areas (Klopfenstein, 2004). The lack of access to AP courses was one reason that minority students, who often live in low income areas, were not enrolling in AP courses (Klopfenstein, 2004; Walker & Pearsall, 2012, Roscoe, 2015). Recognizing the discrepancy in enrollment of minority students, in the 1980s and 1990s, the College Board made a concerted effort to improve access to Advanced Placement courses for minority groups (College Board, 2016). College Board specifically targeted Hispanics to enroll in AP classes with its “All In” campaign. This led to an increase in Hispanic student enrollment in AP classes, with over 100,000 Hispanic females taking AP tests in California alone (College Board, 2016).

Despite having high aspirations and goals as evidenced by their AP enrollment and college acceptance rates (College Board, 2016; Harklau, 2013; National Women’s Law Center and Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2009), the achievement gap, as measured by standardized test scores, dropout rates, and high school graduation rates, for Hispanic females as a minority group is greater than any other (Aguilar, 2013; Harklau, 2013; Moore & Slate, 2008; Walker & Pearsall, 2012). Moreover, despite their academic ability, Hispanic females are more likely to drop out of high school than any other female ethnic demographic (Harklau, 2013; Moore & Slate, 2008; National Women’s Law Center and Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2009; Walker & Pearsall, 2012). This, in turn, has prompted questions as to why so many high-achieving, goal-oriented Hispanic females are
not continuing with their higher education plans (Harklau, 2013; Moore & Slate, 2008; National Women’s Law Center and Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2009);

Considering that learning is often contextualized and dependent on social aspects (Bandura, 1977), it may be that there are more than cultural issues at play when it comes to Hispanic females’ academic achievement. This research study sought to learn from the experiences of those involved in Advanced Placement courses in high school. By learning from the experiences of graduated Hispanic females who were enrolled in high school AP classes, educators can learn how to motivate better, teach, and guide this group to success.

**Situation to Self**

I am a mixed-race woman in my early 40s who lived a majority of my childhood years in Southern California, near the Mexican border. I identify with the white culture, but I spent influential and formative years in my childhood and adolescence in Hispanic countries, living in both Mexico and in Peru. I come from a family of educators, including extended family and in-laws. Most of my family, including immediate and extended family, has graduate degrees; I will be the fourth person of my extended family to obtain a doctorate. However, I was not a “high-achieving” student in high school; I did not take Advanced Placement classes. Even when offered the opportunity, I chose to stay in regular classes. Because of my time spent in Mexico and Peru, the only advanced class I took in high school was AP Spanish, and as the only non-native Spanish speaker in the class, although academically I was successful, I felt intimidated by the native Spanish speakers, and I rarely participated in class.

This study has its genesis in my own experiences, both as a language learner, in an Advanced Placement class filled with native speakers, and as an AP educator. Currently, for the past 12 years I have taught high school English courses in a small border town in Southern
California; the past six years I have taught both AP English Language and AP English Literature. In this context, I have watched as my high-achieving Hispanic female students, many of whom are English language learners, behave in the same manner that I did so many years ago in my high school AP Spanish class: quiet, hesitant to speak out in class discussion or debates, and more comfortable with writing than speaking. I began to wonder if this behavior from academically the top of the class was characteristic of their behavior in all AP classes, or if their reluctance to participate was limited to my English class. I needed to know what drove their behavior: the subject, content matter, or something more.

My questions about the Hispanic females in my AP classes come from my constructivist perspective of learning, which posits that through experiences individuals build their own understanding (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). Indeed, even our own selves may be constructed, built on the expectations of society, or our own life experiences (Gall et al., 2007). I believe learning is experiential and dependent on multiple factors. As students navigate culture, gender, race, and societal demands, their understanding of self and of the world develops.

As a Christian, a Christian worldview was the primary paradigm that guided this research study. Worldview is held subconsciously by an individual and is the foundation for learning (Greene, 1998). As a Christian, holding a Christian worldview, and believing that faith is foundational to knowledge and truth (Greene, 1998), I believe that all individuals are created in the image of God, and as such, should be treated with respect and love. It pains me that there are individuals who are marginalized and mistreated because of their gender and culture. As a woman, it angers me that my fellow women are treated as second-class citizens simply because they are women.
A Christian worldview compels me to realize that knowledge demands action; that without love as a foundation, the acquisition of knowledge is meaningless (Greene, 1998). To that end, as a researcher, I realize that this study’s outcome requires action that will enable a better future for this population. It demands that my results promote a response that will enable participants to feel valued and that their life experiences matter. Finally, a Christian worldview requires that love guide my treatment of participants, giving them respect, and sincerely and honestly relaying their stories. The love that God has for the participants and the population they represent is the love that motivates my search for knowledge about their experiences.

Furthermore, as a teacher in a predominately-Hispanic, agricultural community, I have seen the impact of the Chicano movement in my local community and in the California education system. I am curious to know if the experiences of my Hispanic female students in other AP classes are similar to what I have observed in my own students in class. I was curious to learn how better to treat or teach these young ladies so that they can achieve their fullest potential.

**Problem Statement**

In 2002, after recognizing the disparity in the achievement gap between whites and minority groups, and in an effort to close the achievement gap, the College Board instituted an “open access” policy in which educators and administrators should make AP courses accessible and equitable, without restrictions of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomics (College Board, 2002). As a result of the open access policy, more minority groups have had access to AP courses, with total numbers of low-income students more than quadrupled in the past 10 years of AP (College Board, 2014). However, despite the College Board’s best efforts, a disparity still exists. Only 18% of students who took the 2013 AP exams were Hispanic, and one in four students showing
high AP academic potential did not take any AP course in high school (College Board, 2014). Furthermore, much of the research on Hispanic achievement in AP courses is specific to Hispanic males’ experiences or achievement (Forrester, 2012).

The problem is that while there is some literature on the achievement gap between Hispanic/Latinos and Whites (Becerra, 2012; College Board, 2014; Jeynes, 2015; Higgins, 2015; Klopfenstein, 2004) and studies on the achievement or experiences of Hispanics in education (Cavazos & Cavazos, 2010; College Board, 2014; Harklau, 2013; Higgins, 2015; Jeynes, 2015), there is a paucity of research specifically on the experiences of Hispanic females in high school Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Furthermore, there is much literature and research on Hispanic achievement that is outdated (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Hemphill & Vanneman, 2011; National Women’s Law Center and Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2009; Ndura, Robinson, & Ochs, 2003; Vanderbrook, 2006).

While Hispanic females have been proven to be high achievers academically (Harklau, 2013; Walker & Pearsall, 2012), the research shows that many do not live up to their full academic potential (Harklau, 2013; National Women’s Law Center and Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2009). To date, despite their demonstrated academic ability and potential for achievement, the voices of Latinas in high school Advanced Placement classes have not been heard, nor have their experiences been shared.

**Purpose Statement**

This transcendental phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of Southern California Hispanic female high school graduates who were enrolled in high school AP courses. In this study “Hispanic” and “Latino/a” are defined as having ethnic or cultural roots in Latin America, Central America, originating in Spain, or American Chicana/Latina (Hipolito-Delgado,
The terms “Hispanic” and “Latino/a” are used interchangeably on government policy documents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010; White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics & Gandara, 2015). Because Mexican makes up the largest ethnic group of Hispanics (Hipolito-Delgado, 2014; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010; White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics & Gandara, 2015), and because “Chicano/a” denotes specifically a Hispanic of Mexican-American origin (Blea, 1992; Cotera, 1977; Hipolito-Delgado, 2014) for the purposes of this study, “Hispanic,” “Latino/a” and “Chicano/a” were used interchangeably. For purposes of simplicity, the Spanish feminine form ending in “a” will be used whenever referencing Hispanic females as “Latina,” or “Chicana.”

AP Hispanic students were studied because many Hispanic females are high achieving in high school and enroll in AP classes in high school. Many colleges look for AP courses on transcripts as a means of determining college acceptance (College Board, 2016). For students who do well on the end of course exams, AP can offer a way to earn college credits while still in high school (College Board, 2016; Wyatt, Patterson & Di Giacomo, 2015). Students who take AP classes are more likely to graduate from college, earn higher a GPA in college, and have more earning power later on in life (College Board, 2014; Wyatt, et al., 2015).

For Hispanic females, AP can offer a way to level the playing field between them and their male counterparts. A 2009 study showed that Hispanic females were enrolled in AP in higher numbers than their male peers and perceived school to be more important than did their male counterparts (Hinojosa et al., 2009). For many students, AP courses are the most rigorous courses offered at their high schools. For Latinas who desire to further their education, AP courses are an obvious choice to increase their chances for university acceptance.
However, despite their academic promise in high school, this subgroup is not achieving academically beyond high school (Harkalau, 2013; National Women’s Law Center and Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2009). Although they are capable of achieving academically in college, many Latinas are not continuing to pursue higher education (Harklau, 2013; Moore & Slate, 2008; National Women’s Law Center and Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2009; Walker & Pearsall, 2012).

Chicana feminist theory, which takes an intersectional approach to womanhood and identity, was the guiding theory for this research study. Chicana feminism recognizes that Hispanic women are affected both by their race and class within both the Hispanic culture and American society (Blea, 1992; Cotera, 1977; Garcia, 1989; Wells, 2005). Unlike the Anglo women of the feminist movement, Chicana feminism understands the intersection of gender, culture, class, and race that impacts the lives of Hispanic females (Aguilar, 2013; Chavez, 2013). Hispanic females are described as living in two worlds (Aguilar, 2013; Chavez, 2013; Venegas-Garcia, 2013). Using the Chicana feminist’ perspective of intersectionality, the experiences of high school Hispanic females in AP classes were examined in this study.

The second theory that guided this study was Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory, which posits that learning happens both socially and contextually. Theories must be able to predict human behavior (Bandura, 1977). Social learning theory contends that experiences predict and can influence behavior and meaning and learning is influenced by the environment and context (Bandura, 1977). Therefore, according to Bandura’s theory, high-achieving Latinas who are in AP courses may be affected by the both the AP environments at school as well as their home environment. Social learning theory guided this research study, examining how the experiences of being in an AP class affected and influenced the behavior of high-achieving
Latinas. The intersection of gender, class, culture, and learning environments was explored. Like the Chicana feminists of the past, participants in this study contended with different social contexts as they strove to continue to achieve academically (Cuadraz, 2005). This makes their experiences even more noteworthy as they must “learn” or even “unlearn” habits, mindsets, or behaviors, depending on the social context.

**Significance of the Study**

This research study has practical significance, with potential to add significance to both the Latina population studied and for the educators in whose classrooms they sit. For the Hispanic women, the chance to share their experiences has not been an opportunity often afforded them. For the educator of Hispanic females, this study proposes to give insight and understanding into the various conflicts afflicting this student population. This study has empirical, theoretical, and practical significance.

**Empirically**

Studying the lived experiences of Hispanic females is significant in several ways. As part of the largest ethnic population in America (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), Hispanic females are often high-achieving students (Harklau, 2013; National Women’s Law Center and Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2009). This study adds to the body of knowledge about Hispanic students, particularly those considered to be high-achieving students (Aguilar, 2013; Cooper, 2012; Harklau, 2013; Hernandez, 2015; National Women’s Law Center and Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2009).

This study relates to other research of the experiences of high-achieving Hispanics. Up to this point, studies focused on the achievement gap between Hispanics and other ethnicities in AP classes (Borg, 2010; Gregory, 2009; Koch et al., 2013; Higgins, 2015; Nord, Roey, Perkins,
Lyons, Lemanski, Brown, & Schuknecht, 2011; Walker & Pearsall, 2012). Other studies focused on gifted Hispanics (Forrester, 2012) or Hispanic students’ access to rigorous curriculum (Borg, 2010; Mendez, 2010; Ndura et al., 2003). With regards to Hispanic females’ experiences specifically, some research examined the experiences of Latinas in the education system (Aguilar, 2013; Taylor & Fernandez-Bergersen, 2015; U.S. Dept. of Education, 2015; Vanderbrook, 2006). This study added to the body of literature regarding high achieving high school Latina’s experiences as they close the gender and achievement gap in AP courses.

Additionally, this study added to the body of knowledge by exposing the perceptions, experiences, and factors that motivate success for this population of students (Aguilar, 2013; Cooper, 2012; Harklau, 2013; Hernandez, 2015; National Women’s Law Center and Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2009). Moreover, by focusing on Latinas, specifically those in Southern California, this study added to the body of Chicana feminist literature by documenting the lived experiences and perceptions of Mexican-American women (Blea, 1992; Cotera, 1977; Garcia, 1989).

**Theoretically**

This study adds to Chicana feminism by showing the long-term effects of Chicana feminism in American and Hispanic cultures as well as in the American educational system. By sharing the experiences of Hispanic women who are the recipients of the foundational work laid by the Chicana feminists, this study shows how Chicana feminists have impacted the lives and culture for young Hispanic women. Today’s Hispanic youth still face discrimination, cultural expectations, and challenges to accomplish their educational goals (Hemphill & Vanneman, 2011; Roscoe, 2015). However, because of the work done by Chicana feminists, young Hispanic women have more opportunities. This study shows how current Chicanas experience and
navigate the intersection of race, culture, and class as they pursue education and personal achievement.

Practically

Practically, this study is a platform for the sharing the experiences of a marginalized group of students who, despite their abilities, have been largely ignored in research, practice, and in the culture at large. This study gives high school Advanced Placement teachers insight into how to best serve this student population so that they can achieve their maximum potential. For high-achieving Latinas who plan to pursue higher education, AP courses are an obvious choice to increase the odds of their acceptance at a university of their choice. As the Hispanic population has surpassed other ethnic populations in Southern California (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), this study has particular significance to educators in this region. However, this study aimed to also be relevant to educators with a significant Hispanic student population. On a wider scale, this study gave insight into the experiences and perceptions of AP students. Organizations such as College Board can better understand how to service this particular student population as well as learn how to better meet the needs of all AP students. This study gave insight into how AP is perceived by the female Hispanic student population and gave insight into what they value and do not value about the program.

Research Questions

The following research questions framed this study:

**Research Question 1**: How do Hispanic female graduates from Southern California high schools describe their experiences in AP classes?

Although Hispanic females are high-achieving students with high enrollment numbers in AP classes (College Board, 2015) and goals and aspirations of careers and post-secondary
academic pursuits (National Women’s Law Center and Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2009), their experiences are often negated and ignored (National Women’s Law Center and Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2009). All too often they do not follow through with their stated objectives and goals, instead settling for roles designated for them by their culture, family, or their own idea of what is possible (National Women’s Law Center and Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2009). Their voices and experiences have been, thus far, unheard. By bringing their experiences as high-achieving students to light, their voices have value and their experiences have significance.

**Research Question 2:** How do participants describe the role their family culture, cultural heritage, and American culture has in their academic experiences?

Hispanic females face certain cultural expectations (National Women’s Law Center and Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2009; Ortiz Coffer, n.d.; Roscoe, 2015). How young Latinas perceive and act with regards to the cultural expectations may play a role in their perceptions and experiences as high-achieving students. Recognizing that the individual family unit may be different than cultural expectations (Ortiz Coffer, n.d.), this question also delved into the expectations and pressures from the family. Their parents’ and extended family’s expectations about their academic potential and success may also contribute to Hispanic females’ perceptions and experiences in AP classes. Parents of students in AP classes are generally better educated than students not in AP classes (Edwards & Sawtell, 2013). Hispanic females whose parents were also high achieving may have different experiences and perceptions of success than those whose parents were not high achieving students or whose parents hinder or prevent educational achievement or development (Saragoza, 1969).
Research Question 3: What relationship do participants describe between their gender and their academic experiences?

Hispanic women are the largest “minority” population gender in America and are estimated to make up 25% of the total US population by 2050 (Cuadraz, 2005). Despite this fact, most American high schools do not address the specific needs of Latinas, leading many to feel alienated (Cooper, 2012). Many Hispanic women face gender-specific discrimination in the American education system (Cooper, 2012; National Women’s Law Center and Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2009). The stereotypes, discriminations, and family responsibilities facing Hispanic females contribute to the high dropout rate for this student population (Cooper, 2012; National Women’s Law Center and Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2009). Despite reporting that they wanted their teachers to view them as academically capable and smart, many Hispanic females reported feeling as if they did not belong in a school environment (Cooper, 2012).

Research Question 4: How do participants describe the intersection of class, gender and culture as impacting their academic experiences?

When it comes to higher education, many Hispanic women are first-generation college going (Ortega-Liston & Soto, 2014), which can also present challenges. Furthermore, many first-generation, college-going Hispanic women are low income, and as a result, they face a greater degree of gender subordination (Ortega-Liston & Soto, 2014). Although college enrollment rates have increased for Hispanics, Hispanic women continue to be the most underrepresented population group in higher education (Hernandez, 2015).

Definitions

The following definitions were used to better clarify the terminology in this study:
1. *Achievement Gap* - The achievement gap is the difference in academic achievement between minority students and white students (College Board, 2015).

2. *AP* - AP refers to the Advanced Placement program from the College Board. The College Board was founded in 1900 as a non-profit organization created to increase access to higher education (College Board, 2014). The College Board oversees and administers over 30 AP courses. Begun in 1955, the College Board’s Advanced Placement program has worked to narrow the achievement gap, train teachers, and increase student knowledge and skills (College Board, 2014). The common terminology for Advanced Placement courses is AP. AP courses implementation has grown over the last decade, with over one million students taking AP exams in 2013 (College Board, 2014). Advanced Placement courses can prepare students for the rigor they will encounter in college courses (College Board, 2016; Wyatt et al., 2015). Students who take high school AP courses are more likely to graduate from college than students who don’t take AP courses (College Board, 2016; Wyatt et al., 2015). AP courses can also provide college credit for qualifying students, many of whom are automatically opted out of introductory or remedial college courses (College Board, 2016).

3. *High Achieving* - Although College Board strives to make AP classes accessible to all students regardless of ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, or ability (College Board, 2002), the assumption is that students who take AP classes are high-achieving students. For the purposes of this study, high achieving will be defined as those who score well on standardized tests, who are in the top percentile in their class, and/or who are college-bound.
4. **Hispanic** - According to the 2010 Census, “Hispanics” or “Latinos” are individuals who classified themselves by the categories listed on the Census 2010 questionnaire: Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, from Spain, the Spanish-speaking countries of Central or South America, or the Dominican Republic (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Hispanic origin can be viewed as the heritage, nationality group, lineage, or country of birth of the person or the person’s parents or ancestors before their arrival in the United States. Moreover, those who are of Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino ethnicity may be of any race (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Although “Chicano” refers to Hispanics specifically of Mexican-American heritage (Garcia, 1997), for the purposes of this study, the terms “Hispanic,” “Chicano/a,” and “Latino/a” were used interchangeably. “Xicana” is an alternative spelling for “Chicana.”

**Summary**

This chapter presented information on the proposed research study of Hispanic females. Despite often being academically high achieving and goal oriented, Hispanic females are often denied the opportunity to pursue their academic and career goals. Historically and culturally, this group has been treated as second class citizens. The experiences and perspectives of young, high-achieving Hispanic females should be heard so that this group is no longer marginalized. This chapter explored my philosophical assumptions and worldview, from which my perspective, that as part of the fastest growing minority group, these young women’s experiences are important and deserve a platform to be shared, is drawn.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

As the face of America continues to change with the influx of different ethnic populations, so the landscape of education changes, morphing to reflect the changes in American society. With the changes come different educational needs and issues specific to different ethnicities and cultures. This is evident as the Hispanic-American community; once a marginalized minority group, the Hispanic population in America is rapidly becoming a majority-minority group (Fry & Lopez, 2012). The latest census found that those who self-identified as Hispanic has increased to over 50 million people (Fry & Lopez, 2012; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). In fact, according to the last Census data, the largest growth in population came from the Hispanic ethnic group (Fry & Lopez, 2012; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Hispanics are the majority population in at least one or more counties in over eight states (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), and the Hispanic population has doubled in size in at least one in every four counties across the nation (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Over 75% the Hispanic population lives in eight states; California alone has 28% of the total Hispanic population in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). In Southern California, Hispanics outnumber other ethnic groups at 39% of the population, with white (38%), Asian (14%), and Black (6%) following (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). As a majority-minority population that is rapidly growing, the special interests of the Hispanic population are starting to impact government policy (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Chapter Two begins by discussing the theoretical framework for this study, Chicana feminist theory and social learning theory. Then a brief history of how the Hispanic special interests became of importance in government policy is given with specific focus on the Chicano workers’ movement’s impact. This chapter then focuses on the emergence of Chicana feminism
and the culture clashes facing many Hispanic females. Finally, this chapter looks at social learning theory, the Advanced Placement program in high schools, and offers an overview of high-achieving Hispanic females.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study was framed with two theories, both a social and a learning theory. The first, Chicana feminist theory, was used to examine the lives and experiences of Latinas in AP classes in Southern California high schools. Chicana feminism specifically focuses on the needs of Mexican-American females who have been subjected to not only American cultural standards, but also that of their ethnic heritage. The second learning theory that frames this study was Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory. Social learning theory postulates that models for behavior are needed for learning to occur, and that learning is contextualized. By studying high-achieving Latinas, this study sought to find what motivates them, what models of academic achievement they had, and what their experiences were as they were surrounded by other high achieving students.

**Chicana Feminism**

While Chicana feminist theory has an important role in this research, the young women in this research study are from the “millennial generation” (Pew Research Center, 2015) and thus, are too young to remember the feminist and Chicano movements of the 1960s. However, as Hispanic females, these young ladies are direct recipients of, and deeply impacted by, these two influential, American cultural movements. A brief summary of the Chicano worker’s movement and the Chicana feminist movement that emerged from the Chicano movement follows.

The Chicana feminist movement has its roots in the Chicano workers’ movement that began in the 1960s (Chavez, 2013; Garcia, 1997; Gutierrez, 2011). Inspired by the Civil Rights
movement, the Chicano workers’ movement focused on equal rights socially, politically, and economically for Mexican-Americans (Garcia, 1997; Gutierrez, 2011). Having faced much racism and discrimination simply because of their race and culture (Chavez, 2013; Gratton & Merchant, 2015), the Chicano workers’ movement gave Hispanics a newfound sense of identity (Chavez, 2013; Garcia, 1997; Ortiz & Telles, 2012). To be a “Chicano” evoked a sense of pride in the Mexican culture and heritage that had been previously missing (Garcia, 1997; Ortiz & Telles, 2012). Desiring fair wages, labor conditions, and safe working environments, unions organized the Hispanic workers to protest against the discrimination and unethical treatment they received because of their ethnicity (Gutierrez, 2011). Across the United States, Chicano groups organized protests, walkouts, strikes, boycotts, and participated in other protest activities (Garcia, 1997; Gutierrez, 2011). “La Causa” became the largest and most widespread organized protest movement by Mexican-Americans (Garcia, 1997).

Despite having played a central role in “La Causa,” Chicanas began to feel that their issues and concerns as Hispanic women were being overlooked and ignored by the movement (Blea, 1992; Cotera, 1977; Galindo & Gonzalez; 1999). As the Chicano movement gained momentum, the women involved began to experience and protest against the internal contradictions they saw in the “Chicanismo” attitudes of male superiority, authority, and domination (Blea, 1992; Garcia, 1997). One point of conflict within the male-dominated Chicano United Farm Worker’s movement and that of the emerging Chicana feminists involved in “La Causa” was the issue of birth control (Cotera, 1977; Minian, 2013). Condemned by leaders such as Cesar Chavez as a form of eugenics and population control of Mexicans, birth control was something that was an important issue to Chicana feminists, who recognized the Mexican woman’s desire to exert control over this area of her life (Cotera, 1977; Minian, 2013). Although
their work in the Chicano movement was vital, these women began to experience resistance from those within the movement as their focus moved to begin to challenge the traditional gender roles placed on Hispanic women (Blea, 1992; Garcia, 1997).

Chicana feminists began to speak out against the inequality and tensions they experienced as Mexican-American women (Cotera, 1977; Blea, 1992; Garcia, 1997). Although inspired by and running parallel to the feminist movement of the 1960s, Chicana feminists realized that their fight for equality was different than that of the white woman (Blea; 1992; Castillo, 1994; Chavez, 2013; Cotera, 1977; Garcia, 1997; Milkman & Terriquez, 2012). Unlike the Anglo women, Chicana feminists recognized that they had been “doubly oppressed” (Cortera, 1977, p. 34). Cotera (1977) stated, “We are Chicanas and women. We have nothing now because of these two factors” (p. 17). Cotera (1977) also stated, “With Anglo women feminists, it’s different,” (p. 44), Chicana feminists identified with other minority women and minority struggles for recognitions and acceptance more than the White feminist women’s movement (Blea; 1992; Cotera, 1977). For the Chicana feminist, it was both a societal issue in American society, and a cultural issue with their Mexican heritage (Castillo, 1994; Chavez, 2013; Garcia, 1997). Chicana feminists recognized that unlike the Anglo feminists, they, as Hispanic women, faced additional oppression, one in which their race, class, and culture intersected in the blatant racism and discrimination against Hispanics in American culture with the cultural discrimination and gender bias they faced as women within the Hispanic culture (Chavez, 2013; Cotera, 1977).

Chicana feminists were concerned with what they perceived as gender discrimination, the result of a male domination in their daily lives (Chavez, 2013; Garcia, 1997). The traditional gender roles attributed to Mexican-American women, such as that of a second-class citizen, the “ideal long-suffering woman” whose role as mother and wife was idealized and romanticized,
were protested by Chicana feminists (Enoch, 2004; Garcia, 1997). Arguing that they were not to be “sacrificial victims” to their husbands and children, Chicana feminists urged women to empower themselves, first in their own “conciencia” and then in organized groups to gain power (Cotera, 1977, p. 30). Indeed, in their native Mexico, where many Chicanos had their heritage and cultural roots, even the Mexican judicial system, with its inequitable treatment of men and women, reinforced the traditional roles of “machismo” and the suffering, submissive wife (Enoch, 2004). Standing in protest against their cultural traditions, history, and heritage, Chicanas fought against the “ideal” of male superiority (Enoch, 2004).

The Chicana movement gained momentum as women writers published essays chronicling the new ideology of equal rights and treatment for Mexican-American women (Enoch, 2004; Garcia, 1997). Chicana feminism recognized the role that the Mexican culture played in the lives of women and sought to liberate women from the perceived oppressive “machismo” culture. The emergence of a “second wave” of Chicana feminists, with an emphasis on education, politics and leadership, has reverberated into modern Hispanic culture. Chicana feminists were inspired by women’s history in the United States, and as such, were woman-centric as they centered their efforts to publicize and document the lives of the women themselves (Chavez, 2013). These efforts resulted in Chicana feminists “shattering the universal male subject” and “fracturing notions of the community” (Chavez, 2013, p. 512), altering the Mexican American experience.

Recognizing the difference between the American Hispanic culture and that of their own native country, Hispanic women immigrants find that they have more independence than what they might have had in their home country (Milkman & Terriquez, 2012). Many Hispanic women feel that in America, because of the work of Chicana feminists, their voices are heard
(Milkman & Terriquez, 2012). They are able to attend college and hold jobs where many have leadership positions (Milkman & Terriquez, 2012).

Although Hispanic women have more opportunity afforded to them than ever before, still only a minority are continuing to achieve in higher education or find success in the workplace. Hispanics fall behind other ethnic and minority groups in earning bachelors or other higher educational degrees (Ortega-Liston & Soto, 2014). While Hispanic enrollment in college is increasing, Hispanics are enrolling more frequently in two-year college institutions than in four-year institutions (Llagas & Snyder, 2003). Further, despite more Hispanics earning college degrees, there is still a large gap between white students’ college graduation rates and that of Hispanic students (Llagas & Snyder, 2003). Though women are more likely to earn degrees than men are likely to, the fact remains that women of ethnicity are less likely than men to be employed in positions of authority (Milkman & Terriquez, 2012; Ortega-Liston & Soto, 2014). Hispanic women especially have to contend with negative stereotypes that may prevent them from advancement in the workplace (Lopez, 2013).

One reason for the continued lack of achievement outside of the home is the cultural pressures and expectations as well as economic status than many Hispanic women face. For Chicanas, the struggle to balance their work and home life continues. Indeed, for many Mexican women, there is an expectation that they remain in the home according to the cultural tradition. Many Hispanic females are first-generation college going, and many come from low income backgrounds (Ortega-Liston & Soto, 2014). The lower socioeconomic background of many Hispanic females may explain why many do not complete higher education or pursue careers outside of the home (Ortega-Liston & Soto, 2014). For others, the struggle to achieve is a
struggle against the “machismo” culture and expectations to be the traditional Mexican housewife (Enoch, 2004; Lopez, 2013).

Hispanic women are the “linchpin” to the next generation (White House Initiative, 2015). They are the key to disrupting the cycle of poverty that so many Hispanics endure (White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics & Grandara, 2015). The Chicana feminists recognized the key role Hispanic women play in their culture and the influence they had in the everyday lives of others, and as such, they became pioneers in challenging and changing the system and reality for themselves and future generations.

Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory is the second foundational learning theory of this research study. Social learning theory postulates that behavior is learned by observation of modeled behavior and experiences and outcomes of behavior (Bandura, 1977). In other words, as people see modeled behavior with either positive or negative outcomes, they will, in turn, imitate the behavior with the outcomes they desire (Bandura, 1977). Modeled behavior begins with imitating parents and family members as infants learn language and other actions (Bandura, 1977). Those with whom a person regularly associates determines the behavior that is observed and therefore learned (Bandura, 1977).

However, family, friends, and peers are not the only models for behavior. With the advent of television, and now social media, students have more people to model their behavior after (Bandura, 1977). Furthermore, people may learn vicariously through others’ experiences (Bandura, 1977). Hispanic females who may not have female models of academic success in their immediate sphere of family or friends may find positive behavioral role models externally (Bandura, 1977). This is particularly true if these students find models of behavior whose results
are the outcomes they themselves desire (Bandura, 1977). If high school Hispanic females can see the academic success modeled in other Hispanic females, they will become more empowered to do the same (Bandura, 1977). Most people who observe modeled behavior are reluctant to imitate it until they see the advantages gained by that behavior (Bandura, 1977). As acceptance of that new behavior spreads, the new behavior gains social support (Bandura, 1977). This is the crux of what many Hispanic females face in today’s academic environment. However, many Hispanic females do not have current models for academic success; rather, they themselves are the models for future generations of Latinas.

Perhaps one reason for their determination to continue in academically-rigorous classes, despite not having successful models for this behavior, is explained by the self-efficacy Hispanic females in AP classes have. Social learning theory states the strength of people’s convictions in their abilities determines how or if they will even bother to try in difficult situations (Bandura, 1977). The stronger the efficacy, the more positive performance outcomes and the stronger likelihood of success. Personal success raises expectations for efficacy, and even the occasional perceived failure can be overcome when people have a history of past successes (Bandura, 1977). Since people guide their actions based on the consequences of those actions (Bandura, 1977), this could explain how despite a lack of support from family or culture, many high-achieving Hispanic females continue to be high achieving. Positive self-regard goes much further than any other motivational inducements for success (Bandura, 1977).

Related Literature

Hispanics and Government Policy

Race and racial identity has played a part in the government’s policies towards and treatment of Hispanics, particularly those of Mexican heritage (Gratton & Merchant, 2015; Ortiz
Mexicans comprise the largest population group of Hispanics in the United States, making up 63% of the U.S. Hispanic population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Over 61% of the Mexican population lives in California. In many counties, Mexicans are the largest ethnic population, outnumbering any other race or ethnicity group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). In spite of, or perhaps because of, the growth of the Mexican Hispanic community, the U.S. government has had many various policies regarding Mexicans. From differences in classifying them on the Census, to allowing discriminatory educational policies, to creating a task force aimed at increasing their academic achievement, the U.S. government has gradually evolved in its treatment of Mexican Americans.

As the original inhabitants of the American Southwest, Mexican Americans have long had to barriers to overcome in their pursuit of equality (Gratton & Merchant, 2015; Ortiz & Telles, 2012; Powers, 2014). The massive immigration wave of Mexicans between 1900 and the 1930s into the Southwest region is the foundation for much of the current Mexican population concentrated in the area (Gratton & Merchant, 2015). Many Mexican immigrants came to the United States in cycles; young Mexican men came to work as laborers and then repatriated to Mexico when the work seasons were finished (Gratton & Merchant, 2015). Others stayed and began to settle and assimilate into American culture (Gratton & Merchant, 2015; Ortiz & Telles, 2012). Mexican men were often only given employment in menial and day labor positions (Chavez, 2013). However, as the Hispanic population increased, the political power and influence they held decreased (Gratton & Merchant, 2015).

Early census records show Mexicans as obtaining a lower socioeconomic status than non-Hispanics such as Whites and Blacks, even to the third generation of American-born Mexicans (Chavez, 2013; Gratton & Merchant, 2015). Moreover, racism and discrimination against the
non-assimilated Mexicans was the norm (Gratton & Merchant, 2015; Ortiz & Telles, 2012). Mexicans faced discrimination in job opportunities and wages, among others (Chavez, 2013; Gratton & Merchant, 2015). With the increase in the Mexican American population, racism against Mexicans rose, and though many were American born, the term “Mexican” was used to describe anyone of Hispanic heritage despite their skin color or nationality (Gratton & Merchant, 2015; Ortiz & Telles, 2012).

In fact, on the 1930 census, “Mexican” was used as a racial identifier for the first and only time, with instructions that “laborers” who did not identify as White or any other ethnicity, be classified as “Mexican,” suggesting that class may have played a role in the racial identification as well (Gratton & Merchant, 2015; Ortiz & Telles, 2012). The 1930 Census term offended the Mexican American community who have a high intermarriage rates between Mexican and other races, therefore to be “Mexican” is not limited to one skin color, race, or ethnicity (Ortiz & Telles, 2012). Furthermore, Mexican-American leaders at the time were also concerned as to what a non-white label might mean in terms of civil and social rights for their community (Gratton & Merchant, 2015). The push-back from the Mexican community over the racial label of “Mexican” on the 1930 Census was so immediate and strong, that the government changed the policy (Gratton & Merchant, 2015). For the first time, Mexican Americans united and showed their political strength and power (Gratton & Merchant, 2015).

The 1930’s census was not the only battle with the United States’ government policies that Hispanics have had to deal with. Mexican Americans again united, showing their political power with the Chicano movement. As Gutierrez (2011) examined, there were many paths to power in achieving equality and social justice for the Chicano movement. The revolts and protest movements, such as the United Farmworkers and other labor groups’ strikes, are perhaps the
most well-known paths taken by the Chicano movement (Gutierrez, 2011). Uniting with student groups, the Chicano movement organized strikes, school boycotts, and walkouts, protesting against the discrimination they faced in the school system (Gutierrez, 2011).

Another issue Chicanos faced was blatant segregation that occurred in education in the early part of the 20th century (Powers, 2014). Because of their political victory with the 1930’s census’ racial identifier (Gratton & Merchant, 2015), Mexican Americans were considered “white” (Gratton & Merchant, 2015; Powers, 2014). However, though granted the “white” racial identifier, Mexicans were not given the same privileges and opportunities and faced discrimination, racism, and school segregation (Gutierrez, 2011; Lopez, 2013; Powers, 2014). Though the segregation faced by Hispanics was not the same as that experienced by African Americans, in that it was not law, Mexican Americans still faced discrimination and segregation in schools and through school policies (Gutierrez, 2011; Powers, 2014). Proponents of segregation claimed that Mexican American children were not considered proficient enough in English to be taught with the white students (Gutierrez, 2011; Powers, 2014). Coinciding with efforts to end the segregation of African American students, the efforts made to desegregate Mexican and White students were ultimately mutually beneficial to both parties (Powers, 2014).

High profile cases such as *Mendez v. Westminster School District of Orange County* (1946), officially ended the segregation experienced by Mexican Americans (Powers, 2014). Ultimately, the Chicano movement’s protests resulted in ending segregation, challenging and overturning discriminatory laws, and implementing new orders that allow for Hispanic immigrants to obtain equal access to education (Gutierrez, 2011).

Despite laws against discriminatory educational practices, many high-achieving Hispanic students still experience some sort of segregation in school. This type of segregation is more
insidious because Mexican students do not have equitable access and opportunity to take the same courses as their White peers. Minority students are more likely to attend schools with a less experienced teaching staff and higher rates of poverty (Logan, Minca, & Adar, 2012). While only 18% of whites attend high-poverty public schools, more than 60% of Hispanic students attend high-poverty public schools (Llagas & Snyder, 2003; Logan et al., 2012).

In short, then, historically, many Hispanic students did not have access to rigorous curriculum (Koch et al., 2013; Walker & Pearsall, 2012). Hispanic students are not enrolled in AP courses and do not have access to other advanced courses as frequently as their White peers (Judson & Hobson, 2015; Hinojosa, et al., 2009; Walker & Pearsall, 2012). This disparity in availability and opportunity has contributed to the achievement gap between Hispanics and other ethnicities. The fact is that public schools in America are both separate and unequal (Logan et al., 2012).

To combat the discrimination students may face in education, the Office for Civil Rights was created in 1966 to eliminate discrimination based on ethnicity, color, or national origin (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Over the past five decades, the office has grown to encompass preventing discrimination based on sex, age, or disability (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). The Office has resolved cases of discrimination based on English language ability; in one case, an entire state had prevented English language learners from access to core curriculum (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). These problems, then, are only exacerbated for Hispanic women, as Latinas face more barriers to success than do other minority groups (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The following sections will elaborate on the barriers to achievement for Hispanic women, which include the achievement disparity for minorities to Whites, Hispanic culture, and low income socioeconomic status.
The Achievement Gap

The achievement gap has traditionally been measured as the academic gap between White students and their Black counterparts. However, with the increase in the Hispanic student population, interest in the achievement gap for Hispanic students, many of whom are low income, has gained traction in recent years (Llagas & Snyder, 2003; Madrid, 2011). Achievement research over a three-year period shows differences in college readiness between Black and Hispanic students, with the most significant difference between White graduates and their Hispanic counterparts (Barnes & Slate, 2013; Roscoe, 2015). In today’s modern world, educational attainment, particularly high school graduation, the possession of a bachelor’s degree, or higher education, is a means of increasing cultural capital (Barnes & Slate, 2013). However, many minority students are not able to increase their cultural capital because they are academically behind.

There is a significant achievement gap between White and Hispanic students in K-12 grades (Hemphill & Vanneman, 2011; Madrid, 2011). Although since the 1960s Hispanic student achievement has increased when compared to their White peers, the academic achievement has been small (Llagas & Snyder, 2003; Madrid, 2011). On national standards tests, the achievement gap between Hispanics and White students has persisted and remained at a difference of 21-26 points lower than White students (Hemphill & Vanneman, 2011). Furthermore, although it decreased overall, over a 10-year period, Hispanic students had a consistent, significantly higher dropout rate than any other minority or ethnic group at 12% to less than eight percent for other population groups (Llagas & Snyder, 2003; Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). Hispanic students are significantly behind their counterparts in college enrollment, completion, and wage earnings (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). As the leading minority group and
soon to be the largest ethnic group, this discrepancy between Hispanics and other ethnicities has a significant impact on the future of the nation’s political, social, and economic future (Madrid, 2011).

In California, where Mexicans are the largest minority group, the achievement gap between Hispanics and Whites mirrors the gap on a national level (Madrid, 2011). On California state standards math and reading tests, as of 2010, there was over a 20% difference in achievement rates between Hispanics and Whites (Madrid, 2011). Moreover, in 2009, Hispanic students had yet to attain the levels of achievement made by Whites six years prior (Madrid, 2011). Hispanic students were enrolled at higher rates in community colleges than other ethnicities, with two-thirds of the total numbers of Hispanics students enrolled in community colleges enrolled in just two states, California and Texas (Llagas & Snyder, 2003; Santiago, Galdeano, & Taylor, 2015).

Recognizing the significance and importance of the achievement gap on the nation’s economy and social structure, policymakers have tried to address the achievement gap with various education reform policies specifically aimed at closing the gap. President Johnson’s Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965 was, in essence, a Civil Right’s law aimed at improving the quality of education for all students, particularly low income and minority students (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Although other Presidents made education policy foundational to their administration, President Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) ushered in a new era of “school accountability,” holding schools and states responsible for student academic achievement. NCLB focused particularly on the subgroups of students that are often forgotten and in which many Hispanic students find themselves: low income, minority, racial/ethnic, and students with limited English or English learners (Zoda, Slate, & Combs,
2011). NCLB determined that “no child” would be disadvantaged by circumstances beyond their control. Adequate yearly progress for each of these subgroups must be shown so that no child was “left behind” (Zoda et al., 2011).

The latest in school accountability acts, President Obama’s Race to the Top competitive grant program, gave financial compensation to states that showed gains in student improvement and in closing the achievement gap (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Phased in slowly, Race to the Top also focused on the subgroups of students of which Hispanic students are often grouped. With a focus on the K-12 educational system, both educational reforms’ primarily aimed to close the achievement gap and to increase college and career readiness.

Despite the idealism of such policies, the reality is educational policies like NCLB and Race to the Top have failed to close the achievement gap (Barnes & Slate, 2011). Low college readiness rates for minorities persist, as do high drop-out rates of minority groups (Barnes & Slate, 2011). One study suggested that the persistent differences in success on standardized tests is due to the anxiety the tests cause for minority groups (Dee, 2014).

Not only is there an achievement gap in the K-12 grades, but a gap exists in the post-secondary education experiences of Hispanics. College graduation rates for Hispanics has actually declined over the past 30 years, falling significantly behind white graduates (Alon, Domina, & Tienda, 2010). Hispanic students are more likely to attend two-year colleges than four-year colleges, and Latinos who enroll in four-year colleges are less likely than white students to complete their bachelor’s degree (Alon et al., 2010). Although college enrollment rates for Hispanics surpassed whites in 2012 (Fry & Lopez, 2012; Fry & Taylor, 2013), Hispanic students still trail other ethnic groups in attainment of a bachelor’s degree (Alon et al., 2010; Calderon, 2015; McGlynn, 2014; Roscoe, 2015).
Hispanics fall behind in not only undergraduate degrees, but also fall behind other ethnic groups in attaining graduate or post-graduate degrees as well (Santiago, et al., 2015). As of 2013, only three percent of Hispanics had a master’s degree, and only .5% had earned a doctorate degree (Santiago et al., 2015). Compared to Whites, of whom eight percent have earned a master’s degree and two percent a doctoral degree, and Asians, of whom 15% have earned a master’s degree and four percent a doctoral degree, Hispanics fall significantly behind (Santiago, et al., 2015).

The discrepancy in college degree attainment could be due to the lack in college preparedness for minority students (Roscoe, 2015). Hispanics and other minority groups are entering college underprepared for the academic rigors they will experience (Roscoe, 2015).

Cultural expectations and norms play a part in the achievement gap for minority groups. Hispanic students from low income homes are more likely to have seen family members accept lower paying jobs because of a lack of education, playing into their own personal expectations for themselves (Roscoe, 2015). The result of the achievement gap is Hispanics are disproportionately represented in lower wage-earning jobs with lowered earnings and in less skilled positions (Santiago et al., 2015).

The danger of a persistent achievement gap for Hispanics is significant as this is the future economic base for America. As the largest minority group, the Hispanic population is projected to become the majority ethnicity in America. The future economic status of America rests on a workforce that is educated, trained, and prepared for the scientific and technological advancements (Riegle-Crumb & Grodsky, 2010). It is important that all students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are able to break the cycles of poverty, lack of educational attainment, and social stigmas, and start creating social and cultural capital to pass
on to future generations (Barnes & Slate, 2011). The achievement of the Hispanic population can significantly impact the American economy and society.

**Hispanic Culture and Women**

Mexican women make up the largest subgroup of Hispanic women (Wells, 2005). Hispanic culture is very family centered, with “family” extended to include immediate members, extended relatives, and even close friends (Roscoe, 2015; Wells, 2005). Family is pivotal in their culture, with family always coming first (Roscoe, 2015). In the Mexican-Hispanic culture, the women are the center of the home and are expected to stay home, have children, and serve their husbands (Chavez, 2013; Durand, 2011; Wells, 2005). What is more, autonomy and independence are not necessarily viewed favorably for Hispanic women (Wells, 2005). A problem, then, arises on the education front for going to college increases independence and a detachment from the family unit, which may be difficult for those students who come from a culture where family is center (Roscoe, 2015). Within the Hispanic culture, the mothers are the primary person in charge of maintaining, preserving, and passing on their culture and values to their children (Durand, 2011). Many Hispanic homes have stereotypical gender roles, where the fathers is the head of the house and decision-maker, and the mothers are the keepers and cultivators of the values, culture and cultural and family traditions (Durand, 2011).

For high-achieving Hispanic females, these roles may be stifling. Although one in five women in the United States is a Hispanic female, and Latinas make up 25% of students in America (U.S. Department of Education, 2015), it wasn’t until the Chicano workers’ movement that Hispanic females finally had a voice in either their American or their traditional ethnic culture. Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) was groundbreaking as she gave voice to a group of women whose experiences had not been heard nor considered in mainstream
American literature. Indeed, many Hispanic females, particularly Mexican-American females, find a clash between the roles expected of them within their home culture and that of America culture (Telzer, Gonzales, Tsai, & Fuligni, 2015).

Although perhaps one of the first popular Chicana feminist authors, Anzaldua (1987) was not the first to express the frustrations felt by American Hispanic women. “La Causa,” or “El Movimiento,” the Chicano movement, created an artistic cultural resurgence wherein poets, playwrights, and writers used their art to protest their status (Garcia, 1997). Calling on women and men to fight against the sexist and racial oppression that Hispanic women routinely experienced, NietoGomez (1974) argued that these factors are used to maintain the social oppression. Many Latinas felt pulled between two cultures and two social movements and struggled to develop an identity within the clash (NietoGomez, 1974). Chicana feminists claimed the Hispanic female “no longer wishes to limit her world to domesticity; making frijoles, tortillas” (Saragoza, 1969, p. 77). Tired of being inferior and treated as a subordinate, these women wanted an opportunity to develop their minds through educational opportunities (Saragoza, 1969). Modern Hispanic females are given the educational opportunities that were denied early Chicanas; however, many experience a conflict between their home culture and the American culture in which they are educated.

Rosalie Flores (1975) captured the conflict experienced by so many Hispanic women from the time of the Chicano movement to the modern Latina:

A third generation Chicana finds herself reared by traditionally oriented parents, educated by middle class standards, thrown into a society whose values she is familiar with but they may go against her upbringing. She is often not educationally nor economically prepared to cope with this society. (p. 95)
Although many modern Hispanic females are given the educational opportunities, as is evidenced by how many Latinas enroll in AP courses, often because of their upbringing or home culture, they are not prepared for success.

**Hispanics and Education**

A Pew Research study (Stepler & Brown, 2016) found that the top issue of concern for Hispanics was education. However, the same study found that while 61% of survey respondents had a high school diploma or less, only 14% had a bachelor’s degree (Stepler & Brown, 2016). The high school dropout rate for Hispanics persists (Llagas & Snyder, 2003; Ortiz, Valerio, & Lopez, 2012). Although the Hispanic population has grown considerably, they have remained the lowest-achieving group for the past four decades (Ortiz et al., 2012). Hispanic youth face higher risks of teen pregnancy, substance abuse, and low college enrollment than any other minority group (Llagas & Snyder, 2003; Ortiz et al., 2012). Despite these discouraging statistics, Hispanic high school graduation rates and college enrollment rates have been slowly increasing from past years, indicating change in occurring (Page, 2012).

Contrary to what the statistics show, education is esteemed and valued in the Hispanic community, and Hispanics claim to have high educational goals for themselves and their children (Almeida, 2016; Ortiz et al., 2012; Santiago et al., 2015). Hispanic parents have high rates of satisfaction with the education their children receive (Llagas & Snyder, 2003), and Hispanic parents are more involved in their child’s education by checking over and setting aside a time and place for their child to do homework (Santiago et al., 2015). However, they are less likely to be involved at their child’s school or classroom (Santiago et al., 2015). In 2012, more Hispanics enrolled in college than White students (Almeida, 2016; Fry & Lopez, 2012; Wagner, 2015). While population increase could be a factor for increased enrollment, the fact is that Hispanics
are completing high school at higher rates than they ever have before (Fry & Lopez, 2012); therefore, more Hispanics are eligible for college than ever before (Fry & Lopez, 2012). Hispanic enrollment in public K-12 education is predicted to account for a third of total student enrollment by the year 2036 (Fry & Lopez, 2012).

However, while education is stated to be a primary concern for many Hispanic families (Llagas & Snyder, 2003), many Hispanic students are not achieving it beyond high school. This may be partially due to discriminatory educational policies and practices. Hispanic students are less likely to be enrolled in gifted education programs in elementary schools (Ford, 2014) and less likely to be enrolled in rigorous courses such as AP or honors courses in high school (Koch, et al., 2013; Walker & Pearsall, 2012). The students who are denied access to gifted education in elementary school are less likely to have access to AP courses in high school, which hinders college acceptance and future academic successes (Ford, 2014). Hispanic students are more likely to be enrolled in public schools and a majority of Hispanic students are enrolled in schools where the majority population is comprised of ethnic minorities (Llagas & Snyder, 2003). Furthermore, the public schools in which Hispanic students are enrolled have a high percentage of low income students, as is evidenced by the free and reduced lunch rate of enrollment (Llagas & Snyder, 2003).

Although more Hispanics enroll in college than ever before (Fry & Lopez, 2012; Page, 2012), a majority do not complete a four-year bachelor’s degree (Almeida, 2016). Furthermore, of those enrolled in college, Hispanic students are less likely to major in the most popular fields of study (Page, 2012). This significantly impacts their future economic attainment (Page, 2012). Hispanic college students are more likely to attend college part time or work to pay for college or family needs (Page, 2012). Hispanic students are more likely to thrive and persist in colleges
that mirror the cultural values of community and familialism (Page, 2012). Hispanics place a high importance on a sense of community and emotional support and concern for their well-being (Cuellar, 2014; Page, 2012).

**Advanced Placement in High Schools**

That an achievement gap between Hispanics and other ethnicities exists is evident (Alon et al., 2010; Hemphill & Vanneman, 2011; Madrid, 2011). One solution high schools have sought to close the achievement gap is by offering Advanced Placement courses to all students, with concerted efforts to enroll minority and low-income students in AP courses. The Advanced Placement program, run by the College Board, has been in existence since the 1950s (Scafidi, Clark, & Swinton, 2015).

Advanced Placement courses are available in every core content area and many elective content areas as well (College Board, 2017a). AP courses were started with the premise that there were students who were capable of the rigors of college courses while still in high school (Koch et al., 2012). By showing mastery of college course content while in high school, these students were able to skip over these courses in college, thus not repeating content they had already mastered (Koch et al., 2012). There are currently over 30 AP courses for schools to choose to implement (College Board, 2017a; Scafidi et al., 2015). Advanced Placement courses are generally considered to be the standard for academic success for high-achieving students in public and private schools. The corresponding AP exams, given every year, are considered to be a valid, standardized measurement of college readiness (Holmes, Slate, Moore, & Barnes, 2015).

The College Board, which administers and oversees AP courses, stated that “taking AP is a sign [students] are up for the most rigorous courses [their] high school has to offer” (College Board, 2016). High schools which choose to offer AP courses may label them “AP” after the
syllabus and course materials have been audited and approved by the College Board (College Board, 2017a). Schools are required to submit renewed auditing and approval purposes every year (College Board, 2017a). The AP course audit was created to standardize the core elements and course requirements of courses taught in AP courses (College Board, 2017a).

AP courses are evaluated frequently by the College Board, and the standards and curriculum are the result of a collaboration between college faculty, high school teachers, and other teaching and learning experts (College Board, 2013). As a result of this on-going collaboration, AP courses and exams evolve and are redesigned to meet the demands of colleges and the needs of students (College Board, 2013). Annually, more than 5,000 college faculty participate in aspects of AP course development and design including professional development for AP teachers, course auditing, course and exam content, and aligning standards to college course content (College Board, 2013). This involvement ensures that AP courses are closely aligned to the corresponding college content course (College Board, 2013).

AP courses can be found in high schools in every state in the U.S. and in many academic institutions in at least 100 countries globally (College Board, 2017b). Corresponding AP content tests are administered at the end of each academic year, which determine the student’s competency in the course standards (College Board, 2017c; Mattern, Marini, & Shaw, 2013). AP courses provide rigorous coursework and potential college credit if students pass the AP test at the end of the course (College Board, 2016; Judson & Hobson, 2015; Vanderbrook, 2006). Students earning a score of at least a three on the AP test can earn college credit (Judson & Hobson, 2015; Holmes et al., 2015; Mattern et al., 2013). Students and parents expect AP courses to prepare their students for the rigors they will face in college courses (Holmes et al., 2015). In fact, 90% of the nation’s four-year universities and colleges accept AP test scores for
Access to AP courses can make a difference in college readiness and college acceptance (Koch, Slate, & Moore, 2013). AP courses can prepare students for the academic rigor they will face in college courses (College Board, 2017d; Holmes et al., 2015; Koch et al., 2013). Students who are enrolled in AP courses in high school outperform non-AP students once in college (College Board, 2013; Mattern et al., 2013). Students who scored at least a three on an AP test performed the same or better than non-AP students in correlating content courses in college; higher AP scores resulted in higher correlating college grade point averages (College Board, 2013). There is also a high correlation between AP enrollment and college enrollment (College Board, 2013; Mattern et al., 2013). Students who take AP courses in high school are more likely than non-AP students to have a declared major upon enrollment in college (College Board, 2013).

Studies show that AP courses can be an indicator of interest in an academic discipline, with a strong correlation between AP courses and college major choice (College Board, 2013). Furthermore, there is a strong correlation between enrollment and success in AP courses in high school and persistence in college through graduation (Mattern et al., 2013). Students who take AP courses in high school are more likely to graduate within five years or less than non-AP students (College Board, 2013). Finally, AP courses can help students develop an interest in, leading to a major in, the STEM subjects, particularly for female minority groups (College Board, 2013; Mattern et al., 2011).
Hispanic Students and Advanced Placement

Obviously, like any academically-talented students, Hispanic students can benefit from AP courses; in addition, high-achieving females can benefit from AP courses (Vanderbrook, 2006). But, more specifically, high-achieving Hispanic females could benefit from AP courses. Because it is committed to equity for all students, the College Board established an open access policy which states that “all students who are willing to accept the challenge of a rigorous course should be considered for admission to AP courses” (College Board, 2002. The policy further states that schools should make efforts to eliminate barriers to access to AP courses and that student enrollment in AP courses should reflect the diversity in student population (College Board, 2002).

Researchers have suggested that one reason for the achievement gap for Hispanic students is the lack of access to AP courses (Koch et al., 2013). The “whiteness” of AP classes has been noted and addressed by the College Board’s policy for equitable opportunities (College Board, 2002; Walker & Pearsall, 2012). Although the total number of Hispanics taking AP courses has increased overall, they are still a minority in AP classes (Llagas & Snyder, 2003).

Based on the total student population of the school, Hispanics are traditionally underrepresented in courses for high-achieving students, more specifically enrollment in AP courses is lower than other ethnic groups (Llagas & Snyder, 2003; Musu-Gillette et al., 2016; Walker & Pearsall, 2012). Asian and White populations led other minority subgroups in enrollment and completion of AP courses (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). Even in schools where the majority of the student population is Hispanic, the “whiteness” of students enrolled in AP classes can be observed (Walker & Pearsall, 2012).
Many minority students with high potential for achievement are often ignored in programs for gifted and talented students (Walker & Pearsall, 2012). Although AP courses and AP programs have increased more than 500 percent (Judson & Hobson, 2015) since 1999, minority students are not well-represented in AP classes (Llagas & Snyder, 2003). Many Hispanic students show intellectual promise and potential; however, they are not as frequently enrolled in AP classes as their white or Asian counterparts (College Board, 2013; Judson & Hobson, 2015; Koch et al., 2013; Llagas & Snyder, 2003). Two lawsuits have been filed on behalf of minority students, claiming they are at a disadvantage because high schools with large minority populations do not offer AP courses, resulting in inequity when applying to colleges (Koch et al., 2012).

Although the total number of enrollment for Hispanic students in AP courses has increased, these students are not enrolling in AP courses at the same rates as their White counterparts (Koch et al., 2013; Riegle-Crumb & Grodsky, 2010). Even with the increased rates of enrollment in AP courses, unlike their peers, the Hispanic students are not achieving in these courses (Koch et al., 2013; Riegle-Crumb & Grodsky, 2010). In fact, one study showed that of the ethnic groups with the largest growth of students enrolling in AP courses, these groups also had the lowest “pass” rates, or scores of three, with the Hispanics as the sharpest decline in pass rates (Judson & Hobson, 2015). A study of Hispanic students in three states over a 16-year period showed that despite increasing enrollment of Hispanic students in AP courses, there was a sharp decrease in AP scores (Koch et al., 2013). Although Hispanic students’ enrollment in AP courses almost doubled from 1997 to 2005, the average rate of passing with a score of a three actually decreased in that time (Riegle-Crumb & Grodsky, 2010). In contrast, during the same time period, White student enrollment and passing rates remained stable (Riegle-Crumb &
Grodsky, 2010). These findings suggest that minority students in AP are not given equitable preparation or training as their white peers (Riegle-Crumb & Grodsky, 2010).

In California, where a majority of Hispanics live (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), minority student are disproportionately underrepresented in AP courses in high-performing AP schools (Koch et al., 2012). Moreover, for students at multiracial schools with high AP enrollment, Hispanic and Black student enrollment was not proportionate to student population (Koch et al., 2012). In response to these findings, and as a direct response to the lawsuits filed on behalf of the students, the State of California implemented a grant program to fund AP courses (Koch et al., 2012). Total AP courses in high schools in California increased as result of the grant funding; however, the grant ended after only three years (Koch et al., 2012).

Of AP test takers, Hispanic students are more likely to be bilingual (Edwards & Sawtell, 2013). Over 54% of the 2012 AP Hispanic test takers were from California or Texas, with 51% of Hispanics graduating from high school in California (Edwards & Sawtell, 2013). Nearly 70% of the 2012 AP Hispanic test takers were first-generation college-going students (Edwards & Sawtell, 2013).

Low Income Hispanic AP Students

Perhaps one reason for low AP scores is the fact that many minority students come from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Low income minority students have significantly lower scores on standardized tests than students from higher socioeconomic status (Barnes & Slate, 2013). Furthermore, low income students are less prepared for the workforce and job training than students from higher income backgrounds (Barnes & Slate, 2013).

Students from low-income households typically enroll in college at lower rates than their student peers from higher-income brackets and those who do are more likely to enroll in a two-
year college than a four-year university (Wyatt & Mattern, 2011). Many low-income students may work or feel the need to work to help the family financially; in addition, they may not come from a home environment where education is valued (Klopfenstein, 2004). Also significant, those students from low income homes are more likely to need college remedial courses to bring them up to par with their peers (Wyatt & Mattern, 2011).

In California, Latino students are more likely to be enrolled in schools in which more than half of the students are enrolled in free and reduced lunch programs, an indicator of low socioeconomic status (Madrid, 2011). More than 600,000 Hispanic students attend high schools where college preparatory classes are not offered; thus, there is no opportunity for those students who are capable or desirous of attending college to prepare (Madrid, 2011). In the Los Angeles school district alone, where a majority of the California Mexican population resides, at least one third of the high schools are monitored for insufficient instructional materials, teacher mis-assignment, or poor facilities (Madrid, 2011). These schools are located in areas with a significant low-socioeconomic population (Madrid, 2011). Income status then affects more than just the student’s individual academic ability but also the environment in which the student learns.

High school AP course enrollment may help to bridge the gap for low-income students, helping to alleviate the need for remedial courses. However, low-income students are less likely to enroll in Advanced Placement classes than students from higher socioeconomic groups (Klopfenstein, 2004). Research shows that rigorous coursework in high school will help prepare students for the academic rigors of college (Wyatt & Mattern, 2011). AP courses are designed to prepare students for the academic rigors they will encounter in college (College Board, 2016; Wyatt & Mattern, 2011). Low income students who do take AP classes have more persistence in
their education and a higher rate of college enrollment and completion than low income students who do not take AP tests (Godfrey et al., 2016). However, researchers have found that many low-income students do not take AP classes (Klopfenstein, 2004; Scafidi et al., 2015), and those who do often do not succeed because of a lack of prior academic preparedness for the rigor encountered in AP courses (Scafidi et al., 2015). Low-income African American and Hispanic students are half as likely to be enrolled in AP classes (Scafidi et al., 2015). Moreover, schools in low-income areas, which tend to have a high minority student population, are less likely to offer AP courses in general (Scafidi et al., 2015).

One solution College Board sought to increase enrollment in AP courses for low-income students was to offer a fee waiver, which reduces the costs of AP tests for students with free or reduced lunch through the state (College Board, 2017e; Wyatt & Mattern, 2011). Since 1998, students who qualified for the fee waiver are able to take the AP tests for free or a nominal fee (College Board, 2017e; Wyatt & Mattern, 2011). For the 2012 AP test administration, 61% of AP test takers in California qualified for the fee waiver; of that number, nearly 70% of Hispanic AP test takers participated in the fee-waiver program (Edwards & Sawtell, 2013).

However, in 2017 the fee reduction waiver program was changed. States are no longer able to obtain federal funding through the Advanced Placement Test Fee Program; they must do so through the Every Student Succeeds Act, which consolidates AP funding with other educational grants under a new federal funding plan (College Board, 2017d,e). This new act will no longer limit funding for low-income students to Title I schools, instead, all low-income students, including those in private schools, will have access to fee reductions as provided by the ESSA (College Board, 2017d,e). College Board will also reduce the total exam fee for qualifying low-income students to $53 per exam and waive the state fee (College Board, 2017d).
Participation in the fee reduction program has helped many low-income students attain AP access than were previously able. In studies of AP test enrollment, because of the AP fee waiver program, low-income students in AP classes were demonstrated to be more academically able than their non-AP, low income counterparts (Godfrey et al., 2016; Wyatt & Mattern, 2011). Studies found that AP students receiving fee waivers had higher grade point averages, higher SAT scores, and higher averages of these scores than their non-AP classmates (Godfrey et al., 2016; Wyatt & Mattern, 2011). Furthermore in this study, non-AP students were more likely to enroll in two-year colleges, while AP fee waiver participants were more likely to enroll in a four-year university (Godfrey et al., 2016; Wyatt & Mattern, 2011). Moreover, the AP fee waiver recipients were more likely to persist and graduate from college than were the non-AP students (Godfrey et al., 2016). There was a high percentage of female participants in the fee waiver program, with a majority of students in the program coming from Hispanic and Asian ethnicities (Godfrey et al., 2016; Wyatt & Mattern, 2011).

These studies suggested that participation in AP courses and exams has long-term benefits for high achieving, low-income students. Southern California has high rates of poverty, with the average being 20% below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). The latest census rates showed an average rate of 20% poverty rate for children under the age of 18 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015).

**High-Achieving Hispanic Females**

Hispanic females are a study in contradiction. Latinas report wanting to be viewed as smart and high-achieving by their teachers, yet simultaneously are more likely to report feeling as they do not belong in a high achieving environment (Cooper, 2012). Although they can be high-achieving academically, this does not always translate to pursuing academics beyond high
school. Although a higher percentage of Latinas graduate from high school than do Hispanic males (Cooper, 2012), after graduation, Latinas are less likely to enroll in higher education after high school graduation than their White or Black peers (Harklau, 2013; Fry, 2009). Latinas are highly motivated and have high personal aspirations (National Women’s Law Center and Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2009). Hispanic females place a higher emphasis on academic achievement, and more Latinas enroll in college than do Hispanic males (Zarate & Gallimore, 2005; Hinojosa et al., 2009).

Hispanics are enrolling in college at greater rates than whites, now making up a quarter of the student population on four-year colleges (Fry, 2011; Fry & Taylor, 2013; Hernandez, 2015). Hispanics students are the largest minority group on college campuses (Fry & Taylor, 2013). However, they are enrolling in less selective colleges, opting for state schools over elite or Ivy League schools (Fry & Taylor, 2013; Hernandez, 2015). In high school, more Hispanic females are enrolled in Advanced Placement courses than males, scoring higher on the verbal and written tests (Hinojosa et al., 2009). Mexican American females have higher grade point averages than Mexican American males (Vela, Zamarripa, Balkin, Johnson, & Smith, 2013). So, while they have high aspirations and abilities, they are simply not achieving these goals.

The societal landscape for Hispanic females has not changed significantly over the past four decades. Latinas are also less likely to graduate from college, less likely to attend a selective college, and are more likely to be affected by the family than other female students (Hernandez, 2015; Hinojosa et al., 2009; Fry & Taylor, 2013; White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics & Gandara, 2015). Hispanic females who drop out of high school are more likely to be dependent on welfare than Hispanic males and are more likely to be
unemployed and underpaid (Cooper, 2012). Latinas earn less money than males, have higher drop-out rates, are more likely to be single heads of households, and are more likely to be living in poverty (White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics & Gandara, 2015). Though they have high aspirations, they do not believe they will actually achieve them (National Women’s Law Center and Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2009).

Family also plays a role in determining Latinas’ educational achievement (Hernandez, 2015; National Women’s Law Center and Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2009). Latinas experience stress due to feelings of academic inferiority due to racial prejudice or discrimination (Cooper, 2012). With their cultural emphasis on familialism, many Latinas thrive in classrooms where they feel emotionally safe and connected to the teacher and their peers (Cooper, 2012).

Latinas have higher college participation rates than Hispanic males (Hernandez, 2015; Page, 2012). However, their persistence and degree attainment trails that of Hispanic males (Cuellar, 2014; Hernandez, 2015). Despite being high-achieving students, the number of Hispanic females attending selective colleges is small, with only eight percent enrolled, compared to other ethnic or racial groups (Hernandez, 2015). Latinas’ attitudes about college are also contradictory, with desires to break away from the family and develop independence and autonomy, while simultaneously staying close to home (Hernandez, 2015; Page, 2012).

Cultural expectations and the influence of family impacts college decisions for Latinas, with many remaining at community colleges because they can live at home while still attending college (Hernandez, 2015; Page, 2012). Family interdependence plays a determining factor for Latinas, impacting their self-efficacy (Cuellar, 2014; Hernandez, 2015). The family plays a significant role in college choice for Hispanic females; however, unlike their white counterparts,
many Latinas are first-generation college going (Hernandez, 2015). This means that their parents lack an understanding of the college-going process (Hernandez, 2015). Chicanas also experience homesickness that persists beyond the first year of college at greater rates than other students (Page, 2012). Further, Latinas rate their academic self-concepts lower than Hispanic males (Cuellar, 2014). This lowered self-perception persists throughout college (Cuellar, 2014).

**Gaps in the Literature/Purpose of the Study**

Much of the current literature on Hispanics centers on the achievement gap issue (Becerra, 2012; Cavazos & Cavazos, 2010; College Board, 2014; Jeynes, 2015; Harklau, 2013; Higgins, 2015; Klopfenstein, 2004). There is little research specifically on the experiences of Hispanic females in high school Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Research does show that Hispanic females have been proven to be high achievers academically (Harklau, 2013; Walker & Pearsall, 2012); however, many Latinas do not live up to their potential (Harklau, 2013; National Women’s Law Center and Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2009). Despite their demonstrated academic ability and potential for achievement, the voices of high-achieving Latinas in high school Advanced Placement classes have not been heard, nor have their experiences been shared. Therefore, this phenomenological study aimed to describe the lived experiences of Southern California Hispanic female high school graduates who were enrolled in high school AP courses.

**Summary**

Hispanic females have had many obstacles to their successes in both the Mexican and American cultures. Though the Chicana feminists paved the way for current Hispanic females to achieve academic success, culturally there are still different expectations for these young women. High-achieving Latinas may not have many role models to imitate and pattern for successful
behaviors and as a result—like the Chicana feminists before them—must be their own role models, a process that is often at odds with their family’s and culture’s expectations of women in their community. In other words, pursuing higher levels of classroom learning in the form of AP course and college attendance places them in opposition with what they have learned in their lived experiences up to that point. Furthermore, much of the academic research has neglected this group of individuals, despite the fact that they are high achieving and successful. This chapter summarized the learning theories and theoretical framework for the current research study as well as gave a context historically to the struggles and experiences many Hispanic females have faced and continue to face. Finally, a justification for the current research study was given.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of Southern California Hispanic female high school graduates who were enrolled in high school AP courses. As members of the largest and most rapidly growing minority group in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011), and despite being high achieving, Hispanic females have also traditionally been ignored in the literature. This study, with a focus on their lived experiences, lended itself as a platform for these young women to voice their perceptions. This chapter describes the research design, research questions, provides a discussion of the setting, participants, and my role as researcher. A discussion of data collection and data analysis, methods to ensure the study’s trustworthiness and ethical considerations is also included in this chapter.

Design

This qualitative study employed a transcendental phenomenological design. A qualitative study was chosen because qualitative research is described as a field of tensions and contradictions (Gall et al., 2007); therefore, when the tensions and contradictions experienced by high-achieving Hispanic women was investigated, a qualitative research design was most appropriate. A phenomenological research design was chosen because the goal of the phenomenological approach is to study a phenomenon from the perspective of those who have experienced it (Creswell, 2013; Milacci, 2003; van Manen, 1990). Phenomenological research describes what the participants all have in common when experiencing the same phenomenon, finding the universal experience in the individual’s experiences (Creswell, 2013). By asking what is the nature, or the essence of “the thing” or phenomenon, phenomenological research
seeks to understand the meanings as humans experienced the phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). By finding the meaning of a common experience, phenomenology uncovers the meaning of the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). In this way, it is always retrospective in nature, focused on an experience that has already happened (van Manen, 1990).

Originating as a philosophical movement, phenomenological research seeks to understand “how individuals construct reality” (Gall et al., 2007, p. 495). For the purposes of this study, the phenomenon studied was high school AP classes and the constructed reality, experiences in, and the perspectives of high-achieving Hispanic females in those classes. Furthermore, phenomenological research asks what it means to be human (van Manen, 1990). For many Hispanic females, the tensions and contradictions faced as they experience their two cultures, the essence of what it means to be a Hispanic female, can be revealed in their lived experiences. van Manen (1990) stated phenomenological research is a philosophy of the unique that contributes to improving human actions and interactions. Phenomenology was therefore an appropriate design for this study as this research questions asked what it means to be a Hispanic female experiencing the intersection of cultures, class, race, and gender in a high school AP class.

There are two approaches to a phenomenological study: hermeneutical and transcendental. These two approaches are both different in philosophical groundings as well as in the specific methodology employed by the researcher (Milacci, 2003). In the hermeneutical approach, the researcher becomes a participant in the study, interpreting the meaning of the lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). In transcendental phenomenology, “each experience is considered, perceived and described in its totality, in a fresh and open way” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). The researcher learns to see the reality through a new light by refraining from judgement.
and withholding preconceived ideas about a concept (Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental phenomenology includes identifying the phenomenon, bracketing, or suspending one’s own judgments and biases about the phenomenon, and collecting data from participants who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). This is accomplished through what Moustakas (1994) called “epoche.” In the “epoche,” the “everyday understandings, judgments, and knowings are set aside, and phenomena are revisited, freshly, naively, in a wide, open sense” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). Moustakas (1994) stated that a key concept of transcendental phenomenology is intuition. As the inborn capability of the mind to judge knowledge and experiences, intuition presents the ability to know the self (Moustakas, 1994).

A transcendental phenomenological approach was the best design for this research study because I am not a participant in the phenomenon. Although I am a female, I am not Hispanic, nor did I take AP classes in high school. Furthermore, the aim of transcendental phenomenology is to “determine what the experience means for the persons who have had the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). Gall et al. (2007) described the participants in phenomenological research as being co-researchers by having experienced the phenomenon and sharing the researcher’s interest in seeking to understand its meaning.

Since the purpose of my study was to describe the experience of the graduated females who were in AP courses, a transcendental approach was best-suited design. I needed to bracket my biases and judgments out of the data and focus only on the experiences of the participants, accomplishing what Moustakas (1994) called, “epoche” or “refraining from judgment” (p. 32). Gall et al., (2007) described bracketing as seeking to discover the phenomenon as it is experienced with the meaning gained from the unique experience of the participants and the experience themselves. Furthermore, since the participants themselves were no longer
experiencing the phenomenon, having already graduated from high school, a hermeneutical
approach, wherein the participants find meaning within the context of the experience (Milacci,
2003) would not be the right design.

**Research Questions**

**Research Question 1:** How do Hispanic female graduates from Southern California high
schools describe their experiences in Advance Placement classes?

**Research Question 2:** What role do participants perceive their ethnic culture to play in
their experiences?

**Research Question 3:** What relationship do participants perceive between their family’s
culture and their academic experiences?

**Research Question 4:** How do participants perceive the intersection of class, gender and
culture as impacting their academic experiences?

**Setting**

This study focused on the lived experiences of high school Hispanic females exclusively
from Southern California. Southern California is comprised of the 10 southernmost counties:
Kern, San Luis Obispo, Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernardino, Ventura, Orange, San Diego,
and Imperial. In Southern California, Hispanics are the largest ethnic population, surpassing
Whites (Brown & Lopez, 2013; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010. Participants for this study came
from four of the most populated counties in Southern California: Imperial, San Bernardino,
Riverside, and Los Angeles.

Imperial County is the ninth largest county in California, encompassing over 4,000
square miles (Imperial, n.d.). Although population-wise, at only 180,000 people (U.S. Census
Bureau, 2010), of the four counties, Imperial County has the highest population percentage of
Hispanic/Latinos at 83.8% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Imperial County also has the highest percentage of a language other than English spoken at home for persons aged five or older, with 75.5% of households indicating they are not English only (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Of the four counties from which participants were selected, Imperial County has the lowest rate of high school graduates, at 67%, with the lowest rate of bachelors’ or higher degrees, at only 14%; over 51% of the female population is in the civilian workforce in Imperial County (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

San Bernardino County is the largest county in the contiguous United States, covering over 20,000 square miles (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010; San Bernardino County, 2015). The fifth largest population in California (San Bernardino County, 2015) comprised of more than 2,100,000 people, 52% of which are Hispanic/Latinos, 41% of San Bernardino residents indicated speaking a language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Although 78.8% of residents in San Bernardino County graduated from high school, only 19.3% achieved a bachelors’ degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Slightly more than half of the civilian workforce, at 54%, are women over the age of 16 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Riverside County is the fourth largest in population in California (County of Riverside, n.d.), with 2,387,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010) and 48.4% Hispanic/Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Of the four counties from which participants hailed, Riverside boasts the largest percentage of high school graduates, at 80.5%, but only 21.2% held a bachelors’ degree or higher (Census, 2010). Fifty-three percent of the workforce is women aged 16 or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Forty percent of the population in Riverside speaks a language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Los Angeles County is one of the largest counties in the nation in area at over 4,000
square miles and has the largest population of any county in the nation at over 10 million residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010; County of Los Angeles, n.d.). Los Angeles County makes up 27% of California’s total population (County of Los Angeles, n.d.). With 77.7% of the population as high school graduates, 30.8% of the population in Los Angeles county has a bachelors’ degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Los Angeles county has a large Hispanic/Latino community, at 48.5%, and in the latest Census, 56% of the population indicated speaking a language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). In the Los Angeles County workforce, 57.7% of workers are women.

Table 1

*Overview of Southern California Counties*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>% Hispanic Population</th>
<th>Non-Native English Speakers</th>
<th>% High School graduates</th>
<th>% Bachelors degree or higher</th>
<th>% of women in the workforce</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imperial</td>
<td>180,000</td>
<td>83.8%</td>
<td>75.5%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Bernardino</td>
<td>2,140,096</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>78.8%</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riverside</td>
<td>2,387,741</td>
<td>48.41%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>80.5%</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>10,137,915</td>
<td>48.5%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>77.7%</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
<td>57.75%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants all graduated from high schools from one of these four counties; therefore, the ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic demographics as well as the courses offered at the high schools are similar. Participants did not know each other; however, they shared similar backgrounds. The settings and sites for participant interviews were held in various locations. The
interviews took place in a setting that was chosen by the participants, one that was in a neutral location in the field and was local to the participants (Gall et al., 2007). All interviews were conducted in face-to-face settings.

However, because many of the participants were current college students and were not be local to the researcher, face-to-face follow up and focus group interviews were not be possible. Participants preferred focus group and follow up interviews to be conducted via technological means (Creswell & Poth, 2018) using the app “GroupMe.” Accommodations were made for those participants. The researcher made every attempt to meet with the participants in a neutral location where they felt comfortable and safe to share their experiences; participants selected the locations that ranged from outdoor cafes, to coffee shops, to restaurants, to a local park.

Participants

The participants were selected using criterion-based, purposeful sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018), with 12 participants selected until data saturation was attained. Participants were females, indicated that they identified as “Hispanic,” and were enrolled in at least one AP course in high school; unofficial high school transcripts were requested for validation of AP course enrollment. Participants must have been graduated from high school for at least one year but no more than five years. Participants ranged in age from 19-22, were two to five years post high school, and ranged from freshmen in college to recent college graduates. All participants were enrolled in one or more AP courses while in high school. Initially, participant referrals were requested from high school administrators, AP teachers, and professors at the colleges local to the researcher. However, when participants were not identified in this manner, snowball sampling occurred. Snowball sampling procedure details will be described in the following section.
Procedures

The first step in this research plan was to submit the proposal for research and secure Liberty University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (see Appendix A). Once approval was obtained, I contacted the administrators at four high schools with similar student demographics and population and requested permission and participation in identifying former students as potential participants for the study. I also contacted local college professors who would have access to students for their help in requesting student referrals or identifying potential participants. Because administrators were unwilling to provide any information on former students, I decided to proceed with snowball sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gall et al., 2007) to garner participants.

The following steps were taken in the snowball sampling stage. First, I texted and messaged via social media my former AP students, requesting help in identifying potential participants. Having been an AP teacher for over 10 years, I contacted former AP students who were currently enrolled in either community college or a university. I also contacted a professor at a local university, who had indicated he knew of potential participants for the study. In addition, I emailed an AP US History teacher at a local high school, requesting referrals from his graduated students. Both the professor and the AP US History teacher were able to provide me with contact information for several of the study participants. Additionally, one of my former AP students who now attends a large public university in Southern California provided me with potential participant information after she posted a request for participants on a social media platform. I, then, contacted all participant referrals by text message or phone call to determine their interest in participating in the study.

After initially contacting potential participants, I sent out a request for email addresses in
order for potential participants to complete a screening survey to determine their eligibility for the study. The survey was done via a Google Form, and a link was sent out via email. The survey asked potential participants to indicate their cultural identification, their high school graduation year, high school AP course enrollment, and willingness to sign a consent form for an interview.

Participants were selected based on completion of the screening survey and their agreement to participate in the study. Data was collected several ways: through semi-structured, open-ended interviews, writing prompts, and cognitive representations that show their feelings/experiences in their AP courses with regards to their culture/heritage/gender. A focus group was also conducted after the initial interviews were completed.

Because the focus group participants were all enrolled in a university, some with a double major, they felt the time constraints of a focus group meeting would interfere with their studies. Participants suggested that the focus group be conducted via the app, “Group Me,” which they regularly used for group work at their universities. Of the interview participants who were willing to be a part of the focus group, I created a focus group conversation on the app. I submitted questions to the focus group, and participants responded both to my questions (see Appendix C) and to the other group members’ comments as they had time to do so. Because of this, the focus group conversations via the app took place over a few weeks time as I posed questions and participants responded. In all, eight of the 12 interviewed participants took part in the focus group conversations.

The data was gathered and recorded via audio recording and journaling, using rich and thick descriptions (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). Bias in the data collection and analysis procedures was reduced through memoing, journaling (see Appendix D), and bracketing (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).
The Researcher's Role

As a high school AP English teacher for the past 10 years, I have observed that many of my highest-achieving students were Hispanic females. These intelligent, dedicated, and high achieving students write expressive, insightful essays; however, all too often these same students hesitate and are reluctant to share their ideas by participating in debate or discussion with their classmates. I began to wonder why my dedicated, hard-working, and often highest-achieving students did not participate in the same way the other students did. I wondered if their behavior was typical in other AP classes or if their behavior in my class was the exception.

Believing as I do that meaning is constructed through one’s experiences and knowledge of the world, I hold a constructivist philosophy that guided this research study (Gall et al., 2007). As a teacher and researcher, education and academic achievement is important to me. Furthermore, I have a single culture value system, that of the modern American culture, which encourages and values education and educational degree attainment for all genders, ages, and ethnicities. As a teacher who holds advanced degrees, I wondered if the Hispanic girls in my class were reacting to their experiences in my class only or if their beliefs, ideas, and experiences beyond the realm of my classroom influenced their behavior, and if that same behavior was exhibited in other AP classes. I began to wonder how their experiences as Hispanic females, how their families and family values, and if their Hispanic culture influenced their behavior, and if so, to what extent. For this reason, I conducted a transcendental, heuristic phenomenological study.

Although I have been AP English teacher for the past 10 years, study participants were not current nor former students of mine. Currently, due to a teaching reassignment, I am no longer an AP teacher. Despite working as an AP teacher for so many years, I have never observed any other AP teacher of any course subject instructing a class. So, while I know the AP
standards and expectations based on the AP trainings I have completed, I have absolutely no real practical or actual knowledge of other AP teachers’ classroom protocol, policies, teaching methods, or class culture.

Data Collection

Data was collected in a variety of ways. A pilot study was first conducted to test the validity and relevance of the interview questions. After the pilot study was conducted, the interview questions, written response prompt, and method of cognitive representation were peer and expert reviewed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Once the interview questions were formalized and the peer review was conducted and approved, semi-structured individual interviews were the first step in data collection for the research study. Participants were asked to submit responses to a writing prompt and submit a cognitive representation. The cognitive representation and what it meant to the participant was discussed during the semi-structured interviews. Finally, a focus group was conducted to gain further depth and insight into the complexities of the issue and their experiences.

Interviews

Phenomenological research involves interviews that are informal, interactive, and elicit a comprehensive response about the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Gall et al. (2007) stated that researchers generally conduct at least one, long semi-structured interview that discusses all aspects of the participants’ experiences with the phenomenon. The interview process is an informal, social conversation (Gall et al., 2007; Moustakas, 1994). This process is essential to the phenomenological design. It is appropriate to this study as I sought to describe the experiences of Hispanic females; in order to describe their experiences in AP courses, participants must discuss it. The interview was semi-structured and asked broad, open-ended questions to lead to rich and
full descriptions of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The following interview questions were first tested in a pilot study, underwent peer review, and then were clarified as needed during the interviews.

*Family Life and Hispanic Culture*

1. Which culture do you most identify with (Mexican, American, both equally)? Please explain.
2. Please describe your family life as you were growing up, beginning with your childhood.
3. Please describe your family’s socioeconomic status and how that affected your education.
4. Please describe some of the strongly held values of your family.
5. Please describe both your mother and father’s/guardians’ views toward education, their educational experiences, and their role in your education.
6. What were your parents’ attitudes about their expectations for you as a Hispanic female?
7. Did you have any role models growing up? If so, who were they and why did you admire them?
8. Is there anything you’d like to add about your culture and experiences that wasn’t addressed?

*Education and Experiences*

9. Please describe your current educational goals.
10. Please describe your educational goals as a high school student.
11. Please describe which AP classes you took and your motivation for taking those courses.
12. Which was your favorite AP class and why?
13. Please describe what the environment in the AP classes was like.
14. If you could give an AP teacher advice on how best to connect or reach the Hispanic girls in his/her class, what would you say? Why?
15. Please describe what it felt like to be a Hispanic female in your AP courses.
(16) Is there anything you’d like to add about your experiences in AP Courses that wasn’t addressed?

Questions one through seven were designed to elicit information about the participant’s family and ethnic culture. In particular, questions one through five were specific to the participant’s family values and family’s views on education. Knowing that family plays an influential role in every person’s life but is particularly influential in the Hispanic culture, questions one through five were designed to get a general picture of the foundation for their mindset and perspective towards education. In questions six and seven, I hoped to get a perspective of the stereotypes they might experience as Hispanic females. Questions nine through 13 were designed to gauge participants’ educational experiences. These questions started with broad questions regarding their overall educational goals and experiences then focused specifically on their experiences in AP classes. Questions nine and 10 were designed to understand participants’ motivation for taking AP courses, and questions 11 and 12 were designed to get the participants to discuss specifics of an AP course. Finally, questions 13 and 14 were designed to be broad, so that participants would be able to give a general response to how they felt as Latinas in an AP course. During the semi-structured interview, follow-up questions were asked as needed for participants to elaborate on their responses.

**Cognitive Representation**

Prior to the interview beginning, participants were asked to create a cognitive representation of the relationship they perceived between their culture, ethnic heritage, and their experiences in AP courses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were given tools with which to create a cognitive representation, sketching images, words, or some combination, that captured their emotions when thinking about their experiences in AP courses. Participants were asked to
create the cognitive representations at the point of the initial individual interviews. This was so that their emotions and ideas were fresh and consistent with the interviews. Participants created the cognitive representation before the question/answer portion of the interview occurred so that the interview began with an explanation of their illustration.

**Written Prompt Responses**

Participants were asked to respond to a written prompt elaborating on their experiences in AP classes in high school (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As they pertained to the cognitive representation, asking participants to explain or elaborate on the cognitive representations depicted, these prompts were intended to elicit more rich and detailed descriptions of the participants’ experiences. AP classes contain a significant writing piece to the course (College Board, 2016). Because of this course element, I knew that former AP students would be comfortable and familiar with the idea of writing a response to a prompt. The prompt asked them to reflect on their experiences as a high-achieving Latina. However, a few participants requested that they be able to opt out of this piece of data collection.

**Focus Groups**

A focus group of eight participants was conducted after the individual interviews took place. The focus group was used to expand on ideas or themes that emerged out of the individual interviews. Participants were asked to clarify or go into further depth with their ideas on the issues. As the group interacted with each other, I looked for continued ideas, further patterns, and emerging themes. Originally, it was planned that the focus group would be an in-person conversation with participants; however, due to the fact that participants were in college with demanding class loads or had other work schedules, the need for technology to facilitate the focus group occurred. The focus group, in which eight of the 12 participants participated, took
place via the “GroupMe” app, which all of the participants already had downloaded to their phones. Focus group conversations and responses to questions were then submitted via the app, which all participants were able to see and respond to. This enabled the focus group participants to respond on their time and as their schedule permitted, allowing for more participation and conversations to occur. Focus group responses were sent via email to the researcher, who then downloaded and printed them for coding and analysis.

**Data Analysis**

Data was analyzed as described by Moustakas’ (1994) modification of the Van Kaam method of analysis of phenomenological data. Interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. Using the complete transcript of the interviews, relevant expressions of each participant were listed, coded, and clustered according to thematic elements (Moustakas, 1994). After validating the themes and clusters, individual and textural descriptions were developed. The same process took place with the written prompt responses. The cognitive representations were used to develop the individual and thematic, structural descriptions further. Finally, using all of the data, a composite description of the meanings of the experiences for the group was developed (Moustakas, 1994). This analysis of the interviews took place using a qualitative data analysis software, Atlas.ti.

**Epoche**

Through the process of epoche, I set aside my biases, prejudices, and preconceived ideas in order to be able to look at the phenomenon with a fresh perspective (Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenological epoche does not deny reality or experience, rather, it brackets, or sets aside, “ordinary thought” to present “a phenomenon to be gazed upon …freshly through a purified consciousness” (Moustakas, 1994 p. 85). In order to clear my mind so that I was able to embrace
the ideas presented during the participant interviews, I bracketed my biases and preconceived ideas and my expectations in an electronic journal format (see Appendix D) both prior to the interviews and immediately after. In order to suspend my judgement and to clear my mind and to have a readiness to listen and see a phenomenon with a new perspective, I arrived at the interview sites first, found a quiet place to focus my mind, write my thoughts, track my internal emotions, and prepare myself for the encounter (Moustakas, 1994). In this manner, I was able to be receptive to the new ideas and to see the situation with a fresh perspective (Moustakas, 1994).

**Phenomenological Reduction**

The next step in coming to understand the meaning of things is the phenomenological reduction, in which the essence of “seeing things as they appear” (Moustakas, 1994 p. 90) is described (Moustakas, 1994). The quality of the experience is reduced to language that describes both the actions externally as well as the inward consciousness (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological reduction requires “graded prereflection, reflection, and reduction” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 91) aimed at getting to the very essence of the experience. To accomplish this step, I used both journaling and memoing as a way to record and reflect on the experiences that are shared by participants as well as the actual experience in which they shared. I also used a software program to guide me as I incorporate the act of horizontaling, in which every statement is treated as having equal value (Moustakas, 1994). In this way, the emerging themes consistent with the essence of the phenomenon were able to be encountered.

**Variation and Synthesis of Meanings**

The final steps were to use imaginative variation and synthesis of meanings in which the different possible meanings of the experience were considered and synthesized to create a unified statement of the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). In the imaginative
variation stage, I considered the varying meanings of statements and repeated phrases and looked for consistent themes within the text (Moustakas, 1994). I considered the universal structures that refer to the phenomenon and found examples from the participants’ responses that exemplified these universalities (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, I synthesized the meanings and essences of the experience, recognizing that these are never truly exhausted, but that they represent a particular time and place from a particular perspective (Moustakas, 1994). These steps demanded much personal and textual reflection and were accomplished with the help of journals, memoing, and the software program Atlas.ti.

**Trustworthiness**

In order for the study to be reliable and valid, trustworthiness was established in several ways. First, I conducted a pilot study to test the interview questions and refine them as needed. I also had the interview questions peer reviewed after the pilot study was conducted. Once the peer review was conducted, I proceeded with multiple means of data collection. By having multiple sources of data, I ensured triangulation of data (Creswell, 2013). Each participant was interviewed in addition to submitting a written reflection and/or a cognitive representation. This ensured that themes and commonalities to the phenomenon were adequately represented. The multiple means of data collection increased both the credibility and dependability of the findings. Next, I conducted a member check of the data with the participants. Participants were given the opportunity to review the interview transcripts to ensure reliability and to make corrections or additional clarification of meaning, if needed (Creswell, 2013). Again, this increased the credibility of the findings. Finally, I bracketed my own biases, prejudices, and personal opinions through journaling and memoing throughout the process (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

**Credibility**
Credibility was ensured by using multiple types of data for accurate support (Creswell, 2013). Compiling many pieces of data and finding recurring themes is how credibility is established (Creswell, 2013). This study utilized many different types of data, from personal interviews, to focus groups, to cognitive representations, all to look for common themes. Creswell (2013) stated reliability is ensured by detailed field notes, quality recording of interviews, and accurate transcription, all of which were used in this study. A data analysis software, Atlas.ti, was also used to help the researcher analyze the data and correlate findings. Finally, peer review and member checking were used to ensure accuracy of interpretation and meaning.

**Dependability and Confirmability**

Dependability and confirmability were addressed through the rich, thick descriptions provided by the researcher. This was supported through the use of multiple forms of data collection. Specifically, the researcher used electronic journals and interviews with accurate, professional transcription of the interviews to provide detailed descriptions. By using the journals, wherein the I bracketed myself out of the phenomenon and incorporating rich, thick description of the events, the interview, the interviewee, and my own judgements and biases (Moustakas, 1994), dependability was ensured. With the participant’s permission, interviews were recorded and reviewed multiple times for common themes in the participants’ experiences and perceptions (Moustakas, 1994). In this way, a new knowledge and a new understanding of the meaning of the experience (Moustakas, 1994) was made available to the researcher.

**Transferability**

Creswell (2013) stated that to ensure that findings are transferable from one researcher to another and from one study to another, rich and thick description is necessary. Rich, detailed
description allows readers to transfer information to different settings (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). In this study, the researcher kept an electronic journal to record thoughts, impressions, descriptions, and details of the interviews, interviewees, and other pertinent information. Description and details culled from the journals were included in the study.

**Ethical Considerations**

Because researchers are guided by ethical principles with regards to human participants, and due to the sensitive nature of the topic of study, every care was taken to ensure participant’s anonymity and confidentiality (Moustakas, 1994). Pseudonyms were used for participants, their high schools, and any teachers or other students they may have discussed. This ensured the participants’ anonymity and confidentiality of responses. Participants were also notified of their rights to leave or discontinue their participation in the study at any time for any reason (Moustakas, 1994). Member checking the transcripts with participants was done to ensure accuracy (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, all data kept on a computer that was password protected; transcripts and hard copies of notes were kept in a locked file cabinet.

**Summary**

In this research study, I conducted a transcendental phenomenological study of Hispanic females’ lived experiences in high school AP classes. Multiple means of data collection were used. Interviews, written responses, cognitive representation, and focus groups were the means of data collecting. I bracketed my own biases and opinions by journaling and memoing. Finally, looking for themes and commonalities in the experiences, the data was analyzed multiple ways, one of which included the data analysis software, Atlas.ti.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This chapter explains the findings of this research study. This phenomenological study describes the lived experiences of Southern California Hispanic female high school graduates who were enrolled in high school AP courses. Four research questions guided this study: *How do Hispanic female graduates from Southern California high schools describe their experiences in Advance Placement classes? What role do participants perceive their ethnic culture to play in their experiences? What relationship do participants perceive between their family’s culture and their academic experiences? How do participants perceive the intersection of class, gender and culture as impacting their academic experiences?* Three distinct themes emerged from participant interviews, cognitive representations, and focus group discussions. The themes of bicultural conflict, *familismo*, and the AP environment, are discussed in this chapter following a description of the participants. Finally in this chapter, I discuss the findings as they pertain to the themes.

Participants

Participant Overview

Twelve participants were recruited for this research study. Participants were assigned a pseudonym which were as follows: Estefanie, Gloria, Rebecca, Imelda, Linda, Maria, Jasmine, Rita, Serena, Ana, Deseray, and Veronica. All the young women identified as “Hispanic,” although not all are full Mexican. Of the participants, 10 had parents who, while in their teenage years, had immigrated to the United States from Mexico. Two of the participants were recent graduates of four-year, public universities in Southern California, one participant was attending public community college in Southern California, and one recently withdrew from a public
community college in Southern California with plans to resume studies there after her semester break. Five of the women attended a large, public university in California, and one participant attended a private, Christian university.

Participants attended different high schools in the following counties in Southern California: Riverside, Los Angeles, San Bernardino, and Imperial. All attended at least one AP class in high school, graduating between the years of 2012 and 2016. The participants ranged in age and were from different public high schools in Southern California. In fact, only two of the participants, Deseray and Gloria, were acquainted with each other. Participants who had attended the same high school graduated in different years and did not know each other.
Table 2

**Overview of Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>HS Graduation Year</th>
<th>AP Classes</th>
<th>County</th>
<th>College/University</th>
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Estefanie

Estefanie, age 22, is a recent college graduate with a degree in English literature. She hoped to be a high school English teacher. At the time of the study, she was working as a substitute teacher and studying for the GRE exam to begin a master’s degree in education and teacher credentialing program. Estefanie began her college studies by attending a community college and transferred to a local, area extension campus for a four-year California state university. She had lived with her parents throughout her college years and continued to do so. Though not originally from the area, Estefanie attended a public high school in Imperial County, Southern California.

As a bi-cultural Hispanic, her parents are from Mexico and Guatemala, Estefanie is very proud of her Central American and Guatemalan roots. Throughout our conversation, she explained she had experienced inter-cultural racism as a result of her mixed Hispanic heritage from Mexicans in her youth. Estefanie was raised to be outspoken and strong in her opinions and beliefs – an attitude her parents, particularly her father, fostered in her since youth. She was very outspoken and firm in her attitudes but was not rude. Pleasant, smiling and laughing frequently during the interview, Estefanie was both self-deprecating and aware of her subconscious motivations for her actions. She was reflective in conversation, coming across as a mature person reflecting on her youthful attitudes and ideas, not discrediting them, but simply aware of her motivations and desires.

Estefanie is a driven person who thrives on challenge. She is goal-oriented and spoke at length of wanting to be challenged intellectually. Although she was raised in a middle-class household, she spoke frequently of finances and how she had an awareness of her family’s difficult financial situation in her youth, which is why poverty is now a fear of hers. Estefanie
chose to take the AP classes that she found interesting and intellectually challenging. However, because of her family’s financial situation, Estefanie did not take the corresponding tests for the AP classes in which she was enrolled. Estefanie’s family could not afford to pay for her to take the end-of-course AP tests that might have given her college credits.

**Gloria**

Gloria, age 19, was in her second year at a community college, where she was studying to be a nurse. She was applying to transfer to a state university where she will complete her RN degree. Gloria lived at home while attending school. Gloria attended a public high school in Riverside County in Southern California.

Gloria initially planned to attend the same four-year university that her twin sister attends, but due to a low grade in an AP math class, the university rescinded her acceptance. Although not attending her first choice for college, Gloria accepted her situation at the community college by joining the Honors Society and became a leader in the pre-med club. She said that she is thankful that she is attending community college prior to a university. Gloria said she feels students need to have a better awareness of what community colleges offer and that high school counselors should encourage students to accept community college as an acceptable educational path.

Gloria’s experience in AP classes was positive; however, she expressed feeling extreme pressure and stress from feeling like she needed to be perfect. Unlike many participants who did not take AP classes until their later high school years, Gloria was able to start with AP classes her freshman year of high school; she took several AP courses each year of high school. Although she frequently used the word “stressful” to describe her AP experiences, Gloria recalled positive interactions with supportive teachers. She said it really helped her emotionally
and academically to have her twin sister in the same AP classes with her. Gloria credited her success in AP courses to her AVID class which helped her to learn study skills and gave her additional support as she took the challenging AP classes.

Rebecca

Rebecca, age 19, was a second-year student at a California public university where she was a double major in political science and Chicano studies. She was considering either law school or medical school after obtaining her bachelor’s degree. Rebecca attended a public high school in San Bernardino County in Southern California.

During the interview, Rebecca was confident, outspoken, and articulate. She was aware of various inequities faced in society and spoke at length about them. As the oldest child, Rebecca felt a responsibility to be the example for her younger siblings. She said that she was the “experimental child” for her parents and said she felt pregnancy or college as the only options that were available to her in life. Rebecca pushed for the chance to go away to college and was able to leave home because of her mom’s support. Rebecca said her obtaining a university degree was her way of trying to redeem her father’s dream of medical school since he had to drop out of school when he was younger to help support his family.

Rebecca stressed the personal relationship and connection she had with her AP teachers in high school, those who expected more from her and who connected on a personal level. She said she connected with the AP teachers who cared about their students’ success and what was going on in their personal lives as well as their academics. She spoke of being frustrated with AP teachers who did not seem to care about their students or their academic success and who didn’t challenge their students.

Imelda
Imelda, age 20, was a third-year student at a California public university with plans to go to medical school. She was considering a concentration in pediatrics or cardiology. Imelda attended a public high school in San Bernardino County in Southern California. Throughout the interview, Imelda was quiet, soft spoken, and hard to hear at times. She was formal in her mannerisms and speaking style. Although she appeared shy, she radiated confidence in her abilities as a student.

Imelda recalled positive experiences in both AP courses and in academics in general in high school. However, since she was the only one of her friend group who was high achieving, she remembered her experience as an AP student as an isolating one. Although she was not ostracized at the school for being high achieving, her friends did not understand the struggles she faced with homework or studying, and as a result, she felt by being in AP classes, she was isolated. Despite these negative emotions, Imelda enjoyed the challenge AP course provided. The university she was attending at the time of the study was her “long shot” college; in fact, she applied with the assumption that she would not be accepted. However, because of her academic resume and having taken AP classes, she was accepted and attended her dream school.

Linda

Linda, age 21, was a recent graduate of a public university in Southern California with a double major in anthropology and Chicano studies with a minor in education. At the time of the study, she was working as a teacher’s assistant; Linda has taken a year off school as she chooses between pursuing a Master’s in Education or a PhD in Anthropology. Linda went to a public high school in Imperial County in Southern California.

Linda has had a few emotionally difficult years; after graduation she did not have a “home” to go to, as her mother, a single mom, suddenly and unexpectedly died just last year. Her
mother’s influence on her life was evident throughout our conversation, and Linda stopped a few
times due to being overcome by emotion. Her mother encouraged her children to get an
education and inspired them to succeed, and all but Linda have master’s degrees; one sibling is
working on a PhD.

Linda was quiet and unassuming and spoke quietly and hesitantly. She was a good
listener who said she was taught to “be nice” and was afraid to speak up in class for fear of not
seeming to be a “nice girl.” Although most of her close friends were not in AP classes with her,
they were very supportive of her and encouraged her to be the “smart one” representing their
friend group. Linda recalled a time when her friends made her a huge poster congratulating her
for her acceptance to college. Despite the fact that her mom did not put pressure on her to
achieve academically, Linda recalled feeling that if she didn’t do well in AP classes, then she did
not have value, an attitude she now views as being harmful to herself. Linda said that she felt
since she was one of the few high-achieving Mexican students in her school, she experienced
racism both from other students and their parents.

Maria

Maria, age 19, was a second-year student at a large, public university in Southern
California, pursuing a double major in English and sociology. Maria is the daughter of a judge
and is one of the few participants who has a parent with a college degree. Despite her parents
encouraging her to study law, Maria was pursuing a career in screenwriting and filmmaking with
plans to attend film school after graduation. Maria attended a public high school in Imperial
County in Southern California.

Throughout our interview, Maria was soft spoken and quiet, pausing to think of her
response before answering questions. A creative and driven individual, she said she likes to
“keep busy” and stay challenged, and not “keeping busy” in her first year of college caused depression and made her adjustment to college life difficult. Maria said she wants to be sure to take advantage of all of the opportunities given to her while in school by joining clubs and working a part time job in addition to taking a full load of classes.

This drive to “stay busy” was evident prior to college; in high school Maria was ASB president, involved in clubs, enrolled in AP classes and was head of the dance team. She spoke about how she felt that other people, teachers included, seemed to want to “take her down a peg,” and that she often felt target by others because of her drive and her desire to achieve. She stated, that high school, in her view, is “comical,” and she spoke of the “characters” she met.

**Jasmine**

Jasmine, age 19, was a second-year student at a public university in Southern California. She was a double major in political science and communication with plans to go on to graduate school or attend law school. Jasmine attended a public high school in Los Angeles County in Southern California.

Jasmine’s high school education experience was fraught with gangs, violence, and poverty, which impacted her education at times, in that she frequently lacked basic educational materials, like textbooks or basic necessities, like toilet paper in the restrooms. She spoke casually of the physical dangers she faced daily both from her peers and sometimes her teachers, often utilizing the school library not only as a place to study but also to be safe. Her perilous situation seemed “normal” to her until she got to college and realized other people did not have the same experiences she had had in high school. Jasmine was initially shy and hesitant sharing her experiences; however, as she talked she became more open and confident and her drive to succeed was evident. She had an older sister attending the same university as she was.
Although Jasmine passed every AP test she took, she had many frustrations with teachers and an overall lack of resources because of living in a low-income area. Jasmine experienced a challenge with the AP teachers themselves, particularly a few male teachers. Jasmine stated that their misconduct in predatory behavior caused the female students to band together and to “never be alone” with these men. Although Jasmine initially spoke casually of these experiences, such as the one AP teacher who would look up girls’ skirts as normal behavior, upon sharing these experiences, she became troubled and started to cry, and we paused the interview. Jasmine explained that none of the girls reported these teachers’ behaviors to administration because they felt that they would not have qualified AP teachers if these teachers were fired, and the students felt their school already lacked in AP and other educational resources. The girls preferred to deal with the harassment than to lose the few AP teachers they had, even though there were clear issues of misconduct.

**Rita**

Rita, age 19, was in her second year at a private Christian university in Arizona. She was a double major, studying psychology and criminal justice. Rita attended a large public high school in Imperial County in Southern California. Although it is a four-hour drive, Rita came home regularly to work at a restaurant throughout the week and weekends. She also worked at a preschool near her university. Rita was the youngest child of her siblings. Because she was one of the older cousins in her large extended family, she felt a strong sense of responsibility to be a good example for her younger cousins. Aware of her own inner motivations and of the cultural issues faced by Hispanics, Rita often mentioned the inner tension she felt as a Mexican American and the push-pull of living with both cultures.
Rita’s overall experience in AP classes was positive; however, she remembered feeling frustrated that the expectations for males and females were different. She stated the males had more expected of them academically. She remembered experiences where AP teachers seemed to have higher standards for the male students than for the females, something she said she later realized was sexism.

Serena

Serena, age 19, was another participant who had a parent who graduated from college. She was a second-year student at a public university in Southern California, majoring in human biology and society with a concentration in medicine and public health. Serena attended a public high school in Los Angeles county in Southern California.

Serena said she had scholarship offers from other universities, such as Northeastern University in Boston, but she chose to stay in Southern California because of the warm weather. She plans to continue her education with an MD and PhD to conduct bio-medical research. Her desire is to find ways to improve medical conditions in developing countries.

An immigrant to the United States in her early childhood, Serena was passionate about global health issues, having seen and experienced firsthand the issues in her native country. Articulate in the interview, Serena was self-aware and seemed driven to make a difference in the world. Unlike the other participants, Serena had the unique experience of dual enrollment in high school, in which she took college courses while still enrolled in high school. She said she thrived in that academic setting. She also was able to take college research courses at different universities during summer vacations.

Serena’s education experience was different from other participants in that she attended a magnet high school that focused on STEM for minority students. As a magnet school, it was a
selective school; students had to apply to get in, which Serena said created a culture of
achievement. Furthermore, Serena attended STEM magnet schools for both elementary and
middle school. Serena’s AP experiences were positive; she had teachers who were focused on
giving minority students the tools necessary to succeed in the competitive STEM field.

Ana

Ana, age 19, was currently taking a semester off from school. She was previously
enrolled in a community college but decided to take a break to decide what major she wants to
pursue. She thinks she wants to be a teacher. Ana attended a large public high school in Imperial
County in Southern California.

Although she attended high school in the United States and has her green card so that she
can live in the U.S., at the time of the study, Ana lived across the border in Mexicali, Mexico,
which she prefers to the United States. Although she said that her future plans are uncertain at
this stage of life, she said she is not concerned about not deciding her future right now. Although
her mother wants her to continue in school, Ana is not sure that is what she wants. She said her
older brother dropped out of college and still has a good job, so Ana does not feel compelled to
continue in academia in order to be financially stable.

In the interview, Ana was friendly, bubbly, and very outgoing despite stumbling while
speaking English. Because she did not immigrate to the United States until high school, Ana’s
comfort level with speaking English was a recurring topic in her conversation. She said that her
AP Spanish class was a safe haven, where she was comfortable, and she was able to be and feel
successful. Ana enjoyed being challenged in high school and was frustrated when she was unable
to express herself in English. She recalled being frustrated with teachers who didn’t push her
harder academically in high school because of the language barrier. She felt that her lack of English language ability caused some teachers to view her as incapable, which frustrated her.

Deseray

Deseray, age 19, was a second-year student at a public university in Southern California where she was a double-major in politics and pre-law. She planned to attend law school. Deseray attended a large public high school in Riverside, Southern California.

Deseray’s older brother, who was nine years older, was her role model. He was in the top 10 of his class of 500 students, so she also wanted to be, and achieved the top 10 ranking in a class of over 500 students. During the interview, Deseray was loud, friendly, and open, speaking confidently and easily. She was reflective, emotional, and self-aware. As we spoke, several different times she paused in the interview and reflected on ideas that just occurred to her as a result of our conversation. She became emotional when speaking of her father and his influence on her life.

Deseray had positive experiences in AP, despite feeling “stressed and tired” from being involved in many other extracurricular activities such as sports, school leadership, and clubs. She used positive adjectives such as “happy,” “smart,” and “confident” to describe her feelings about her time in AP classes.

Veronica

Veronica, age 19, was a first-year student at a large, public university in Southern California. Veronica took AP courses that she thought would best prepare her for the major she thought she wanted to study in college: nursing. Veronica attended a public school in Los Angeles county in Southern California. The public high school she attended included three smaller “schools” within it. Veronica was part of the STEAM (science, technology, engineering,
arts, and math) school in her high school and was a member of the first graduating class of the STEAM school. For Veronica, the small environment was a catalyst for her to find herself. She was able to spread her wings, start clubs, and try out new things because they were the founding members of the school – she had leadership opportunities that wouldn’t have been afforded her otherwise.

Throughout our conversation, Veronica was self-assured and spoke confidently and clearly. Although she had older siblings, Veronica was the first in her family to attend a four-year university. She planned to return to school after getting work experience as a nurse to get her NP license. She has contemplated a possible PhD in nursing with the goal of inspiring other young Hispanic women to also get higher education.

Veronica had a practical approach to choosing AP classes in high school; she said she only enrolled in the AP classes that she thought would be interesting rather than focusing on how it might appear on her transcripts or college applications. Veronica said she did not take certain AP classes that her school offered because they did not seem interesting or would not be helpful to her in the future she envisioned for herself. As a result, she had positive experiences in AP classes, never feeling stressed or in competition with anyone.

**Results**

Several themes emerged from this research study: bi-cultural conflicts, *familismo*, and the AP environment. The first theme was bi-cultural conflict. Participants experienced a conflict between the Hispanic culture they identified with and the American culture in which they were raised and educated. This theme connected with both Research Question One, “How do Hispanic female graduates from Southern California high schools describe their experiences in Advance Placement classes?” and Research Question Two, “What role do participants perceive
their ethnic culture to play in their experiences?” A second theme, *familismo*, revealed the impact that family and the family’s values had on their achievement. The second theme connected to Research Question Three, “What relationship do participants perceive between their family’s culture and their academic experiences?” The third major theme, the AP Environment, emerged as significantly impacting the achievement for participants and connected to the fourth and final Research Question Four, “How do participants perceive the intersection of class, gender and culture as impacting their academic experiences?” The following section discusses the development of themes and sub-themes.

**Theme Development**

I identified three major themes in this research study: Bi-Cultural Conflicts, *Familismo*, and the AP Environment. Data was collected in the following manner. First, I interviewed participants individually, at which time they were asked to do the following tasks: write an essay about their experiences as a Hispanic female in AP courses as well as to create a cognitive representation that illustrated their emotional connection to their experiences in AP classes in high school. Both the cognitive representations and the short essay were voluntary, and while all participants completed a cognitive representation, several chose not to write the essay due to time constraints. Next, I conducted a focus group via the app GroupMe. Focus group participation was voluntary, and eight of the 12 participants participated in the discussion. Finally, participant interviews were transcribed, and the interviews, cognitive representations, and short essays were analyzed for themes. Themes were developed by using a data analysis software, Atlas.ti. The focus group was conducted to clarify and elaborate on issues. Focus group data was also transcribed and analyzed using Atlas.ti software. I identified three major themes: bi-cultural conflict, *familismo*, and the AP environment.
Theme One: Bi-Cultural Conflict

The first emerging theme from the data was a conflict between the Hispanic culture the participants identified as their home culture and the American culture in which they were raised and educated. Many participants shared emotions of feeling “too white for Mexicans and too Mexican for Americans.” Linda shared, “You feel like you don't belong here (the US) and you feel like you don't belong there (Mexico).” Rita stated similar sentiments, “When I'm here, I feel Mexican, when I’m in Mex, I feel American. I'm never gonna be American enough for American people, and I'm never gonna be Mexican enough for Mexican people.” The main theme of bi-cultural conflict was explicated in the following two subthemes, being considered “whitewashed” by other Hispanics, and having “Americanized” roots.

“Whitewashed.” Participants repeatedly used the phrase “whitewashed” to describe the conflict they experienced between their two cultures. Estefanie explained that “whitewashed” means, “It's like you're not enough. You’re not Mexican enough for the Mexicans, you’re not white enough, or Central American enough for the Central Americans. You're just like a mix.” For participants, being called “whitewashed” is never a compliment, and being perceived as being “whitewashed” can be caused by varying factors.

One factor that caused participants to be perceived as being “whitewashed” is skin color. Rebecca, a light skinned Mexican, explained, “I was seen more as whitewashed because my pigment isn’t that dark,” stating that sometimes she would experience discrimination from other Hispanics based on being perceived as white. Maria, also light skinned, had a similar experience, “In high school, I got a lot of, like ... ‘Oh, Maria, the white girl.’ There's something frustrating to me about that.”

Serena, who stated she is “white passing” because of her skin color, said:
Whenever I'm in a situation with other Latinos, I feel like I have to speak Spanish, or throw in like a Spanish word here and there, as soon as possible, or mention that I’m born in El Salvador, so I feel like I fit in. Because I feel like if I just come into the room and like speak English, and not incorporate something overtly Latino, then I feel like they think that I’m white. Which is, I suppose kind of disappointing, because I identify with them, but I feel like they don't identify with me.

Estefanie said that she felt being called “whitewashed” was “inter-cultural racism.” She said she has been labeled “whitewashed because of the way that I speak and the way that I dress.”

Estefanie said this attitude frustrated her. She said:

Even my cousins have told me that like, ‘Oh, you’re white washed.’ I say, ‘Why? Why am I white washed? Because I talk this way? Because I like boots and I like certain kinds of clothes? What am I supposed to look like?’

For other participants, the experience of being perceived as “whitewashed” came from the language barrier they faced as Hispanics who don’t speak Spanish fluently. Rebecca stated:

Growing up, when I would go to Mexico for the holidays or something, it was very difficult for me because when I would speak Spanish, it wasn’t that fluent. Then when I was over here, my English wasn’t that fluent.

This conflict created confusion and frustration for the participants because, while they were able to accept the duality of their cultural influences, others seemed unable to accept it. Jasmine said:

It’s something where, if I were to go to Mexico, I don’t think that they would consider me Mexican either. Because while I do associate myself with that culture, there are certain ideas that are more American. And just even the way I speak, the slang is different. And I feel like I’m not completely Mexican, but if I look at the way, I guess,
Americans are portrayed in the media or how people would consider a regular American, I wouldn't fit that idea either.

As a college graduate, Estefanie finally came to accept this duality and perception about herself, saying, “I'm fine with that now, it's like I am, I am a mix. I’m not an expert at either culture, but I know a little bit about both and that’s who I am.” However, for Estefanie, navigating these two conflicting cultures was a difficult experience in high school. Estefanie remembered feeling like “people didn’t understand what it was to be from two different cultures.”

Being perceived as “whitewashed” was also a result of being high achieving. For participants, the decision to pursue education, especially higher education after high school, automatically placed them in the “whitewashed” category by their peers and even extended family members. Rita remembered:

It was kind of frustrating, to try and explain it to my family, when they were, ‘Oh, are how you doing?’ ‘Oh, I have all this work in my AP class,’ and they just wouldn't take them seriously, like, zoned out type of . . . ‘Who cares?’

For Gloria, pursuing a college degree created tension between her and her extended family. She stated that her extended family still will ask her:

‘Why don't you guys get a job already?’ I always get the question, ‘Why don't you get a job already, drop school …. why are you going to college if you can just go get money right away?’ I'm like, ‘no.’ Especially my aunt, she’s like, ‘All you guys care about is school. No social life.’ Okay, but put yourself in my shoes, you don’t understand how it's like. So, I was really discriminated against in my family.
For Rebecca, the conflict came from Hispanic peers, who she felt had the attitude toward her that, “‘You wouldn't know what this is. You're not Mexican enough.’ I'm like, ‘I'm more Mexican than you.’”

“Americanized.” Much of the conflict between the two cultures started in the home, where participants’ parents were considered “Americanized” because their values and expectations differed from the stereotypical norms of the Hispanic or traditional Mexican culture. The parents were considered “American” in values and attitudes, which they then passed on to their daughters. Veronica described the tension between cultures, “my parents still definitely have some of the more traditionalistic views, but at the same time they know that education and that somewhat adapting to the American culture is necessary.” Jasmine explained that “with Mexican there was those values of you’re not expected to go to college, especially women.” As Rebecca stated:

Sometimes a lot of parents are very close-minded …you’re finishing high school. Then you’re going to get married. I know I have a lot of friends that didn’t come out to college because of that mentality, or there are parents that don’t want their daughters to leave to come out here [to college].

At times, the participants experienced this conflict within their own immediate families. Rebecca shared, “My dad and I got into an argument. He didn’t want me to leave. He wanted me to stay back home, but my mom was a very key advocate for me.” Rita also experienced the conflict within her family structure, with her mom challenging her relatives’ more traditional, cultural mindset of the daughters staying at home and not leaving for college. Describing a conversation between her family members and her mom of whether they would allow their
children leave for college, Rita said her mom’s attitude was considered “American” in contrast to her other family members’ mindset. Rita said:

None of my family wants that: ‘My kids are with me. Don’t go away!’ And my mom was like, ‘No.’ And they're like, ‘It’s ’cause you're American. That’s how American people are: they just help them ‘till high school, and then they send them off to college.’ That's something my mom has always been told … ‘Us Mexicans don't do that, it's an American thing.’ I always do think my mom kind of thought in an American way.

In contrast to the traditional cultural expectations, the participants’ parents had a different expectation and standard for them, one that was considered “American influenced.” Rita stated, “My family always tells my mom, ‘Oh, it’s ’cause you're very American. Your style is very American.’” When asked what made her family expectations different from others, Deseray stated, “Honestly, it comes from my dad actually was born here and grew up here (the U.S.).”

Estefanie also noted the cultural differences:

I don’t have macho Mexican men in my family … that's not my dad. My dad is Central American and that’s very different. I was raised to talk. I was raised to raise my hands, to speak up. I was going to be the best in the class. I wasn’t ever told that I was less than because I was a woman.

Jasmine shared similar experiences of the conflict between cultures. She said:

My dad was liberal in the sense that he did have these expectations for us. Because I had certain friends who, they were also pretty high achieving. But I remember their dad was like ‘what’s the point of them going to college if you’re gonna get married?’ ‘Cause they did have the very Mexican ideals of machista and the woman stays at home. And my dad was more like, ‘I don’t want you guys to be set back by this. I want you guys to go get a
job and never have to rely on someone.’ And my mom was very like, ‘Yeah, I agree as well.’ And I think it was very helpful.

Like the others, Gloria felt pressure to achieve academically from her parents, which she also considered an “Americanized” attitude. Gloria said, “Since we're Mexican, a lot of their parents didn’t really care about their grades, or what they did. But my parents, we were totally different. They would get mad if I would get, like, a B or a C.”

To summarize, the first theme identified is the cultural conflict participants experienced between their native Hispanic culture and American culture. The experience of being “whitewashed,” or not being considered a “true Mexican” by other Mexicans was shared as were the challenges and experiences of having parents who were more “Americanized” than their peers or relatives.

**Theme Two: Familismo**

The second theme that emerged from the data was the importance of family in the lives of the participants. In fact, family played, and continued to hold, a central role in the participants’ academic achievements. The importance of their immediate family was repeatedly stressed by the participants. From their parents’ influence and involvement in their education to being the motivating force behind their dreams and future plans as well as a being a determining factor in college enrollment, the role their families played in the lives of the participants was paramount. The second main theme of *familismo* was explicated in the following sub themes of the parent’s influence in the participants’ education and the family values shared by participants.

**Parents’ influence.** The parents’ influence in the academic lives of the participants was highlighted; though many parents lacked a formal education, at least one parent was directly and actively involved in their child’s academics. The value and emphasis on education was the
biggest influence parents had on participants’ academic experiences. Rita’s mother, though she worked as a house cleaner in America because she lacked proper documentation, was one of the few of the participants’ parents with a college degree, having graduated from university in Mexico. Of the importance her mom placed on education, Rita said:

   She feels education is the most powerful thing out there. To her, it’s like, that’s gonna’ be your weapon, always. And that’s what she pushed into us. I’m so grateful, because, she just believes so much in it. And, to her, it’s the key to get out of whatever we are in, or to get anywhere we want to be. She’s just like, “Get that education.”

   By focusing on how education can provide a better future, parents encouraged their daughters to be successful in academics. Serena’s parents were not college educated, but still she said, “they were very focused on instilling in me that education was important, because it could help you get a better life.” Likewise, though not college graduates themselves, Veronica’s parents also valued education. Veronica said:

   Even though my parents didn't really know the importance of an education back home, they definitely realized it here. That if you wanted to go anywhere in life or do anything in life, you definitely had to have at least a high school graduation.

   Mothers specifically played a pivotal role in encouraging and motivating their daughters. One example was Linda, whose mother died suddenly, shortly before her graduation from college. However, Linda remembered her mother being “the one who motivated all of us. So, it was really hard to graduate without her. It didn’t feel like a graduation, it was just kind of ...” She trailed off, her expression bleak, her eyes filling with tears; she shrugged, unable to finish her sentence. Linda explained that it was her mother who pushed and encouraged all of her children to pursue a college degree, though she did not have one herself.
Likewise, Ana’s mother has an influence in her daughter’s educational decisions. Ana, who attended one semester of community college before taking a break from school for a semester, said her mother’s reaction to her “break from college” was frustration. Ana said, “My mom she's like, ‘Why? There's people that they don't have the opportunity to go to school, and you guys have the opportunity.’” As a result of her mother’s influence, Ana has promised her mother that she would return to school to at least obtain her associates degree.

Rita’s mother warned her of the difficulties of life without an education. Rita said her mother always told her the opportunities are fewer for uneducated Hispanic women. Rita said her mother told her:

It’s more difficult for you, because you are a girl, and the way this world is, sadly, women get paid less, and if you don't have an education, people will look at you less. If you were a white woman without an education, it’d be different. But, if you're Hispanic, and you don't have an education, it’s harder.

Jasmine’s mother encouraged her to take AP classes, and as a result, Jasmine said, her parents were “understanding that it was a lot of work and so my mom would never really push us to do more housework, more than she thought we could handle.”

Meanwhile, Jasmine’s dad worked to encourage success for his daughters:

My dad was very big on competition. And so when my older sister she got into I think like the top 10, he told my other sister, ‘Oh, I want to see you go higher than her.’ And then he told me, because my sister got three, he was like, ‘You better be number one.’ And so it was very much like my dad sort of fueled being competitive and making sure you had good grades.
Involved in education. Not only were parents involved in encouraging the participants to value education for themselves, they also were involved in the daily academics. Maria’s mother, a judge who attended a prestigious law school, helped her with the practical aspects of higher education. Maria remembered, “She already knew ... when I was applying to college, she knew everything. Now my mom actually helps kids out with their personal statements; she’s really good at it, too. She knows exactly what the [universities] are like.”

Because he had a more flexible work schedule, Estefanie’s father was the involved parent in her education. Estefanie said:

My dad was the parent who went on the field trips with us, he was at the band trips, he was helping out. My dad’s very outgoing and everyone loves him. My dad has always been very involved and took us to school, picked us from school because my mom’s job was a little bit harder to get around. As far as like school and academics go, he’s very involved.

In contrast, Jasmine’s father worked longer hours and was unable to be involved in her academics, but she stated:

But I feel like my mom really picked up the slack on that. So she was always present. Like if it was back to school, she was present. If it was parent teacher conferences, she was present. Honor roll, she was there. It was something where if my mom could help out the school, she would. And she would always offer to do anything if they need anything.

Though a few participants’ parents were Spanish-only speakers, they still were involved as much as they could be in their child’s education. Ana’s mom, who speaks only Spanish, helped by keeping track of Ana’s homework assignments. Ana said, “My mom every day after school she asked the teacher about the homework, because the teacher speaks Spanish. So if she
asked about the homework and then the teacher explains to my mom.” Likewise, Rebecca’s parents, also Spanish-only speakers, tried to be as involved as they could with her academics. Rebecca remembered:

They tried their best, and I’m satisfied the fact that they really took the energy. They could have been like other parents that I’ve seen that just don’t care … They tried their best to try to teach me the little words they’d picked up here and there. They really tried. Then making sure that I always did my homework, that I was always reading. I read a lot growing up, so they were always on my case, “We can’t help you, but this is what we need to do.”

For Deseray, her mother’s emotional support and presence was the biggest support for her, “She was always with me since I was little. Every single day, picking up from school. Just always there.”

**Lack of education.** For many of the participants, their parents lacked higher education, and some dropped out of school before high school. The parents’ lack of education influenced the daughters emotionally and practically. For some participants, their parents’ lack of education caused an emotional response in the participants, who said because of it they felt an obligation to pursue a career path or higher education. For other participants, their parents’ lack of education led to a more practical response, causing them to become more self-reliant and independent learners since their parents were unable to help them academically.

Rebecca’s cognitive representation captured the internal struggle many participants said they felt.
Rebecca explained her cognitive representation saying she felt like she “owed it to my parents” to succeed academically. However, in doing so, she felt she missed out on life experiences to pursue her academics. She felt a deep responsibility and accountability to her parents. Rebecca explained:

My dad dropped out of medical school in Mexico when he met my mom and he came here. He became a farm worker out here. That was very difficult for him, because he had to deal with the responsibilities of being the oldest in his [immediate] family but also providing for a family of his own. Coming out here, he was providing for two families. My academics have always been a priority. I feel like they motivated me a lot more now because I owe it to him. I have the opportunity to go to school here, and he had to drop out for that. For me, it was an expectation but also something that I chose to take over.
Like Rebecca, Jasmine said her father also dropped out of school but at a much younger age than Rebecca’s father had. Jasmine explained:

My dad had to drop out when he was in second grade because I think his older brother had passed away, so he was now the oldest of the family and he had to support my grandma and his siblings. When he came to the United States, he learned how to read and write all by himself. And he was like, ‘If I would've gotten the chance, I would have.’

And so he pushed education a lot on us and that’s why all of us are in college now.

The pattern of parents who had to drop out of school was consistent for almost all participants. Rebecca’s mom “didn’t go to high school. To this day, she regrets it.” Estefanie’s parents “both have their GEDs.” Gloria’s mom “made it up to middle school. But my dad did graduate in Los Angeles.” Veronica said:

My mom only went up to the third grade in Mexico, because she had to stop to help her family, because they had a little ranch back there … for my stepdad, he only finished middle school, and then he had to stop to help his family.

Some of the participants’ parents did graduate from high school. Ana’s dad graduated high school, but neither of her parents went to college. Imelda’s parents “went to school in Mexico and they only got to high school, and then they stopped.”

Gloria recognized the impact their lack of education had on both her parents and on her. She said:

They had a main focus on caring about school a lot, since they didn't go to school. My dad went to [college] for a little period of time, but they didn't have the money anymore to support him, so he had to drop out. They said they wanted a better future for us, so that's why they really cared about us doing well in school.
Of her parents, only Deseray’s father graduated from high school, but Deseray said that only fueled their belief in her ability to succeed. She said:

> With my dad, it was mostly my dad, he was always like, ‘Whatever you want to do, you can do it.’ At first, I was like, “Oh, that's something every parent says to their kids.” But then I realized he actually believes that I can do whatever I want to, like … do it.

As she recalled his words of encouragement, Deseray teared up and became emotional, and she repeated, “He actually believes that. I can do whatever I want to.”

**Learning to cope.** Because of their parents’ limited education, participants were forced to find coping strategies to succeed academically on their own. Veronica said, “It was up to me to keep up my grades and to search out all those things. I would Google stuff if I didn't know the answer or I would create little study groups with my friends.” Jasmine said, “I would spend four or five hours in the school library.” Deseray said she would ask for help at school or in her Avid class, “I was also in Avid since seventh grade. We have tutors there.” Gloria said, “If I struggled, they’d be like, ‘Go to tutoring.’ I had to find it [academic help] myself.”

Although their parents tried their best to help, they could not always help them academically, as a result, participants quickly became self-sufficient learners. Serena remembered:

> My mom tried her best to help us. But as soon as I reached a certain age, which was like third, fourth grade in elementary school, I wanted to be as independent as possible. Because I didn't want to make my mom feel bad, because she didn't understand English. And my dad, the way he taught things, I didn't really like it. So, I tried to be as independent as possible by going through school.

Likewise, Deseray said her mother tried to help her:
I remember when I was little, I would come back and sometimes I really did struggle when I was little with English, but she would sit there with me trying to figure it out. We would have my brother try to help us. Even with math as well. She wasn’t that great. Like once I got to a certain level, she couldn’t help me anymore. But by then, I had that standard that you have to do it, you have to ask for help at school, or you have to ask someone else.

Gloria also said, “I kind of just taught myself. Like, I have to do well.” Similarly, Ana said, “In high school I never asked my parents for any help.” Serena’s parents’ role supporting her was emotional motivation more than academic. Serena said, “I was kind of on my own. Like, my parents were there for motivation.”

Participants said they realized early on that their academic success ultimately depended on themselves. Jasmine said, “You had to be very intrinsically motivated or else you weren’t really going to get far.” Serena echoed this idea of being self-motivated to succeed. She said:

I feel like you have to find it within yourself to find that drive to succeed. Because you can’t be like, I want to be like this person. So, you have to, you know, find it within yourself, like, ‘I can do this. It’s on me.’

For Veronica, the motivation has always been within herself, “I've always had this drive in me … It’s always been there. I always knew that in order for me to get an education, I just had to, I don’t know, be the best.”

**Family values.** The importance of the family was evident in the values the participants held. Ana explained:
My parents and I are really close. I feel like I always have them. If I have a problem or something like that … I can tell them everything, and I think that, it’s really nice that I can tell my parents everything, ‘cause I got friends that they cannot say anything.

The close-knit family was common for participants. From being family oriented in their college choices to having family members as role models to the future they envision, the participants’ values centered around their families. Jasmine said:

Family is the other main aspect. I feel like it’s something that pretty dominant in most Mexican communities because we’re so interconnected, and we have events like quinceaneras where it’s not just the family event … you have madrino and padrino who pay for everything or the whole family comes together to do events. And everything’s more close-knitted, and I feel that family is a really big aspect of my values and my family.

**Family oriented.** Participants attended a variety of community colleges and universities. When determining their choice of college to attend, being close to family was a significant factor in their ultimate decision. A few participants received scholarship opportunities at prestigious universities; however, some turned down opportunities at schools that were not geographically close to their families. Some, like Estefanie, Ana, and Gloria, never left home at all. Ana and Gloria both lived at their respective homes while attending community college; living at home is a matter of convenience both financially and emotionally. Estefanie explained her reasons for not leaving for college. Estefanie said:

I wasn’t mature enough to leave home. I wasn’t. I feel like I would have missed my parents tremendously and my family. It’s very overwhelming to move from this kind of environment to a totally different kind of environment, especially for me when I was just
adjusting to this. I feel like the pressure of having to do well to validate my parents spending so much money on my education would have probably been very, very straining for me …. just being close to my home, being close to my parents, being able to do my work in my room, in a safe place that I knew was my home, I think that makes a world of a difference.

Estefanie lived at home while she attended a community college, then attended a local extension campus of a large public State university. She still lived at home at the time of this study while working full time and applying to graduate schools.

Both Jasmine and Rebecca said they had the opportunity to attend schools that were far away from their families, and although both said they initially decided that they were going to attend these institutions, both changed their minds because of family. Jasmine said, “I was gonna go to Berkeley, but I didn’t like being so far from home. My mom was like, ‘You're gonna be far from me.’” Rebecca also said, “My dream school was Berkeley.” But her cousins attended the university she is now attending, so she changed her mind to attend her institution to be with family. Rebecca explained her choice:

With having my cousins out here, they’re like, ‘It’s a sign. You need to come here. You have us. You’re not alone.’ That really played out and helped me a lot my first year. Still now, I still talk to them a lot.

Jasmine and her younger sister both attend the same university, which is within a 40 minute drive from their parents. They leave every weekend to go home. She said:

Right now, I live in an apartment with my sister since we both go here. But we commute, because my mom currently went to Mexico to visit my abuelita. And we’re going back [home] every Friday to take care of my dad.
Linda chose her university because her brother, who was two years older than her, was attending the same school; he, in turn had chosen it because his older sister was there. Linda said, “There’s four of us, three of us went to [the same school], and my second older sister went to Berkeley.”

Leaving home and not living with family has been a difficult adjustment for the participants. Rebecca saw her decision as a means to advance her family economically and to change the direction of her family’s future. She explained her decision process saying she thought:

Am I going to be the one that's going to take on this family responsibility of going further than they did or am I going to stay back home and just settle for everything that’s going on? My parents have been very supportive of me to come out here and everything. My sister is out here now – I’m very family oriented.

For Rebecca, having her sister come to attend the same university was helpful emotionally.

Imelda said her biggest adjustment to college was, “Not seeing my mom every day. Yeah. That was a little tough the first few days. That was the toughest. Well, not seeing both my parents every day.” Veronica experienced the same “culture shock” attending college and leaving home. Veronica said:

I’m very much so connected to my family. Before I even started classes, I did a summer session here. During that summer session, I would practically go home every weekend, because I just wasn’t used to this environment. Coming here was such a culture shock.

**Role models.** The importance of family and the value they carried in the participants’ lives is seen in the role models they selected for themselves, with family members being the only ones they mentioned as people they wanted to imitate.
Older siblings were primarily mentioned as role models, as much for their character traits as for modeling the way to achievement for the participants. Estefanie, who has two older sisters, said:

My oldest sister was probably my biggest role model. I looked up to her very much. She was very brainy, she was very outgoing. She was always just, she’s one of those people that’s good at a lot of things. It's really annoying! But she never treated me like her annoying little sister, which the other one did. I always really appreciated that. Now that I realize that that was the reason I loved being around her so much was that she never treated me like I was a pest. She was very outgoing, and she was very outspoken. We’re a lot alike, we’re very different at the same time. I think she was just always doing something. Whether it was like at school or at church or in the community, she was always doing something. I think I admired that about her. I admired that.

Rita also looked up to her older sister. Rita said:

Actually, my sister was the first to graduate college. First to go to college, first to graduate college. And that was just what my mom was rooting for; all three kids to go to college, graduate college, ‘cause nobody else did. I’m just very proud of her, and she’s very much a Democrat, and very much an activist, so now she’s a president of this, kind of a movement type of committee, where they just fight for all types of rights. And she’s so passionate about it, and she could have a job that pays a lot better, but this is just what she loves to do. And I admire that. That she’s never really searched for the money, she just wants rights for Hispanics, for women. Oh, she's such a feminist.

Veronica’s sisters were several years older than her. When asked her role models, Veronica said:
My sisters, I think. Just because they had gone through it even worse, I guess. Because they grew up in a worse neighborhood and everything like that, but they still managed to get their college education to strive for more and they still are. They told me if I ever needed any help especially when I was younger when they could still help me, to call them. Or they would come over and help me. They would also let me use their computers, because I didn't have a computer when I was younger. I got one more towards graduating high school. They would definitely, like, let me go over and print stuff on their computers and just let me use their computers to type stuff or send the stuff and they would print in and bring it to me.

For Deseray, her older brother inspired her to achieve. Deseray remembered the turning point for her, when she decided to try to achieve academically, was when her brother graduated from high school. Deseray said:

My brother was one of the people that I remember when he graduated from high school he got so many awards, and he graduated top 10 as well. That was like, ‘I want to do that. That's it. That's what I want to do.’

Likewise, Jasmine’s older sister showed her what was possible if she tried. Jasmine said, “When my older sister started going to college and actually making it, she was another inspiration that if she could do it, I'm pretty sure I could do it as well.”

Parents were also significant role models for the participants. Although many of their parents were not formally educated, the participants admired their parents for their achievements despite their lack of academic degrees. Jasmine’s father dropped out of school in the second grade to begin working to provide for his family. Jasmine said she admired her father for his
achievements despite having the challenges he had in his life which prevented him from succeeding academically. Jasmine said:

My dad a lot played a good influence in what I did because I saw how he ... well, he would always tell us about how he came to the States not knowing English and he hadn’t been taught how to read or write in Spanish nor in English. And how he really had to put in the effort to learn himself. And he actually learned it. And I sort of got that inspiration to just all the effort that my father put in, I didn't want to disappoint him.

Rebecca admired her mom and her grandma. She said:

They were the religious, but also how to be a good, badass woman representation. They showed that to me growing up. Learning how to, we can't change people, but we can change ourselves and how we feel about certain things. They were very inspirational in that movement. My mom is one of my best friends. She’s there for me. I'm there for her.

Like Rebecca, Linda’s grandma and late mother, both of whom were not college educated, were her role models. Linda said:

They could do everything basically, I wish I could learn all the things they know. I think that's really powerful to have lived it, and you know it. Just because you don’t know the academia for it doesn't make it any less.

Both Maria and Serena have one parent with a college education. Maria’s mother is the third female judge and the first Hispanic female judge in her county. For Maria, her mother and her aunts, all of whom are lawyers, inspired her to be high achieving. Maria said:

I see somebody like her and I'm sort of just like ... nothing can stop me in what I want to do. Her parents didn't want her to go to college, they thought it was a waste of time, so Mom did [a community college] for two years and then she went to ... she went to
Clarion University in Pennsylvania. My mom and her sisters, because ... my mom went to law school here, her two sisters, they’re both younger than her, they both went to UC Irvine. They were honor students at Irvine; they both were Merit Scholars, I believe, actually. So, I always saw those three and I was like ... they can do it, I can do it too.

Serena said she admired her father:

I wanted to be like him intellectually. Because I always knew that he was very smart … whenever I ask him a question, even today, whenever I ask him a question he always has the answer. Even though, like sometimes we disagree … Like, you know, we have discussions about it. But even now, he's still very well-read. He is very educated. And so, I look up to that aspect of him.

For some participants, relatives serve as role models for them. Gloria admired her cousin who took a similar academic path, first attending community college then university, just like Gloria is. She said:

My cousin Stephanie. She lives in Texas, and she was the first one in our whole family to actually go to college … she was kind of my role model, ‘cause my parents would always say, like, ‘you want to be like Stephanie.’ She had straight As, she took AP classes, she was in high school, and now she's in college. I would talk to her and everything. She was kind of like my role model.

Rebecca’s older cousins were her role models. They helped to pass on information they thought she would need to succeed academically. Rebecca said, “I only have two cousins that have come to [her university], but I have other cousins in the Cal State system. They’ve been like, ‘This is what we know. Let's pass on this information to you.’”
Imelda’s role model was a relative who was successful in the career she desired: a medical doctor. Imelda said:

Role models … one of my uncles. He’s a cardiologist. But he’s in Mexico. Whenever he would come and visit, he would show me pictures of his work. Yeah. So, he would be like, ‘Oh, look. This is a heart. This is a kidney,’ whatever, you name it, you know? And my sisters were always super disgusted, and I was the only one that was so fascinated by seeing blood and guts and all that stuff. Like sometimes when I feel like I can’t keep going, I guess you could say, because it gets really hard or whatever the case may be, he's like, I mean, he says, ‘It's hard for a reason, because if it wasn’t hard, then everybody would be a doctor.’

**Future oriented.** Participants shared the value of thinking and preparing for their future. All had a plan for what they wanted to do with their lives after obtaining their degrees; most had double majors and plans for graduate school. This future-mindedness guided them through high school, which is why many chose to take AP classes. Veronica’s cognitive representation showed the participants’ perspective of AP classes as a path to a better future.
Participants focused on preparing themselves for the next steps to achievement while still in high school. For Veronica, “AP classes were the bridge to my first step into getting into university, because it would make me look competitive.”

In addition to AP, Gloria was involved in AVID classes as well as AP classes. AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) classes are part of the AVID College Readiness program that offers college readiness support such as tutoring and study strategies to help traditionally underrepresented students develop the skills they will need in college (“What is Avid” n. d.). Gloria said both classes were “kind of like a way to get to college.”

Rebecca remembered that in high school:
I was known as the one that was willing to sacrifice a lot to get further ahead. A lot of people were telling me, ‘Take this class. Take this class. It's going to raise your GPA. It’s going to make it look like you know what you're doing for college applications.’ Then I was captain of Varsity Soccer all four years back home. I did ASB two years. I did a bunch of different clubs and everything. They’re like, ‘This is your fighting chance. If you felt like you don't have a chance, this is the way you can have a chance to excel in a different level.’ I took that more to heart with my educators that saw the potential that I had and everything. I just challenged myself further.

Like Veronica, Serena viewed AP as a stepping stone to achieving her ultimate goals. Serena’s cognitive representation is a visual of her perspective of AP classes as being the ladder to her academic success.

Figure 3. Serena's cognitive representation of her perspective of AP classes.
Unlike other participants, Serena took college courses while still in high school. She said the academic culture at her high school was such that:

After your junior year of high school, you would try to do research at a university. I don't know how that became the culture there, but if you’re not doing research, then who are you as a person, right? Like, you’re not trying to achieve anything. Like, that is the way to college. You do research.

While in high school, Serena participated in various research studies at the same university she attended; this experience was an influential factor in her eventual decision when choosing which college to attend.

**Higher purpose.** Participants see their futures and their academic goals as being part of a higher purpose in life. Estefanie, who plans to be a high school teacher, asked the question that seems to sum up the perspective of the participants’ mindset, “If you don't have something you're working for, then what are you doing?” Rebecca said:

I have a higher purpose. For example, I always tell myself my purpose in life is to help someone. That’s the route that I'm going within my life. That’s why pre-law or medicine, that’s where I’m going for. I want to help people. That's the kind of goal that I have. I feel like religion, in this sense, plays into my education because I know that my end purpose is to help other people, if that makes sense.

Serena also viewed her future as having a higher purpose. She said she has a passion to eliminate disparities in health services and health policies guides her decisions. Serena said, “Just getting MD would feel incomplete for me.” Serena’s family’s experiences served to point her in her future direction. Serena said:
I knew what they [health disparities] were because I grew up in El Salvador and I still had family there that still talks about it. And I grew up in an immigrant community, and you know, I have older relatives that don't speak English. And so they have a hard time accessing these resources. I feel like you kind of have this mentality that you want to save the world, and you want to do everything.

Her goals are to help reduce disparities in health resources around the world.

Rita said, “I feel like I can make a change in people, and most of my little cousins look up to me. And that puts pressure on me.” Veronica wants to empower other young Hispanic women. Veronica said, “I feel like I would actually be really interested in teaching. Because I feel like I could have a lot of impact, especially on females of my culture, empowering them. If I did it, you can do it too.” Linda was also thinking about teaching, either at the high school or college level. Imelda’s purpose was to provide for her family. With a father who was in manual labor with no retirement available, Imelda worried about her parents. She said:

He’s sacrificing so much to provide for us. I think about the future and when he’s old, like who’s gonna keep him on his feet and who's gonna keep him and my mom … So, in a way, like being a physician kind of like puts me at ease because if I make it that far, I’ll be able to provide for them when they can’t provide for themselves, and in a sense, it kind of feels like repaying them for all that they've done for me.

Ultimately, participants said their sense of a higher purpose helped them to be undeterred by detractors. Rebecca said:

Laugh at me if you want, but I know that I'm going to do something with my life, so I don’t care what happens right now. I’m going to try no matter what. I decided I’m going to give myself the trying. I have a chance to try, so I’m going to try.
The second theme that emerged from the data was that of the important role that family plays in the lives and experiences of high-achieving Hispanic females. From the family values of placing a high priority on education, despite the lack of formal education of the parents, to the emphasis placed on the family as a unit to being significant role models in their lives, participants expressed the important role their families played in their lives. The family values helped participants to become future oriented and to view their future goals and achievements as having a higher purpose, using their degrees to help their families and better society.

**Theme Three: AP Environment**

The environment of the AP classes was the third major theme that emerged from this research study. Participants remembered overall positive experiences, but when asked for details about the AP class environments, participants had mixed emotions when remembering specific details. The environment in the AP courses was created by both the AP teachers and AP students. The subthemes of participants’ feeling empowered, having a sense of community, a feeling of satisfaction at defeating stereotypes, and feeling a deep sense of frustration revealed the effect of the various environments created in AP courses on participants.

**Community.** Jasmine explained her cognitive representation as feeling like she was part of a community as the students in her AP classes were primarily females. Jasmine said, “It was mostly girls. I think we’d be lucky if we had one or two guys.” Her cognitive representation showed her AP environment as being all female.
Figure 4. Jasmine's cognitive representation of her perspective of AP classes.

Jasmine explained what her cognitive representation meant:

So, I thought about what my experience was. And I feel like because I was in a community that was predominantly Hispanic and when I was in these classes, many times, especially in AP classes, there was only girls in those classes as well and many of them were Hispanic women as well. So it felt very much a community, but it was still I guess a little bit individual. Everybody did their own individual thing, but it wasn’t something where we always knew we had each other to sort of ... if we needed questions or asking something like that in particular. And I drew six girls because there was five other girls that I knew since middle school and we had all told each other, ‘Well, were gonna take certain classes together.’ And I think we actually took AP classes ... We took
the same AP classes in high school and we also coordinated so that we would take similar AP classes, so we would have that bond as well.

Jasmine’s experience of having females in the majority in her AP courses as well as having a sense of community created by having girls in the classes was common to participants. With the exception of STEM related courses, in which more males were enrolled, a majority of students in the participants’ other AP classes were women. Rebecca said:

That was a very interesting aspect that mostly female were taking these AP courses. I got stuck with mostly female, but that was very empowering to see that in the classroom because I feel like a lot of educators connected more to us on the personal level in being like, ‘You guys can do it. You're not alone. Look around. There’s mostly females here.’

Imelda felt empowered because, “I wasn’t the only girl in the AP classes.” Maria remembered, “There were definitely a lot of girls that were in AP classes.” Likewise, Deseray said she had, “mostly girls in most of our class. Yeah. For my AP government class, I remember we had three boys and the rest were like 25 girls.” Gloria shared the similar experiences. She said:

There were a lot more girls in my AP classes than there were guys. But, like, for example, in my AP US history, the whole class was guys, and there was only three girls, including myself. But, only those classes were guys. But mostly, there were more girls than guys.

Linda remembered more of an equal distribution of students, with the exception of math courses:

I want to think back and say 50/50. But I do remember there being a lot of boys like especially in AP Calculus. There was fewer girls. But then in AP Government I remember there was a lot of girls. So, I think it just depended on the class sometimes too.
Estefanie credited the girls in the AP classes with being the most intelligent. She said, “Most of the time the girls were the smarter people in the class.”

**Empowering.** Having classes of mostly females created an empowering environment for participants. Maria’s cognitive representation shows the participants’ attitudes about feeling empowered as a Hispanic female in AP classes.

*Figure 5. Maria's cognitive representation of her perspective of AP classes.*

Jasmine recalled feeling like, “If she can do it, I can too;” when taking difficult AP courses, she drew emotional strength from the other female students in the classes. Rebecca remembered the gender enrollment having a positive impact. Rebecca said:

Mostly female were taking these AP courses. I got stuck with mostly female, but that was very empowering to see that in the classroom because I feel like a lot of educators connected more to us on the personal level.
Freedom of discussion. Participants felt empowered to speak out in classes with mostly females enrolled. Jasmine said in her “AP psych or in classes where we talked about subjects that were more like, oh how do you feel about women's situations or women's topics. There was a sense of like all the girls could support each other.” However, Jasmine felt that, “with male teachers I feel like we couldn't win either though. The male teachers, we didn't have that sense of freedom.”

Although most of her AP classes had a balance of both genders, Linda said that in classes where there were more male students, she felt intimidated.

Yes. I didn’t want to sound dumb in front of the whole class. If I knew of an answer and I was sure of it and it was maybe like a one word answer I would say it. But I never felt confident enough to just speak my opinion in front of everyone … I think I was a lot more timid in high school. And also just what we learned about like taking up space, I don't think I ever thought I could. ‘Cause I didn't want to step on anyone’s toes or be considered rude, I guess.

Disproving stereotypes. Participating in AP courses enabled participants to feel empowered because they felt they were disproving stereotypes of Hispanic women. As an AP student, Imelda said:

You get to disprove the, like the stigma that people of other ethnicities ... Like here especially, that Asian students are so much more better at things than other students, so when you’re doing well in these advanced placement classes, you're like, ‘I’m like kind of beating your statistics.’

Maria agreed, “It’s empowering when you go somewhere else and you tell people, ‘Yeah, I'm taking AP Econ, AP Calculus BC,’ and they're like ‘Oh, wow, that's impressive.’” Linda
recalled “mostly all the Asian, White students, and then maybe a handful of Latinos” in her AP classes, so being one of them helped her self-confidence. Linda said, “I did feel very smart … I wanted to show that I was good enough.”

**AP cohort.** As AP students, participants felt a sense of community and connectedness, which empowered them. Many of the participants created their own AP cohort, coordinating class schedules so that they could take classes with each other. Jasmine said she coordinated AP class schedules with the same group of friends since middle school. Likewise, Deseray’s friend group created their own AP cohort. Deseray said:

> I had my little group of friends since the beginning. All of them ended up in college. There's not a single one that didn't. …. We didn't meet through there, though, because some of them we just knew each other from middle school. Since the beginning I started taking AP classes …. Also, because it was such a small group of us that were in AP, that we just knew each other …. We all knew who we were … it was such a small group of us that were in AP, that we just knew each other.

Veronica had a similar experience:

> You would mostly have basically all of us ... All of us knew each other already from middle school and stuff like that … Everyone knew each other. We even knew the lower classman. I just felt it was a very good community.

Estefanie remembered, “Everyone knew each other pretty well.” Maria also stated, “we just knew each other really well, because we all had been in the same classes together, lot of studying.” This sense of community was helpful for participants.

**Supportive community.** Within the AP community created by enrollment, participants found a supportive group that helped them with projects or studying. Veronica recalled, “We
would create little study groups with my friends. We would have group chats, and if I ever got stuck, I would just message them and be like, ‘Can you guys help me with this question?’”

Maria had similar situations:

Likewise ... if somebody helped me, I would help them right back, and I also can understand how a person was ... if I knew that person was going around not helping people out, well, if you're going to ask to me for help, well, I'm not going to give you help, you know what I mean?

Rebecca found a community of students who wanted the same things out of life. She said:

Obviously, I connected more with the students that wanted to get out. We call ourselves the top ten, the group that got the top ten GPAs. We were our own little clique. ‘Alright, guys. This is what's coming up. There's this scholarship open. Look into this. Look into that.’ We were collaborating. We would do group projects together because we were all on the same boat.

Veronica recalled, “For my cohorts specifically all of were just ... we had this mental state that we wanted to be better and we wanted to do better.”

The support was as much emotional as it was practical. Gloria remembered:

I had my friends with me, a lot of us took the same AP courses, so we had the same AP teachers, sometimes we had the same classes. It was really nice to be with them, because we understood what we were going through, and we could help each other along the way.

Serena felt, “I had people that I could relate to, in my classes. I had, there were a lot of different kids that had immigrant parents or that had parents that I knew my parents would get along with.” Rebecca found emotional support as well. Rebecca said, “It wasn't as bad because everyone kind of came from the same similar struggle. We had, even within the AP courses, the
group that really wanted to over-excel.” Rebecca’s community extended to former classmates and older AP students. She said:

They’re [former AP students] still constantly checking up on me, trying to encourage me to understand. They went through the struggle as well, so I’m not the only one that’s gone through this. Then making the friends out here from Latina communities and them being older than me, and being like, ‘This is what happened to us, but we’re here to help you. You’re not on your own.’

**Competitive cohort.** Although the AP environment created a sense of community for participants, there was also a competitive sub culture within the AP classes. Imelda’s cognitive representation showed this sub-culture.

![Imelda's cognitive representation of her perspective of AP classes](image)

*Figure 6. Imelda's cognitive representation of her perspective of AP classes.*

Imelda explained she felt isolated because of the other students in the class. She said:
They were really competitive kids that didn’t really like collaborating. They were kind of like, ‘This is what I know and I really don’t want to share what I know with you because then it’s probably gonna put me at a disadvantage.’ So, it was not too much of a pleasant experience in that sense.

Moreover, Imelda felt isolated from other non-AP students because she was taking AP classes. She said:

It was really kind of like an isolating type of thing in the sense that I couldn’t really identify with my friends or with my classmates as much. I couldn’t really share that much of, how do you put it? We didn’t really have too much in common with regards to what we wanted to do in the future because most of them wanted to just go straight into the workforce after graduation. So, it felt like it was just kind of me in my little bubble at times.

As Maria explained, “We all were friends, but there are certain limits.” Gloria recalled:

I found it a lot stressful … I always felt the need to be perfect. Especially with kids who were very competitive, and a lot of my friends were in the top ten. We're all competitive at my school, and it was just really stressful for me. We are very competitive. So, we were very competitive in school to see who could get the best grades, so we just kind of taught ourselves.

Rebecca said, “We were competing against each other. There was this subtle competition and trying to get back at each other. At the same time, we knew we were all in the same place.”

Despite having her friends in the AP classes with her, Jasmine described both a supportive and competitive environment. She said, “We were still very helpful of each other, but we were all very competitive.” For Jasmine, the competition pushed her to achieve:
I remember in our senior year in particular, I was gonna’ take two or three AP classes and I told a friend and she was like, ‘Okay, I'll take two or three AP classes, too.’ ‘Cause she didn't wanna fall behind. I was sort of tied with another girl in terms of valedictorian and she’s actually in the group. And she was gonna take three AP classes her 11th grade year, so I was like ‘I have to take three.’ And then she took three again and then I was like, ‘I have to take three as well.’

Maria remembered feeling hesitant to ask her AP classmates for help because there was always a desire to have an edge over each other. While Linda felt that the competition caused a rift between her and some of her classmates. Linda said, “Because I always did really well, so I felt like a lot of people compared themselves in a really negative way to me.”

**Competitive with self.** For other participants, the AP environment created competition with themselves as much as with their classmates. Veronica felt more internal pressure than any external competition. Veronica said:

I think just for me personally, I didn't feel that [competition with others]. It was more, ‘I just have to do this for myself.’ I wasn't really competing against anyone else. If they did better than me, that's totally fine. But at the end of the day it was just me competing against myself, telling myself, ‘Yeah. You can do this. You can be in this class.’ You know?

Imelda remembered questioning her own abilities because of the competition. She said:

When it came to like out loud collaboration, it was mostly them talking and sometimes if I felt I didn't understand something so well, and they kept going, you kind of felt like, ‘Oh man, do I really belong here?’

But Veronica felt that the competition with herself made her better. She said:
I think anyone can really do an AP class as long as they have the drive and the will to succeed in the class and they want to do good that they can. It's just you that’s stopping yourself from believing that.

**Frustrations.** While participants had positive experiences in their AP classes, many expressed frustrations with being a high achieving minority in AP. Another frustration was the discrepancy between AP courses and actual college courses. Finally, participants were frustrated with their AP teachers. Imelda felt, “just being a minority student enrolled in AP classes, it felt like I was isolated from the rest of my classmates.”

While Rebecca felt frustrated with low expectations of minority students. She recalled a teacher telling her:

> It really has to do with is the expectations that we put on our students. The expectations are so low on you guys. That's why it takes a few of you, only a few. It's just like the expectations are so low on you guys [AP students]. It's just like the school cares but doesn't really care.

Rita felt that the expectations were different based on gender. She said:

> I always felt like they were a lot harder on the guys than the girls. It was like, ‘We don't really mind you,’ kind of thing …. I don't know, he [AP teacher] wouldn't see full potential in me, but he was still, like, he would still accept me being in his class.”

While Maria said in her AP classes:

> I always felt let down. Just like ... this [the AP class] is so stupid, kind of. And the funniest thing is that the classes that I enjoyed the most were the easiest ones. Not necessarily the ones that were the most challenging. I come to college and I don't get straight As on everything in every class, but ... there’s something to be said about being
in a class and maybe not getting that A, but still coming out of it being like ‘I really
enjoyed it, though,’ and I did not get that at all in high school.

**Not academically challenged.** Participants expressed frustration at not being challenged
academically in AP classes. Imelda recalled, “there wasn't too much of a challenge” in her AP
classes. Estefanie estimated only half of her AP classes were challenging. Estefanie said:

The other half probably shouldn't have been called AP classes. Just because they, I don’t
know. Maybe I have like a high standard but I kind of would sometimes think to myself,
‘If this is AP, what are the other kids doing? This is so easy.’

Jasmine recalled:

I would go into it expecting to learn … And then to see that everybody was kind of doing
their own thing was very like ... it kind of motivated you to do less, or you didn’t do as
much as you should've been doing.

Serena felt that because, “sometimes you just got busy work. And kids, I feel like the kids at my
school were smart enough to know, this is just busy work. I'm not learning anything from this.”
As a result from not being in an academically challenging environment, Serena said “cheating
was rampant” in those AP classes.

For participants like Rebecca, who said she wanted to learn, the experience was
frustrating. She remembered one particular AP class:

We did not prepare. We watched more movies than anything else. I would miss his class
and I wouldn’t miss anything. It was that kind of environment in that class. I remember I
hated that class because of it, because I felt like I was just wasting my time.
Likewise, Estefanie said the teachers needed to do more to create a more rigorous academic environment. Estefanie said, “They need to challenge them [students] more. I feel like they’re too lax.” Imelda agreed:

*Teachers really should ... they should be less lenient with students in AP classes, because I mean if you’re taking an AP class, it’s because you’re making a commitment. Because if you didn’t want to put in the effort, then you might as well just have taken the regular course. Yeah.*

Imelda blamed the system as much as the teachers for AP classes not being academically challenging enough. She said:

*Students take AP classes for the extra grade bump, so they wouldn’t really, really try, so the teacher would kind of have to dumb it down a little bit to not have the grades kind of reflect badly on them. So, in some courses, I didn’t feel like I was being pushed hard enough.*

Rebecca’s experience was similar to Imelda’s. Rebecca said the whole system needs to change:

*It needs to be harder, because I was taking four AP classes at a time. My senior year, I took four AP classes at a time. I was applying to college. I was doing sports. I was doing a ton of stuff, and I missed a lot of school, too, because I was going on different trips with my family and everything. I still did fine. I still got the perfect GPA my senior year. It shouldn’t have been like that. It should have been harder.*

Jasmine credited the teacher for creating an environment and culture for learning. Jasmine explained:

*I feel like it varied in each [of the] classes that I took. Because I would have certain classes where depending on how interactive the teacher was with us, then the*
environment would be safer or be stronger. You feel like you were learning more, everybody was more competitive. But in environments where the teacher wasn’t really sure what she was doing, it kind of became like a free for all. Everybody would do their own thing.

Serena said rampant cheating on assignments became one result of the lack of being challenged in AP classes.

There’s a lot of cheating and a lot of copying at my school. felt like, I felt bad copying from people’s work, ‘cause I wasn't learning anything and it wasn’t my work. No one took it seriously. But because I’m always a try hard, I took it seriously, because I can’t imagine life not taking a class seriously.

**Not prepared.** Another frustration that participants experienced was feeling unprepared for the rigors of college classes and the expectations from college professors. Rebecca said:

AP especially. AP is seen as a higher standard, and it makes a difference if you get into college or not, but in reality, it doesn’t really prepare you to know what to expect. They’re like, ‘If you can do AP, you can handle college,’ and it’s not even at the same level of intensity.

As Imelda explained,

We’re told that an AP class is like a college class, right? So, when you're sitting in an AP class, sometimes you’re like, ‘This is what college is gonna be like. I got this. It’s whatever.’ And I remember my first quarter here, I would call my mom crying, because it was so hard.

One reason Imelda struggled was because her high school AP teachers would “cut the slack” for their students. She said,
Because I was sort of used to that in the sense that like, ‘Oh, I missed a deadline or I forgot my paper at home.’ Like, your teacher would be like, ‘Oh, it’s okay. You can bring it in tomorrow.’ But if that happens here, your professor’s like, ‘Sucks to be you.’ Participants felt that the expectations of students in college is much different and more rigorous than what is expected of them in AP classes.

Estefanie felt that AP students need to be allowed more individualization, where “They need to be pushed more to be independent thinkers because that's what college is. Then, that's why they struggle so much.” Rebecca made a similar comment. She said, “I feel like AP is very different to college-level courses because even doing AP, you’re spoon fed the information.” Linda felt that, compared to other students in college, she was not as academically well prepared. Linda said,

I just felt it was so unfair the opportunities we had because they would get the same grade as me, but yet I went to the writing center like four times. So I think realizing that, it made me kinda mad. They already know everything, and I have to write the same paper as them. So that was kinda frustrating.

Both Linda and Veronica felt that more individualization and learning how to analyze instead of memorizing information would have helped to better prepared them for college. Linda had advice for AP teachers:

Try to analyze more. Because I think what we learned was more like memorizing, no evidence for our opinions. But I wish there would've been more of those. Because that's basically what you do in college, you make an argument, support it. And I think in high school it was more like memorize what the teacher said so that you can do well on the essay.
Veronica echoed the same idea. She said of her AP classes: “It was just a lot of memorization. There wasn’t really a lot of emphasis on conceptualizing and analyzing what we were learning. It was just, you have to memorize this for the exam.”

As far as overall academic preparedness for college, Jasmine said:

I feel that for some classes I was and for some I wasn’t. I think in humanities it was because I had more teachers in that area that were ... they gave more workload or they actually taught better. In terms of STEM, I feel like there was no chance of me doing well in those classes.

Veronica felt that AP teachers should do more to prepare their students for college. She said:

I feel that if you're going to teach an AP course, you should structure it more like a college course itself. I feel if they were to structure it more like an actual college class is, it would be a better representation of how it will be in college. I know it’s still high school, and you're still babying your students, but if you’re going to take an AP class maybe take into consideration how those classes would be taught on college campuses and try and structure it the same way.

**AP teachers.** Another frustration for participants were the AP teachers themselves. As Maria said, “Oh, I had pretty bad AP teachers.” All participants had stories to share about “bad AP teachers” who caused them much frustration from poor teaching methods, to a lack of experience, to a lack of connection with the students.

However, unlike the other participants, when she described the “bad AP teachers” in her school, Jasmine described predatory behaviors. Jasmine had upsetting experiences with several male AP teachers. Jasmine said:
A few of them [AP teachers] were kind of creepy or the girls wouldn’t ... if someone were to go to talk to a certain AP teacher by themselves, girls would go with them because they didn’t feel comfortable going alone with certainly teachers.

Jasmine said the students never reported their experiences nor their unease about these male teachers to administration. Jasmine explained the reason:

We didn’t because we knew they were the few teachers who could teach the subjects. And if we reported it we would lose that. And we didn’t have a lot of already higher education resources so many of us just kind of stuck with it. Or we knew that he's been here for six, eight years, they’re not gonna fire him. And so we just kind of dealt with it. So for us it was very like, ‘Oh this teacher was trying to look under your skirt.’ Just dealt with it. And we just kind of like, ‘Oh, okay. He was just doing what he usually does.’ And we just kinda had to deal with it. Yeah. Yeah I know. So I remember there was stuff like that.

While none of the other participants shared experiences of AP teachers who were predatory like Jasmine did, there was still a common thread of inexperienced teachers who were unprepared for the content or rigors of teaching an AP course.

**Lack of pedagogy.** Participants experienced AP teachers who lacked good pedagogical methods. Linda summed up the frustration felt by participants, “If you don’t teach it, how am I supposed to know it?” Gloria said her AP teachers expected students to already know the material for the classes they were in. Gloria said, “They would be like, you’re supposed to know this already. I’m like, okay. And they wouldn’t answer my questions.” Linda recalled, “They didn’t teach us. Like I remember chemistry was pretty hard and I remember teaching myself from the book.”
At least Gloria had books; for some of Jasmine’s AP classes Jasmine said, “we didn’t get our books in time [for the start of school] so we were already behind.” Jasmine also recalled those teachers, “wouldn't really teach us. They would just be in their desk and they would give us handouts and that would be out work for the day.” Jasmine elaborated one experience with an AP teacher:

She would tell us wrong information, or she would just put up a PowerPoint, she wouldn’t go over things. We never did a brief … we never did essays. Our homework consisted of packets; she never checked them. She never really ... and I think one time I had a clarification, I asked her and she was like, ‘Don’t you have Google?’ So I feel like she never really helped us with that work and so many of us expected just not to pass. For some students like Deseray, not having the emotional support from the teacher was bad enough, but then the teacher pitted students against each other. Deseray explained:

She was really mean. She made you feel bad if you were wrong. I never liked that when a teacher did that, like they made you feel like you were making a mistake and they made you feel bad about it. She made the class super competitive as well, because when we took notes and everything, for notebook checks she counted how many notes you took. It was based on other people’s grades whether you got an A or a B or a C … So everybody was competing in that class … People were miserable in that class. Yeah. She was terrible.

Jasmine and her classmates compensated for the teacher’s lack of pedagogy by finding resources to help them, “So we had to do Shmoop.” She recalled an instance where the school was going through the accreditation process and accreditation committees were visiting the campus, “I remember they were just going to look at our chemistry class, so our teacher sent us
all to the library to go get books so that they would all have books as well.” Gloria’s “most hated” teacher “wouldn't teach [the content]. He would go off on random definitions, to like, what's the definition of this.” Jasmine recalled one teacher who told students he wouldn’t be teaching some of the information they would need to know for the AP test. Jasmine said:

The first week, he told us, he was like, ‘I only care about European History. Asian History, Latin American history you’re gonna have to learn yourself.’ So we had teachers where it was like they just wouldn’t teach us certain things that we needed to know to pass the test or to be successful in the AP class.

For some of the participants, the poor pedagogy meant inconsistent methods and a lack of belief in the students’ abilities. Ana felt frustrated not knowing what the teacher expected from the students. She said:

In every project he expected, like the kids to do something else. You know like ... I don't know …. he wanted us to have like the best projects, right? I don't know really, he expected more I think, I don’t know, I didn’t like him.

Linda said, “I never knew what to expect” from some of her AP teachers. Maria said one of her AP teachers told the class, “U.S. history was his hobby, not his actual profession.” Maria felt like “he was trying to play ... it was a constant mind game with him.” She explained the “mind games” the teacher played:

His tests are pretty hard, but you can find all the answers on Quizlet, and it was sort of like a game in his eyes. But to me and my friends, it was sort of like, ‘this is stupid. Just quiz us like a normal person, you know, on the readings.’
Both Linda and Imelda experienced inconsistency in teaching methods as well. Linda recalled, “It was rare that we had any lessons. And then if we did have lessons, we’d have a really hard test that didn't match the lesson.” And Imelda remembered:

A lot of students would never do the reading and the teacher would get mad, so he’d give like random reading quizzes and the students would kind of pass your paper to the back and the person behind you grades it.

As a result of the teacher’s behavior, Imelda said her class began to cheat on the quizzes.

Rebecca said students’ frustration caused them to look for the easy way out as well. She said:

I had one educator … He swore he was the best teacher ever. I only remember reading one book in his class, and not even fully reading it, just skimming it because we can get away with not reading in his class … I was trying to look for the loophole so I could just do the bare minimum in his class.

For Gloria and Ana, a big frustration came from the teachers not believing in their abilities to achieve. Gloria said,

It was so bad. Bad. I would hate going into the class too, hated it. I remember he would ask questions, and he would pick the shyest kid, which would be like me and the other girls. I’d be like, ‘I don’t know.’ [in response to the question] I would guess something. He would be like, ‘You’re going to fail your AP exam.’ He would tell us, ‘You're going to fail it.’ I was like, ‘He’s not teaching anything. He’s not teaching us.’”

As a language learner, Ana felt that “not only AP teachers, like every teacher in general …. they feel like we're not capable of something.” Ana recalled an example of a teacher who discouraged her from challenging herself to achieve. She said:
She was like, ‘Oh, you cannot read that book, it’s too big for you,’ or, ‘You cannot read that book, it’s too hard for you.’ So, how does she know is that it’s hard for me. Like, I know I’m capable, I know I can use a dictionary. I feel like teachers, well not everyone but other teachers, they don’t realize like we’re capable of more.

Ana summed up how the experience made her feel: “Bad in a way that I know I can do it, but I can’t, you know?”

**Lack of experience.** Perhaps one reason for poor pedagogical methods was because many of the participants’ AP teachers lacked teaching experience. Rebecca said:

I got stuck with a lot of educators that it was their first-time teaching AP. Then not even that, they hadn't been teaching that long. The more experienced educators, they didn’t want to take on the challenge. They would get stuck doing it because they wanted to have more classes for pay reasons. They weren’t prepared enough to teach us or to properly guide us in the direction.

Maria had teachers who were teaching content in which they didn’t have experience or education. She said:

I had an AP Physics teacher that just ... he just didn't know how to, like, teach. But he was really good at Calculus, so he was just like ... he always taught us stuff for a Calculus class rather than a Physics class.

If Maria had been taking AP Calculus, she said that would have been helpful, but she was taking AP Physics, so she needed calculus instruction. Jasmine had a similar experience of inexperienced and ill-prepared teachers. She said:

A few of the AP teachers I had, I think I had three teachers who were teaching those AP subjects for three to four years; they were already pretty used to it. But we also did get a
lot of teachers who ... our school was just trying to add more AP courses to look nice in the curriculum, so we had a lot of teachers who were just starting and didn’t really know how to ... didn’t know what they were doing.

**Lack of concern.** Perhaps the biggest frustration experienced by participants was feeling as if their teachers had a lack of concern for them as an individual. Rebecca said, “a lot of educators don’t care. They’re just there for themselves, and that’s very difficult to do.” All participants expressed a desire for a more personal connection with their teachers. Maria said, “In high school, we weren't really supported, truthfully.” Rebecca said:

Some teachers literally were not, they didn’t care about teaching. They were just there for the pay. They didn’t care what the percentage at the end of the year when everyone took the exam would look like because they had tenure.

For Jasmine, the lack of a connection meant a lack of a larger success rate for girls who were already battling cultural expectations and traditions. Jasmine said:

I don’t know with Mexican there was those values of you're not expected to go to college, especially women. And then in terms of my community and my school, it was really ingrained to us that you’re not gonna be as successful in college and you think you are in high school.

Rita also remembered bias from the teachers:

Being in a school which had very few white people and Asians, they were just like, you know, the stars, superstars, always, and teacher’s favorites, so that was something really interesting … just felt like the less Mexican you were and the more of a guy you were, the better you were treated.
Rita also felt that gender played a role in connecting with the teachers, “I felt like the teachers always went for men’s opinions more, and men always seemed to excel in papers over women's papers, even though I felt like sometimes I did really well in my papers.”

Linda wished her teachers would “validate feelings and not just say like, ‘Oh, you’re being emotional.’ Because you’re a girl and you’re Latina.” Jasmine simply wanted interaction with the teachers. She said, “Teachers that just wouldn't interact with us. Or whenever we tried to, ‘Oh, you should chaperone for an event.’ They just wouldn’t really engage with us as much.”

**Personal connection.** While participants recalled frustrations with AP classes, many felt positive emotions when remembering the personal connections they formed with AP teachers who they called “effective” or their “favorite.” Participants said the teachers who had a personal connection with the students were more effective than the others with whom they experienced frustrations.

To create a personal connection, some of the teachers created a fun learning environment. Gloria remembered two of her AP teachers whose personalities made the difference. Gloria said for her AP Spanish Language class, the teacher “was like a second mom to me. I got really close to her.” Gloria remembered her AP Spanish teacher “would bring food and we would watch a lot of movies and everything. It was really fun. I really loved that class.” As much as she liked her AP Spanish teacher, Gloria described the teacher who most stood out for creating a fun environment. She said:

AP Language. She was my favorite. ‘Cause she was very, like, her personality would really pop out. She was really bubbly. She would pass around little pretzel jars around class, and she would play games with us … she had a personal connection with everyone.

Rebecca also had a similar experience with her AP English teacher who she said cared about:
Just with anyone that she came in contact with. She was one of those educators that genuinely did care about our success, so she was always trying to look for it, not even in just the academic but also the emotional and the social aspect of our lives. Any person that ever met her loved her. There was no person that would talk bad about her. She just had a God-given gift to be caring for others feel like my connection with my educators came a lot to do with the will that I had to keep going. I feel like that came with her experience as well.

Jasmine had fond memories of a teacher who cared for everyone. She described this teacher:

[She] just she didn't care what type of student you were, she would talk to you very ... as if you were on equal footing in a way. And she was very respectful to us and we gave that respect back. And she was always, I guess, friendly with us in a way.

Deseray appreciated her most memorable teacher’s passion. Deseray described her:

She was passionate about the subjects, so she made people be passionate about it. Mostly AP are, as well. When she taught about it, when she taught us that class, she was always just passionate about it. She just had something that was very nice. You went into her class and you could laugh, and it was funny and everything, but at the same time you were doing work.

Linda described a teacher who she felt comfortable going to for academic help. Linda said:

It was really interesting, and I liked his teaching method. I liked that I could just go in ... like I remember going in during lunch, and he would help me. But I think I’ve always like bio a little bit. I don't know, he was just a really good teacher ... just trusted him. I could go in to ask him questions He was just really nice. I think a lot of students liked him.
Participants fondly remembered the teachers who took an interest in participants’ personal lives. Ana described her most effective teacher:

He was really into students. Like there’s teachers, like they don’t care. Like if you have any problems, they don’t care, like just pay attention to class or just be quiet. He was like ... I don't know one day I feel sick and he was like, ‘Why don't you tell me.’

Rita also felt comfortable confiding in her teacher, saying, “he was just my favorite, because he understood me, and he knew all of my problems. I got to just talk to him, all the time.” Thinking back to what made her favorite teacher so effective, Deseray said:

I think it was a personal connection. Yeah. I think it was that. Because other teachers, you go up to them, and I’m not going to lie, some of them I was kind of intimidated to talk to them, because they were either super strict ... But Ms. M was the type of person that would tell you, ‘Hey. If you’re struggling, come talk to me. Tell me what’s going on, and then we’ll work something out.’ Yeah. It was a personal connection, how a lot of people had with her.

Veronica also had an AP teacher who also cared about his students. She recalled: “Especially with my class, he was just there for all of us. He knew the stuff that went on with kids that had bad home lives, and he really tried to help us out.”

The emotional support an educator gave to their high-achieving students was crucial. As Rebecca said:

I feel like educators need to recognize that we have other different struggles because we're challenging our parents at the same time. Just being there for us in the emotional aspect and reminding us that we do have a chance to leave, that’s very essential.
Participants described effective teachers who believed in them and encouraged them to continue achieving. Some even advocated for them to their parents. Having a teacher who believed in her made the difference for Imelda. She said:

They were all great teachers. But I think the one that pushed me the most was my Calculus teacher because she’s an alumni here, so yeah. She says, like, ‘If I can do it, anyone can do it. So, if you're doing it, it's doable. If I can do it, anyone can do it.’

Rita said she would always remember one teacher. She said:

I will remember Mr. C. Because he just always believed in me, and said, ‘You’re going somewhere. You’re doing something. You’re gonna come back to me with a great profession, and you’re just gonna tell me how great it was, because you’re going somewhere.’

Rita also remembered her Honors’ English teacher, Ms. D, “she was sort of pushy. She was a girl, and she pushed, and pushed, and everyone had equal potential. I really liked her. She was pushy, and … She was very influential.”

Rebecca suggested that an educator who can advocate for her students is an effective teacher. She explained:

It takes educators that extra step to try to approach these other students that don’t want to speak up. I’ve met so many people that have these issues, but they don’t talk about them. … Sometimes it just takes someone to advocate for them, to be like, ‘You know what? I’m sorry, sir. You don’t know what you’re talking about. You need to understand times are changing and you come from a different time era and location, and it’s different here. This is what your daughter should do.’
Participants had advice for teachers who wanted to create a more personal connection with their high achieving Hispanic students. Gloria said,

'Trying to get to know them a little bit more. ‘Cause I know the people who are really shy in class, they don’t really speak out as much. Trying to get to know them on a personal level, I think, that’s what all my teachers did. I remember in my AP classes, at the beginning of the year, we would all get to know each other, and get comfortable. Then, as the year went along, we were even more comfortable with each other.'

Veronica also had a similar suggestion for teachers:

'Trying to go a more personal relationship with your students, understanding where they're coming from, their struggles that they’ve had, their home life. Because when you see a student in the classroom, that doesn’t accurately represent what they may be going through at home. I personally know of some kids who went to my high school who they would come to school every day, but they were homeless. They didn’t have a home. You never know what they're going through so you definitely have to look beyond just what the student is doing during class and really figure out where they need the most help. Whether that be you’re a mentor to them, just something to them, maybe you become that parental figure that they don’t have. I definitely feel like if teachers created that more personal connection with students, it would just make schools look better, schools in general.'

Finally, Jasmine offered this advice for AP teachers to engage their Hispanic female students:

'Just don’t be afraid of us. Or don’t be afraid to connect with us. I feel like it was also a thing to where they felt too afraid of political correctness, they didn’t know how to address us or how to deal with us in instances like that. And just to not have that barrier
of being afraid, like many of us are just like any other student. We want to learn, we’re just Hispanic and we’re just women on top of that. But it would just be that, to interact with us as if we weren’t something different or something to be afraid of or something to be cautious of. We just want to learn.

The AP environment itself was the final theme explored. Participants felt a sense of community as well as a sense of competition in the AP classes. AP teachers had a significant role in creating either a positive or negative learning environment for participants. Participants’ experiences included AP teachers who were inexperienced, lacked resources, and lacked content knowledge and skills, all of which created frustration for the participants. Participants remembered positive experiences with effective AP teachers who created a personal connection with the students.

Summary

This chapter discussed the findings in the lived experiences of high-achieving Hispanic females in Southern Californian AP classes. The following four research questions were investigated in this research study: How do Hispanic female graduates from Southern California high schools describe their experiences in Advance Placement classes? What role do participants perceive their ethnic culture to play in their experiences? What relationship do participants perceive between their family’s culture and their academic experiences? How do participants perceive the intersection of class, gender and culture as impacting their academic experiences? Participants attended high school in different Southern Californian counties where all participants attended public high schools; all participants had at least one AP class. All participants identified as Hispanic and ranged in age from 19 to 22. Participants’ attendance in higher education ranged from a college dropout, to community college, to a private, Christian
University, to a large, public University in Southern California. Three major themes emerged from the participants’ experiences in AP classes. The first theme, that of the conflicting Hispanic and American cultures and the connection to the first two research questions, was discussed. Secondly, the importance of family and the difference between participants’ family values and experiences that caused them to be high achieving was discussed. This theme connected to the third research question. Finally, connecting to the fourth research question, different aspects to the environment of the AP classes and AP culture was discussed, with a recommendation from participants for AP teachers to strive to have a personal connection to their high-achieving Hispanic female students.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

This chapter discusses the findings and implications of this research study which was focused on high-achieving Hispanic females’ experiences in Southern California high school AP classes. This chapter is organized with a summary of the findings, a discussion of the findings and implications of the study, an outline of delimitations and limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research. The experiences of high-achieving Hispanic females is discussed using Chicana feminist and social learning theories.

Summary of Findings

This research study investigated the lived experiences of Hispanic females in Southern California high school AP classes. The following research questions guided this research study:

Research Question 1: How do Hispanic female graduates from Southern California high schools describe their experiences in Advance Placement classes?

Research Question 2: What role do participants perceive their ethnic culture to play in their experiences?

Research Question 3: What relationship do participants perceive between their family’s culture and their academic experiences?

Research Question 4: How do participants perceive the intersection of class, gender and culture as impacting their academic experiences?

Three major themes emerged from the research. The first theme was a cultural conflict experienced by participants. Participants experienced a conflict between their “home culture,” the traditional Hispanic culture, and the American culture in which they had been raised and educated in. Much of the cultural conflict experienced by participants was due to the fact that
they did not feel fully accepted by either culture. Participants experienced a sense of not belonging to the Hispanic culture or American culture, saying they were “not Mexican enough for Mexicans and not American enough for Americans.” This conflict in culture, or being perceived as “whitewashed,” connects to the second theme, the values and importance of the participants’ families. A second theme, that of their values, revealed the importance of the family and the impact that family had on their achievement. Participants’ families valued education and pushed them to achieve. Participants felt an obligation to achieve their parents, most of whom were uneducated and immigrants. Furthermore, participants’ role models were all family members. The third major theme, that of the environment and culture of AP classes, emerged as significantly impacting the achievement for participants. Participants experienced both a sense of community and competition in the AP cohort. Participants identified teachers and their significant impact of achievement both negatively and positively. Finally, participants stated that teachers who create a personal connection with high-achieving Hispanic females are more likely to influence and have a positive impact on their students’ achievement.

**Discussion**

**Balancing Between Cultures**

Participants in this study described their experiences as a balancing act living between two cultures, feeling like they were not quite Hispanic and not quite American. This conflict was shared by all participants despite not all participants being of the same ethnic culture. This struggle echoes the issues facing Chicana feminists who protested against the perspective of Hispanic women in American society and the cultural expectations of their Mexican heritage (Blea, 1992; Castillo, 1994; Chavez, 2013; Cotera, 1977; Garcia, 1997). Like the Chicana feminists whose race, class, and culture intersected not only with racism and discrimination
against Hispanics and Hispanic women in American culture but who also faced cultural
discrimination and gender bias within the Hispanic culture (Chavez, 2013; Cotera, 1977), so also
participants in this study described experiencing similar conflicts.

Labeling this conflict as “being whitewashed,” participants described this term as
meaning to being considered “not fully Mexican” based on their skin color, language ability, or
academic achievements and goals. As Estefanie explained, “I just felt I was stereotyped a lot,”
participants were stereotyped by both Americans, “just another Mexican girl who has to try
hard,” (Estefanie) and by other Mexicans, sometimes including their own relatives, who judged
them for trying hard. Deseray described it as “judgement” from people who “may not realize
that this is new trend of Latinas becoming more achieving may actually be good … they see it as
something that breaks part of their culture.” Maria summed up the conflict as “marriage and
family is something that is sort of engrained in many of our values, so steering away from the
norm will always gain some negative reactions.” Participants’ experiences confirmed the
research that Latinas experience stress and feelings of inferiority due to racial prejudice or
discrimination (Cooper, 2012).

Empowered to achieve. Although they acknowledged feeling conflicted by the
“whitewashed” perception, participants chose to continue achieving. Because of the path paved
by Chicana feminists, participants had family support that empowered them to choose a different
path. Chicana feminists sought to empower women, beginning with their own “conciencia”
(Cotera, 1977); likewise, participants’ experienced empowerment beginning in their homes.

Veronica credited her parents saying,
if my parents would have not cared or motivated me along the way, I eventually would have lost my drive and passion …. It was honestly just through their emotional support that I was able to get through all my schooling.

In contrast to her family who supported her, Jasmine recalled having friends “who didn’t receive financial support from their parents because they believed that education was a waste of time for women.” Jasmine remembered her dad telling her, “essentially that a pencil and bookbag weigh less than a shovel.” She explained, “In essence, they really push for a higher education because … they know it’ll be worth it.” These experiences connect to social learning theory which postulates that people learn by imitating others, even if that learning is vicarious through others’ experiences (Bandura, 1977). Participants’ parents pushed them to succeed despite their own lack of educational experiences, thus participants “learned” vicariously through their parents’ lack of success how to be successful.

Participants’ families’ values and expectations played a significant role in helping them to balance between the two cultural expectations they faced. In the focus group, Veronica, Deseray, and Jasmine all agreed that their parents’ influence helped them to feel “you can be a career woman and a family woman and rock at both jobs.” This study confirmed the findings that family has a significant role in determining Latinas’ educational achievement (Hernandez, 2015; National Women’s Law Center and Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2009). Not only are they empowered by their parents, but their decision on which college to attend is impacted by their families. This also corroborated with research that found that cultural expectations and the influence of family impacts college decisions for Latinas (Hernandez, 2015; Page, 2012).
These high-achieving Hispanic females were empowered and encouraged by their families in their academic success; however, this is not necessarily always the case for women from Hispanic families. In fact, the empowerment to achieve that these women described was contrary to what many Hispanic women experience in a culture where family comes first, and women are often expected to stay home, have children, and serve their husbands (Chavez, 2013; Durand, 2011; Wells, 2005). In fact, participants described friends’ parents as having this “traditional” mindset, whereas they did not experience this mindset because of their “Americanized” parents. The bi-cultural conflict began at home, with the parents’ “Americanized” perspective of education as valuable, despite many not having an academic education themselves, influencing the participants and helping to determine their success.

The impact of familismo was evident in the role models the participants had, in which family members were named as participants’ role models as well as being a determining factor in the decisions they made for which college to attend. Participants described their family as a determining factor in which college they attended, based either on family members who were already attending the school or the proximity to their families. Several participants continued to live at home throughout college.

**Safe spaces.** Participants found AP courses to be safe spaces for them to find community and connections with other Hispanics and Hispanic females. Although the research shows that Hispanics are traditionally more underrepresented in AP courses than other ethnic groups (Llagas & Snyder, 2003; Musu-Gillette et al., 2016; Walker & Pearsall, 2012), with Asian and White populations leading in enrollment and completion of AP courses (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016), participants’ experiences differed from the research. Both Gloria and Rebecca recalled
there being “mostly Hispanic” students enrolled in their AP classes, with Rebecca saying, “just because we were all Latino, it made it easier for me.”

Hinojosa et al., (2009) found that more Hispanic females are enrolled in high school Advanced Placement courses than are males, and this study’s findings were similar, with participants recalling a majority of females enrolled in their AP courses. Because of this, participants felt a sense of community. Many Latinas thrive in classrooms where they feel emotionally safe and connected to the teacher and their peers (Cooper, 2012); participants described a competitive community where they thrived.

With participants recalling experiences collaborating and studying together, Gloria summed the AP community as “The environment wasn’t too bad. We were competitive, but not to the point you could tell. But, it was a good environment.” Most participants stated their friends were also in the AP classes, which helped to create a positive and empowering environment. As Jasmine said:

In a way being a woman made my achievements more empowering … although the majority of my classes consisted of mostly female students, we were all aware that in terms of higher education we were still a minority and whenever one of us would get a good grade or an award, it still felt like we were sticking it to the man.

The environment of community and connectedness is supported by social learning theory, which postulates that learning occurs in community (Bandura, 1977). The academic environment of success shared in the AP classes created a shared social community in which learning was valued thus encouraging participants to strive for success. Participants both modeled and imitated academic behaviors and learning from the community they established in the AP classes.

**Academic Preparedness**
Although research showed that rigorous coursework in high school prepares students for college (Wyatt & Mattern, 2011), and although AP courses are designed to imitate the academic rigor students will encounter in college classes (College Board, 2016; Wyatt & Mattern, 2011), participants expressed frustration with the disconnect they experienced between their AP classes and the reality of college. Rebecca described the difference:

I feel like AP is very different to college-level courses because even doing AP, you’re spoon fed the information. Out here, it’s not like that. You’re self-teaching yourself. You’re reading your textbooks. You’re going to lectures. You’re watching videos if you need to understand a concept or anything. You’re doing this all on your own. In AP, you’re still being spoon-fed the information.

Estefanie’s assessment was similar to Rebecca’s; she said only about half of the AP classes she took should have been called “AP” because of the lack of rigor in the classwork. When research shows that Latinas feel their academic self-concepts are lower than Hispanic males (Cuellar, 2014), and that this lowered self-perception persists throughout college (Cuellar, 2014), the need for stronger rigor in AP classes is evident. Participants noted that while they expected differently, their AP classes did not prepare them for college. Rebecca said, “it doesn’t really prepare you.” While Imelda, who had felt confident in high school of her abilities to be successful in college, said she remembered calling her mom daily crying because of how difficult college was her first year.

**Teachers’ impact.** Participants described their high school AP teachers as having had a tremendous impact, both positive and negative, on their academic success. Participants described effective teachers as being those who had a personal connection with the students. While many of these teachers were not Hispanic, participants said that when they did have a Hispanic teacher,
they felt more connected. Cooper’s (2012) findings that Hispanic females thrive when they feel connected to the teacher corroborated with the findings of this research study. Participants felt more comfortable in classes with female teachers, saying that the environment was different with male teachers. Furthermore, participants said that having a Hispanic teacher brought a deeper level of comfort and acceptance. Veronica said, “Hispanic teachers of any gender makes a difference to not only connect with students, and to make them feel proud and not ashamed of being Hispanic.” She recalled feeling “like we were always holding back on being Hispanic” despite being in a predominately Hispanic-populated school. Jasmine and Gloria agreed with Veronica’s assessment of the value of having a teacher who was Hispanic in the classroom, saying, “it made the class more enjoyable and made me more active in the class.” Clearly, Hispanic educators have a significant positive impact on the academic and emotional success of high-achieving Hispanic females.

**Implications**

**Recommendations**

This study has implications on institutions such as The College Board, school administrators, and classroom educators. College Board has made efforts to increase Hispanic student enrollment; this research study found that this has had a positive effect on participants. School administrators are recommended to ensure effective teachers, particularly those of Hispanic ethnicity, are recruited and trained to teach AP classes. Furthermore, administrators can encourage a school culture where academic success is encouraged. This study also has implications for teaching practices for classroom educators from increased rigor to creating a communal culture in the classroom where Hispanic females feel confident and encouraged to participate and achieve.
**Recommendations to College Board.** College Board has made a concerted effort to recruit and encourage Hispanic students to enroll in AP courses by establishing fee waivers for low income students (College Board, 2017d; Wyatt & Mattern, 2011), and creating the “All In” campaign (College Board, 2016) which was designed to recruit and attract minority students to AP, and by having an open access policy since 2007, allowing “all students who are willing to accept the challenge of a rigorous course” to be admitted the courses (College Board, 2002). These efforts to recruit and retain Hispanic students, particularly Hispanic females, to take AP courses should continue.

However, despite the College Board’s attempts to make AP course content consistent, uniform, and academically rigorous through a review and audit of the syllabus and course materials (College Board, 2017a), many participants did not experience academic preparedness in their AP classes due to a lack of course content measuring up to the end-of-year test as well as not being rigorous preparation for college. College Board would do well to make sure that what schools submit for the course audit is what is actually being taught in the class.

Ideally, the AP course audit will standardize the core elements and course requirements of courses taught in AP courses (College Board, 2017a); however, participants’ experiences were vastly different, with all participants expressing frustration over a lack of academic preparedness. Either due to AP teachers being poorly trained to teach, a lack in training in the content area, or a disinterest in the subject matter, this study found that in participants’ experiences, many AP teachers did not adequately prepare them for either the end-of-year test or college.

Although College Board stated that AP courses are evaluated frequently by the College Board (College Board, 2013), there is no pre-requisite for training or certification to become an AP teacher. Participants in this study experienced teachers who were inexperienced. College
Board should consider a certification and training process through which AP teachers are mandated to participate in order to establish and teach AP courses.

**Recommendations to administrators.** Administrators are recommended to recruit highly-effective teachers for AP Courses. One theme of this study revealed ineffective teachers who hindered achievement of Hispanic females. Another recommendation is that Hispanic teachers are recruited to teach AP courses. The need for Hispanic educators is clear; with a majority of students in California being Hispanic, the need for teachers who identify and have experienced the same struggles as their students is obvious. Teachers who represent the racial and ethnic makeup of the community as well as those who are grounded in the day-to-day life experiences of their students cause their students to have a more positive perception of academics and their ability to succeed (Dilworth & Coleman, 2014).

Administrators would do well to recruit and retain teachers of the same ethnicity and culture as their student population. With the Hispanic population in America increasing to over 50 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010; Fry & Lopez, 2012, and with Hispanics in Southern California outnumbering other ethnicities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), educators should reflect the student population. With only 7.8 percent of the teacher population as Hispanic (Dilworth & Coleman, 2014), the percentage of Hispanic male students is seven times to percentage of Hispanic male educators (Dilworth & Coleman, 2014), administrators need to seek to recruit and retain more Hispanic educators. As Gloria said, “having a Hispanic AP teacher made us feel comfortable and included in the class and made us feel like we can succeed.”

**Recommendations to educators.** Although education is valued in their communities and families, many Hispanic females do not continue to achieve academically beyond high school (Harkalau, 2013; National Women’s Law Center and Mexican American Legal Defense and
Furthermore, many high-achieving Hispanic females do not continue with their higher education plans (Harklau, 2013; Moore & Slate, 2008; National Women’s Law Center and Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2009; Walker & Pearsall, 2012). This is due in part to the traditional expectations they face. Educators can encourage and advocate for these young ladies to continue with their educational goals.

Participants in this study stated that the personal connection to their teachers played a significant role in their achievement. Arguing that they are contending with more than other female students, often even fighting against their own family’s expectations of them, participants stressed the need for a personal connection with their teachers. Educators need to establish classrooms where students feel safe, respected, and a sense of community.

Research shows that teachers influence students’ attitudes through their interpersonal relationships, and ethnic minority students who shared a close bond with their teachers have a more positive attitude toward their ethnic group as a whole (Geerlings, Thijs, & Verkuyten, 2017). As Jasmine said, “Having that connection was also helpful afterwards because whenever I needed help or wanted to talk about different issues I would always go to them.” Creating a personal connection with their minority students, particularly the Hispanic females in their classes, can enable this demographic to be more successful academically.

**Delimitations and Limitations**

This study was bounded by several defining factors. First, the study was a phenomenological study. Second, participants were Hispanic females over the age of 18. Hispanic is a term that is used interchangeably with “Latino” and includes people of origins in Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, from Spain, the Spanish-speaking countries of Central or South America, or the Dominican Republic (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). In Southern California,
Hispanics are the largest ethnic population, surpassing other races and ethnicities, with Mexican being the largest Hispanic group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). For the purposes of this study, participants were recruited from Southern California. Although all participants shared a common Hispanic cultural heritage, one limitation of this study that they were not all of the same ethnic group, with 10 participants identifying as Mexican, one as Guatemalan, and one El Salvadoran ethnicity. A third boundary of the study was that all participants were enrolled in at least one AP class in high school. Finally, participants were at least one year removed from high school and no more than four years post-high school. The purpose of bounding the study in this manner was to give voice to a marginalized group of individuals. Hispanic females are often high-achieving students; however, their voices and experiences have not been heard or shared (Harklau, 2013; National Women’s Law Center and Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2009).

Limitations to this study included the fact that for the phenomenon studied, the participants’ perspectives were several years after the experience itself. A second limitation was that this study was limited to Southern California Hispanic females’ experiences. A third limitation was that this study was confined to the participants’ experiences as high school students. Another limitation to the study was that all participants were from low socioeconomic public schools. This might contribute to their experiences in AP classes, where high poverty areas have higher rates of attrition and lower teacher retention rates. Finally, all participants continued to be high achieving, with all but one enrolled in higher education. The experiences of other Hispanic females in AP classes who did not continue on to college or higher education was not represented.
Recommendations for Future Research

Recommendations for future research include a study of Hispanic females who are currently in high school AP classes. The current study was limited to participants who had already graduated from high school; however, the voices of Hispanic females in high school AP classes as they are experiencing it should be heard. Second, a study on the impact Hispanic teachers have on their Hispanic students is recommended. Participants in this study expressed the significance of Hispanic teachers to their achievement; however, this study is limited to high achieving females. Geerling et al. (2017) and Dilworth & Coleman (2014) noted the impact ethnic minorities in education can have on their students of ethnic minority cultures. Further exploration of the issue of “being whitewashed” is recommended. This phenomenon is one that all participants mentioned and discussed in length. “Whitewashed” can mean race (skin color), a perception of not being Hispanic enough due to a language learning, or due to academic achievement. Another recommended study is high-achieving Hispanic females who did not go on to college. Finally, a case study on the mindest of parents of high-achieving Hispanic females is recommended. Participants credited the “Americanized” parents as the key to their academic achievement and success; a case study on what creates the “Americanized” mindset would be valuable.

Summary

This study focused on the lived experiences of high-achieving Hispanic females in Southern California high school AP classes. With the Hispanic population quickly becoming the majority ethnic population in the United States, and with Hispanic women being the lynchpin to success for this community, it is important to understand the experiences of the high-achieving Latinas. Utilizing a Chicana feminist approach as well as a social learning lens, this study asked
four questions pertaining to the intersection of race, gender, and culture in the lives of high achieving Hispanic females in high school. Findings included the conflict of cultures experienced, with participants feeling like they do not belong or are not fully accepted by either culture. This state of being “whitewashed,” a feeling of not belonging to either Mexican or American culture was the most difficult for participants. Finally, participants expressed a deep desire for a strong, personal connection to their teachers. Research shows that educators with strong, personal connections with students can increase student attitudes and feelings of belonging. High-achieving Hispanic females already battle with not feeling accepted by Mexican culture or American culture; a strong connection to teachers may help alleviate this and sustain their educational achievement.
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APPENDIX A: IRB Letter of Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

September 8, 2017

Laura MacKenzie

IRB Approval 2964.090817: A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of Hispanic Females in Advanced Placement Courses in Southern California High Schools

Dear Laura MacKenzie,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School

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APPENDIX B: Interview Consent Form

A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of Hispanic Females in Advanced Placement Courses in Southern California High Schools.
Laura MacKenzie
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of high achieving Hispanic females. You were selected as a possible participant because you have been identified as a high achieving Hispanic female. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Laura MacKenzie, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to describe the lived experiences of Southern California Hispanic female high school graduates who were enrolled in high school AP courses.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:
1. Respond to a written survey. This will ask you a few questions to qualify criteria for the study. It should take less than 5 minutes to complete.
2. Participate in an interview. This interview will be audio recorded and will take approximately an hour.
3. Respond to a written prompt about your experiences in high school AP courses. This will be completed at the time of the interview and should take no more than 15 minutes.
4. Illustrate your experiences in high school AP courses. This will be completed at the time of the interview and should take no more than 15 minutes.
5. Participants will be asked to either show copies of their high school transcripts (unofficial are accepted) or grant the researcher permission to obtain copies of their high school transcripts as verification of their AP course enrollment.

Risks and Benefits of Participation: There are no risks to participating in this study. Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. Benefits to society include a practical significance, with potential to add significance to both the Latina population studied and for the educators in whose classrooms they sit. This study proposes to give insight and understanding into the various conflicts afflicting this student population.

Compensation: Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. Participants will receive a $25 gift card as a “thank you” for participating.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.
• Participants will be assigned a pseudonym.
• I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
• Data will be stored on a password locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
• Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
• I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Laura MacKenzie. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at lcmackenzie@liberty.edu or 760-960-9649. You may also contact the researcher’s faculty advisor, Dr. Fred Milacci, at fmilacci@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 1887, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

______________________________ Date
Signature of Participant

______________________________ Date
Signature of Investigator
APPENDIX C: Interview Questions

Family Life and Hispanic culture

1. Which culture do you most identify with (Mexican, American, both equally)? Please explain.
2. Please describe your family life as you were growing up, beginning with your childhood.
3. Please describe your family’s socioeconomic status and how that affected your education.
4. Please describe some of the strongly held values of your family.
5. Please describe both your mother and father’s/guardians’ views toward education, their educational experiences, and their role in your education.
6. What were your parents’ attitudes about their expectations for you as a Hispanic female?
7. Did you have any role models growing up? If so, who were they and why did you admire them?
8. Is there anything you’d like to add about your culture and experiences that wasn’t addressed?

Education and Experiences

9. Please describe your current educational goals.
10. Please describe your educational goals as a high school student.
11. Please describe which AP classes you took and your motivation for taking those courses.
12. Which was your favorite AP class and why?
13. Please describe what the environment in the AP classes was like.
14. If you could give an AP teacher advice on how best to connect or reach the Hispanic girls in his/her class, what would you say? Why?
15. Please describe what it felt like to be a Hispanic female in your AP courses.
16. Is there anything you’d like to add about your experiences in AP Courses that wasn’t addressed?
APPENDIX D: Sample of Electronic Journal Bracketing

Conference Room at the Brawley Public Library mid afternoon 4pm Conference room is set off to the side, hidden away from main areas of library.

Library is quiet, not many people here – a few students using the computers after school.

Participant lives in Mexicali but attended high school in US – she was very friendly, bubbly, outgoing –

Said she didn’t used to be comfortable speaking in English, but because of a job post-high school, she became more comfortable.

Her comfort level with speaking English was recurring idea in her conversation – she mentioned how she was more comfortable in her AP Spanish class because the kids spoke Spanish and she felt comfortable in “my language” vs speaking in other classes where she felt frustrated at knowing what to say but not how to say it (pronunciation was an issue) – the fear of messing up. Her AP class seemed to be a safe haven .. or a place where she was comfortable and able to succeed and feel successful.

She joined the AP History club even though she wasn’t in the AP History class (her counselor wouldn’t let her take AP History) – she didn’t seem to mind too much that she wasn’t allowed to take AP History .. her counselor said she wasn’t capable (maybe the language barrier?) – she laughed about it – didn’t seem too concerned – shrugged her shoulders like “what can you do?”/”oh well”

Interesting statement that the white teachers were more helpful to her than the Mexican (cultured/heritage) teachers – even though the Mexican teachers could speak Spanish, they would force her to speak English and/or had expectations she wasn’t sure of how to succeed. She also had Mexican teachers discouraging her from challenging herself beyond her abilities, while the white teachers pushed her to do better.
APPENDIX E: Focus Group Questions

1. In our conversations, your experiences in AP classes seemed to be largely frustrating because of poor teachers/teaching. Yet most recalled your AP experience in a positive manner, with positive connotations. Please explain in a little more detail how or why this works as both a positive and a negative.

2. Many of you touched on the idea of judgement you felt from other Hispanics (family, friends, classmates, etc) for being high achieving. Could you elaborate on this idea and why you think this situation occurs for high achieving Hispanic women?

3. What existed as the “norm” for most Hispanic women (marriage, family, work, etc) did not apply to any of you. Can you pinpoint what made your parents/family different from their siblings/peers? And how did that impact you?

4. In our interviews, nearly all participants mentioned gender as not being a barrier to achievement. Did being a female specifically impact your AP experience in either a positive or negative way, if at all?

5. I noticed a pattern that the “best” AP teachers were those who were not only competent in the subject matter, but also had a personal connection with the students. In what ways or would a Hispanic teacher (or either gender) make a difference in the class environment or potential for success for young Hispanic women?