

Positioning and the discourses of urban education: A Latino student's university experience

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Hungerford-Kresser, H. and Vetter, A. (2012). Positioning and the discourses of urban education: A Latino student's university experience. *The Urban Review*, 44(1), 219- 238. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-011-0193-y>

This is a post-peer-review, pre-copyedit version of an article published in *The Urban Review*. The final authenticated version is available online at:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11256-011-0193-y>.

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Abstract:

Based on data collected from a year-and-a-half-long qualitative research project, this case study examines the early college experiences and identity negotiations of one urban-schooled Latino participant as he navigated a predominately White state university in his hometown. Recognizing the university as a figured world, this study highlights two emblematic personal encounters that positioned him in inferior ways. It also offers a counter-example of a rhetoric professor who positioned him in positive ways and contributed to his academic success. Implications are framed in an argument for the inclusion of identity studies and positioning theory in order to better contextualize urban-schooled Latina/os' early college experiences.

Keywords: urban education | identities | figured worlds | university | Latina/os

Article:

Introduction

Manuel (all names of people and places are pseudonyms), an urban-schooled Latino adolescent, attended a large State University (SU) in his hometown after graduating high school. In early October of his freshman year, when asked what he felt prepared for upon entering the university, he stated emphatically, "Reading and writing. Yeah, in English, I was prepared." However, this comfort with reading and writing academic texts did not translate to passing grades in many of his other courses. Following his freshman year at SU, Manuel was placed on academic probation, suspended for a semester, and has not yet returned to school.

Studies indicate that experiences like Manuel's are not uncommon. Even as Latina/os are entering the university in larger numbers, retention and graduation remain significant issues (Solórzano et al. 2005). For every 100 Latino/a elementary school students enrolled in the US

school system, 48 drop out of high school and 52 graduate. Of those 52 who graduate from high school, 31 enroll in college, but only 10 will graduate (Valle 2007). Only 46% of Latina/os who enroll in college receive a bachelor's degree, with around 10% of Latina/os aged 24–64 graduating from 4-year institutions (Oseguera et al. 2009). In addition, it is predicted that Latina/os in the 18–24 year old range will be under-represented by 500,000 students in US universities by the middle of the twenty-first century (MacDonald 2004). It is clear that the educational needs of the Latina/o population in the university system are not always being met; the educational pipeline is perforated with countless opportunities for exit (Solórzano et al. 2005). The retention of urban-schooled Latina/o students is needed, however, studies indicate that this need has not yet translated to success in the retention of the nation's Latino/a populations (e.g. González 2002; Villalpando 2003), indicating that the “how” of increasing Latina/o student achievement is a complex issue.

As a means of highlighting the complexities underlying Latina/o college student retention and persistence, Holly spent a year researching the academic and personal experiences of five Latina/o college students enrolled at a prestigious, predominately White state university in Central Texas. All of these students attended the same urban high school (where Holly was their teacher), participated in a variety of high school to college transition initiatives, and graduated in the top 10% of their high school class. In this case study, we focus on one participant, Manuel, for a number of reasons: (1) Manuel was considered to be “academically gifted” by the majority of his teachers, Holly included, (2) he had a positive attitude about schooling and about the university, and (3) though positive about his schooling experiences, he simultaneously maintained a critical perspective when analyzing his first year university experiences.

Scholars argue that highlighting the experiences of Latina/os from their individual perspectives has the potential to enhance understandings, and subsequently strengthen practice, by illuminating the dominant discourses that undergird both (Solórzano et al. 2005; Solórzano and Delgado Bernal 2001; Solórzano and Yosso 2001; Villalpando 2003). Therefore, in this study, we focus on one urban-schooled Latino student, Manuel, as he navigated his first year at a large state university. We highlight the inextricable link between his identity negotiations and his apparent struggles and successes in early college. As Latina/o students navigate the academics of college, interpersonal interactions, saturated in the discourses (Foucault 1977) of the university, occur on a daily basis. The power in these events lies in their ability to position students in particular ways, in turn affecting the ways students author themselves in this new and unfamiliar world (Holland et al. 1998). As such, the following two research questions guided the study: In what ways do discourses work to position Manuel within the figured world of the university? And, how does he respond to these positionings?

Conceptual Framework

To frame this study we first describe past research on the academic experiences of Latina/os in university settings. Next, we use the concept of figured worlds and positioning theory to illustrate how Manuel constructed and enacted his academic identities to negotiate membership within the university.

Many Latina/o scholars carefully (and critically) situate the experiences of Latina/os at the university. For example, Villalpando (2003) used the method of “counterstory” (Solórzano and Yosso 2001) as means of studying Chicana/o college students. Data collected over a period of 9 years were used to create composite characters to engage in a critical dialogue about Chicana/o student experiences at the university. He focused on the struggles between self-preservation and self-segregation for Latina/o students. At the same time, he offered implications based on the assistance offered to individual students through their Chicana/o peer groups.

Additionally, Solórzano (1998) studied the experience of Chicana and Chicano scholars. Specifically, he looked at the under-researched topic of “microaggressions,” both gender and racial, and their impact on Latina/o doctoral students, while arguing “this subtle form of racism can have a dramatic impact on the lives of people of color” (Solórzano 1998, p. 121). Using qualitative methods as a means of giving voice to gendered and racial microaggressions, his study focused on a group of scholars who were awarded some of the most prestigious fellowships in the US. Even with this selective group, he found common patterns of microaggressions among participants. Those patterns included microaggressions that related to racial and gender discrimination at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, the alienation of Latina/os within the university, the recognition of lower expectations for Latina/os by faculty, and racist and sexist behaviors from both faculty and fellow students. His work encouraged studies that focus on individual Latina/o students in all areas of the educational pipeline.

González (2002) looked at the experiences of Latina/o students on a predominately White campus. As did Solórzano (1998), he focused on the experiences of individual Latina/os through a case study of two students. He argued:

One of the more recent challenges for predominately White colleges and universities is molding a campus culture that supports the goal of improving retention rates of an increasingly diverse student body. Although the numbers of racial and ethnic minority students attending predominately White colleges and universities continue to increase, the culture or climate of these campuses continues to complicate their path toward graduation (Skinner and Richardson 1988; González 2002, p. 194)

The purpose of his study was to look specifically at the elements of campus culture that hindered Latina/o student persistence at predominately White universities. He found that there were particularly alienating elements of the campus culture, and categorized them into three cultural systems: (a) the social world, (b) the physical world, and (c) the epistemological world (González 2002, p. 201). Social interactions with peers, the campus buildings and structures themselves, along with the lack of Chicano/a knowledge being exchanged on campus, contributed to an increased sense of alienation for his participants. González (2002) found: “It was within each of these three worlds that the dominant White cultural representations communicated the messages that a Chicano presence at a predominately White university was something that was not important, valued, or does not belong” (p. 214). However, he did find limited (but important) sources of “cultural nourishment” for these students, necessities for their survival and persistence in the university culture. These provided a foundation for suggestions on transforming the university to more adequately meet the needs of Latina/o students.

These case studies focused on Latina/o student persistence are important because they highlight issues of power in the university context and complicate Latina/o student experiences in academic worlds. They maintain that the individual experiences of Latina/o students are worthy of research, particularly when presented as individualized and intimate portraits. By emphasizing connections between Manuel's literacy experiences and identity formations in his first year at the university, we hope to bring identity work, particularly positioning theory, and Latina/o student case studies together to offer implications for better meeting the needs to Latina/o students in US universities.

Figured Worlds and Positioning Theory

We selected the framework of the figured world as a means of focusing on Latina/o student experiences because of its emphasis on agency (Holland et al. 1998). Figured worlds are "socially produced, culturally constructed activities;" they are historical phenomena to which people enter or into which individuals are recruited (Holland et al. 1998, pp. 40–41). Within the figured world of academic life, students intentionally negotiate their identities and strive to author themselves as members of that world. Figured worlds are available to students with particular social identifications. Some worlds are more difficult to navigate by those who have not mastered the social practices of that world. Because these practices have become stabilized, entry, access, and exit are complicated (Holland et al. 1998).

While positionality, space of authoring and making worlds are also elements of the theory of figured worlds (Holland et al. 1998), we focus particularly on the positioning of one Latino student and how he attempted authorship. Positioning theory is useful when examining how students construct and enact academic identities within a university. Harré and Langenhove (1999) suggest that people situate themselves discursively along storylines that are related to personal histories and beliefs. Specifically, Davies and Harré (1990) stated that people position themselves reflectively (how a person positions themselves) and interactively (how a person positions others and is positioned by others). For example, Manuel entered the university with a storyline of what it meant to be a college student and he reflectively positioned himself, through verbal and nonverbal language, in that way to negotiate the parameters of membership into the university. At the same time, Manuel was positioned by others in ways that shaped his academic membership. Over time, these positionings contribute to how students construct their academic identities and are viewed by others, which impacts student's success and persistence at universities and ultimately their access to identities (e.g., successful university student). Constructing new identities within an institution takes regular practice and requires individuals to learn new behaviors in order to be recognized as a member by others (Holland et al. 1998; Wenger 1998).

In figured worlds there is only collective authorship; responses to positions are not optional and are shaped by issues of power and status, though the nature of the responses is a personal, agential choice (Holland et al. 1998). Those responses, in the form of speaking, gesturing, thinking, or any sort of exchange, allows an individual to affiliate with or position himself/herself in opposition to another person. This *space of authoring* is where the theory of the figured world finds agency. Certain positions, based on race, class, and gender, are apparent in many worlds, while other positions are more prominent in particular worlds. People attempt to

orchestrate the social languages and practices within figured worlds in ways that position themselves as powerful.

In the university (i.e., a cultural world) discourses function as powerful, non-neutral positioning tools that sort students (Cary 2006; Foucault 1977; Gee 1996; Kress 1989; Usher and Edwards 1994). For example, one measure of university success is the acquisition and/or appropriation of various academic literacies. There are multiple academic literacies, created by discourses, racialized by their very presence in academic institutions (Urrieta 2006, 2009), and students encounter and navigate them on a daily basis. Social capital matters in figured worlds, and students demonstrate their acquisition of such capital through a variety of academic literacies. These are the semiotic mediating tools or cultural artifacts for individuals participating in a figured world (Holland et al. 1998; Holquist 1990; Vygotsky 1962). For students to succeed at the university level (i.e., “earn good grades”), they must learn the ins-and-outs of the university and the multiple discourses that encompass this cultural world—discourses that change from class to class and group to group (Bartholomae 2003; Bizzell 2003; Elbow 1998; Rose 1998). This can lead to a (re)negotiation of various identities, including, but not limited to, the identities associated with being a student.

Scholars of positioning theory have typically examined how teachers and students position themselves and others within classrooms (Clarke 2006; Leander 2002; Yoon 2008), but few have focused specifically on how Latino students situate themselves as students within a university setting. For example, Wortham (2004) explored the positionings of Tyisha over time in a classroom. He found that Tyisha’s teacher situated her as an outcast because she did not fit into her concept of a “good student.” In an attempt to resist such positionings, Tyisha silenced herself and remained on the outskirts of membership in the community. Leander (2002) found that Latanya’s (a high school English student) identity as “ghetto” was constructed by classmates through multimodal artifacts, such as a classroom banner or embodied spaces. He suggested that students’ identities become solidified through the dynamic configuration of these artifacts over time during classroom interactions and advises teachers to pay attention to how these artifacts can be used to position students in both liberating and oppressive ways. Reeves (2009) studied the intentional and unintentional positionings of English Language Learners by teachers and found that teacher interactions profoundly shaped how students situated themselves as capable or incapable learners of a new language.

Recently, Mortimer et al. (2010) researched how US schools prepare students to become university bound by teaching them how to adopt a university-bound identity. Within the study, they argue that schools need to take on a more complicated view of identity that is dynamic and fluid rather than fixed and stable. Positioning theory illustrates how people situate themselves in various ways with respect to a model. Thus, people take different stances around what it means to be a successful university student. As Mortimer et al. argue, some students might deem too-successful peers as social outcasts or “nerds” while others might view a university degree as impractical.

With that scholarship in mind, this study uses positioning theory and critical discourse analysis to examine the school experiences of one Latino student to highlight how he negotiated academic identities to become a university student. We do not argue that there is one academic identity for

Manuel to construct in order to be successful. The purpose of this paper is to open dialogue about how current Latino students negotiate academic identities in hopes that universities will expand their understanding of university student to a dynamic and fluid identity. Such a framework can assist educators in better understanding why some students succeed and others do not. Success at the university is about more than simply attaining academic literacies; it is about becoming a member of a cultural world and all of its inherent complexities.

Method

As detailed above, many scholars have situated the experiences of Latina/os at the university through case studies, including Urrieta (2007, 2009), Villalpando (2003), Solórzano (1998) and González (2002), among others. These case studies argue that the individual experiences of Latina/o students are not only worthy of research, but are particularly so when presented as individualized and intimate portraits. Case study gave us the freedom to contextualize Manuel's experience and offer implications for Latina/os while guarding against over-generalizing their individual and collective experiences. We focused on Manuel because of his desire for academic success at the university and his willingness to be forthright about his struggles and achievements. He was a Latino student "expected" to "make it," but still struggled once he made the high school to college transition, making his single case worthy of more detailed study.

Participant

Manuel is a tall, lanky light-skinned Latino with dark hair and dark eyes. On most days he is casually and neatly dressed, preferring blue jeans, collared shirts and sneakers. Bilingual, he switches easily between Spanish and English, depending with whom he is communicating. With an infectious laugh, terrific wit, and sharp mind, Manuel is easy to engage in conversation. However, he is also deeply intellectual and often begins serious theoretical discussion without any forewarning. Holly first met Manuel in Pre-Advanced Placement and Advance Placement English classes at Roland High School. Manuel was her student for 3 years and was also a member of her Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) cohort. The term "at risk" (US Bureau of the Census 1997; Ronda and Valencia 1994) is often associated with students like Manuel: Latina/o immigrants from single-parent homes, urban-schooled, and whose families are a part of our nation's "working poor" (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2008). While Manuel was in high school, his mother was raising her four children on her salary from a local fast food chain and frequently enlisted Manuel to take care of his younger brothers, two of whom were under the age of two. By the time he was in college, he was regularly taking care of his three younger brothers, one of whom was a newborn. He lived at home and commuted, because his mom needed him to watch his siblings. The only member of his family labeled an illegal immigrant, Manuel was not allowed to work outside the home, and had been waiting on his "papers" the entire time Holly had known him.

Though bilingual, Manuel had not been labeled an English Language Learner (ELL) since his early elementary years. Brought to the US with a cousin's documents at age 5, Manuel never returned to Mexico, even for a visit. At Roland, Manuel was considered to be an exceptional student—top 10% of his class, involved in countless organizations, including ROTC, and student council. He opted to be part of AVID, a college preparatory program for first-generation college

students. As a four-year participant, he chose an intense college readiness program as a freshman and pursued it until he graduated. During Manuel's junior and senior year, the AVID curriculum dealt with college readiness, admission, finances, and resources available to the freshman student on college campuses. The idea was to expose secondary students to a variety of post-secondary academic literacies before they encountered them as college students.

Much has been written about urban schools and the inferior educations students in urban settings receive (e.g. Anyon 1997; Olsen 1997; Rubin 2007; Valenzuela 1999). These researchers highlight how poor students, and particularly poor minority students, struggle in schools with inadequate facilities and poorly trained teachers. Typically, they are also heavily tracked (Oakes 1985, 2005; Rubin 2006). Roland High School, a 4A high school on the Eastside of a mid-sized city in Texas, is just such a school. The city is viewed by many as economically and racially divided by a major highway. Though the highway in no way equally divides it, residents often talk about the "Eastside" and "Westside." Desegregated in the 1960s along with the rest of the local schools, it is now racially and economically resegregated like many urban schools in the country (Wilson and Segall 2001). Roland, in particular, had a terrible reputation in the city. It is not uncommon to hear others talk about it as the "school that should be shut down" or "the school that will be shut down." Statistically, Manuel's urban high school was typical. The Texas Education Agency listed the following demographic data for Roland Manuel's senior year: 79% eligible for free and reduced lunch, 63% Latino/a, 34% African American, and 2% White, with 23% of the student body designated Limited English Proficient. The school did not perform well on state-mandated tests and there was a high turnover of both teachers and administrators; Manuel had four different principals before he graduated. Additionally, Texas has a "top 10% rule," where students who graduate in the top 10% of their classes have the opportunity of being admitted into any state university in Texas. Like many students who graduated in the top 10% at Roland, because of finances and continued responsibilities to his family, Manuel chose to attend SU, a top-rated university in his hometown. We have highlighted his urban school experience because it figured heavily into his experiences at SU.

Context

State University (SU) is located five miles from Roland High School (RHS). SU was a popular option for students graduating in the top 10% who wanted to remain close to home for college. It is a highly ranked public university and competition for admission to a freshman class is intense, and largely impossible for students who rank outside of the top 10%. One of the largest universities in the country, the number of enrolled students at SU at the start of the 2006/2007 school year was 49,697. According to the university's online *Statistical Handbook*, 56.6% of the students were identified as White, .5% as American Indian, 14.4% Asian American, 8.9% Foreign, .7% Unknown, 3.9% African American and 15% "Hispanic," remarkably different demographics from those at RHS.

Data Collection, Sources, and Analysis

The larger study included five Latina/o participants, all in their first year of college. They were selected based on common criteria, all of them were: (1) urban-schooled, (2) graduated in the top 10%, (3) admitted to the top university in their hometown, (4) first generation college students,

(5) and personally identified as Latina/o. As part of the official research protocol, Holly conducted five focus group interviews (3–4 h in duration), five individual interviews with each participant (varying in length from 45 min to 2 h), and detailed individual life history interviews for each participant (2–3 h each). Artifacts were collected and included written classroom work, emails, text messages, and access to MySpace and Facebook accounts. All focus groups and individual interviews were transcribed verbatim. There was no mediation or interpretation of data in transcription. All interpretations occurred in analysis. Student interactions with professors and teaching assistants were studied through comments on student work, occasional classroom observations, and professor interviews. Holly kept a research journal throughout the process (Merriam & Associates 2002).

Using constant comparative analysis, we read and open coded all transcripts and field notes to make connections across all five case studies (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Lincoln and Guba 1984). Initial coding included codes like, “TI” which stood for “typical issues” and was affixed to any data that seemed indicative of a traditional transition struggle. Then we gathered multiple codes (and the data connected to them) and placed them in categories like “locating resources to ensure success.” These categories were used to organize and write results. Once we decided to look at Manuel as a specific case, we returned to our cross-case categories and focused particularly on ones dealing with discussions of academic success and struggle. We examined both individual and focus group interview data (under each of these categories) in which Manuel participated and highlighted each statement he made about academic success or struggle (Lincoln and Guba 1984; Merriam & Associates 2002). We used the surrounding conversations to contextualize his statements. From these re-readings, it became clear that the majority of positive statements about academic success were made in connection with one particular course, so we returned to Manuel’s written work in that course, along with two classroom observations and an interview we conducted with Manuel’s professor. After creating summary vignettes (Tisdell 2002), Holly conducted a member-checking interview, asking Manuel to review her summaries and categorical distinctions (Merriam & Associates 2002). Three of these vignettes became the findings of this study.

Once we had categories unique to Manuel’s interpretations of his personal successes and struggles, we attempted to complicate our understandings gleaned from the constant comparative method (Lincoln and Guba 1984)—fleshing out details through more detailed analyses using positioning theory (Davies and Harré 1990) and Fairclough’s levels of discourse (Fairclough 1995). First, we examined how Manuel positioned himself, positioned others, and was positioned by others to better understand how he constructed and enacted his academic identities within described interactions. When applicable, we analyzed portions of data on local, institutional, and societal levels (Fairclough 1995; Rogers 2004). Fairclough’s model is three-tiered on multiple levels: there is always description, interpretation and explanation of discourse and social practices at three domains of analysis—the local, institutional, and societal (Rogers 2004). Examples of the local included conversations and interactions with peers, teachers, and counselors on SU’s campus, along with the focus groups these students participated in. Manuel encountered and utilized a number of institutionalized discourses, including those related to education as the great equalizer. While at SU, students consistently encountered societal discourses related to race, class, and success. These domains do not exist separately but are constantly in conversation with the others (Fairclough 1995; Rogers 2004). Because the local

level is indicated by particular texts, we looked at Manuel's recounting of his experiences as emblematic of the local level of discourse. Additionally, we looked for evidence of institutional and societal discourses in these interpersonal (local) interactions. These analyses ultimately provided a means for looking at power and knowledge in the figured world of the university, while studying Manuel's opportunity for authoring or identity work.

Both Holly and Amy are white female researchers working with a young Latino; it would be easy to ignore the power/knowledge relationships at work in our relationship, making a critical level of analysis necessary, if not mandatory, for creating an ethical study (Frankenberg 1993; Greene and Abt-Perkins 2003; McIntyre 1997). It is also important to remember that Holly's position in this study as an outsider (Betty 2003; Tisdell 2002) was further complicated by the fact that she had been Manuel's teacher for 3 years in high school. We must acknowledge that her relationship with Manuel might have clouded his responses in interviews and focus groups, but we also believe the relationship provided a platform that allowed him to unburden himself about his struggles in ways he might not have with a stranger. This is why summary vignettes and discourse analysis were both chosen for the study.

Findings: The Competing Discourses of Urban Education and College Success

The ways Manuel referenced his positionality are an important backdrop to the findings of this study because they highlight competing discourses that impacted his ability to author himself as a successful college student. First, the issue of urban versus suburban schooling was a frequent topic of conversation between Manuel and the others in the focus group. Manuel often articulated the (previously mentioned) local/societal discourse of Eastside versus Westside when discussing his Roland High School education, namely by comparing it to a particular Westside high school: "Just because you come from that kind of school doesn't mean that you are not going to succeed at SU... They just assume that just because we come from Roland we don't know as much as if we come from Westforest or other good schools." Second, he also referenced others' insistence on positioning him as Latino. For example, in a focus group discussion, he argued though he had grown up in the United States, his "Mexican blood" still defined him, even when he did not want it to. Interestingly, he argued it was not a defining characteristic for him until others made it one: "When people start talking about it, it's part of me. If they leave it alone, it doesn't really matter." Third, he also understood that his previous success as a high school student was based, in part, on the ways others positioned him, "Once they start telling you that you are a good student, that you are a brain, well, then you start thinking, 'Well maybe I am a good student and maybe I need to do more things to achieve that goal of you know, being... of giving myself an identity of a good student, not just a regular student.'" In the past, positive positionings like these assisted Manuel in authoring himself as successful in school. However, at SU, the positionings connected to the discourses of urban schooling and the "mandatory" label of Latino frequently overshadowed his ability to position himself as successful. Finally, we want to emphasize Manuel's consistent references to connections between urban schools and minority students that attend them. An example follows:

The curriculum I think is like the same in all schools... faculty and teachers try and teach us the same things. It's just that, I guess, the ethnicities you know Black and Hispanic, the kind of school Roland is, we don't strive. The teachers, they're there. They can teach

you something. But we choose not to. I guess because all our lives we have been knowing, or I guess people have been telling us, just because we are Hispanics, Mexicans, or whatever and Blacks, we can't succeed. But we can be better than kids at good schools but I think we choose not to because of that...They make us feel inferior. (Hungerford-Kresser 2010a, p. 8)

Comments like these indicate that for Manuel, the rhetoric surrounding urban high schools is inextricable from conversations of race (Hungerford-Kresser 2010b). Urban schools are populated by "Black and Hispanic" kids. He vacillates between blaming those who attend these schools (himself included) with comments like, "we don't strive" and "we choose not to," and pointing to the discourses that frame urban education when he explains, "people have been telling us...we can't succeed" and "they make us feel inferior." Manuel's internalization of these positions and connections among them are vital to understanding his responses in the data excerpts included in this study.

As Manuel struggled to position himself as a successful student at SU, various interpersonal encounters worked to counter his personal identifications, positioning him in ways that conflicted with his notions of success, making the process of self-authoring a complicated one. Two seemingly innocuous events highlighted discourses related to Manuel's past educational experiences and positioned him as a university outsider. The first, a white, middle-class student's presentation over state legislation, highlighted racial and class differences between suburban and urban high school students. In the second, a meeting with an academic advisor, Manuel was made keenly aware of the perceptions of urban-schooled students harbored by individuals in the university system. In the following section, we discuss these two examples and then offer a counterexample, one of a professor who allowed Manuel the opportunity to author himself in unique and comfortable ways in his cultural world.

Manuel's Classmate: The Discourse of Inequity

When talking about academic success, Manuel frequently discussed perceived differences between his secondary and post-secondary experiences and the experiences of his White, middle-class counterparts. One of the most salient examples was Manuel's description of a young, White woman's presentation about a Texas school law. The complicated formula, created to equalize funding for Texas public education is often broken down to a simplistic claim of "taking from rich schools to give to the poor," and has been informally dubbed the "Robin Hood" law. Although this belief is technically inaccurate, both Manuel and his classmate, like many other people, assume money is taken from schools serving middle and high-income areas and given to schools like Roland. The debates surrounding the Robin Hood law are exceptionally heated. The student in Manuel's class was from a suburban district, close to the university, where many people are particularly angry about this law. Typically, arguments centered around the high property taxes they pay to live in an affluent area and send their children to prestigious public schools, and being disgruntled with having their tax money funneled to other schools and districts deemed "less fortunate." The young woman was complaining in her presentation about "those people" taking money that belonged to her and her neighbors, probably unaware that at least one of those people was sitting in the room listening to her. Manuel spoke about the experience in a focus group interview:

Manuel: Like this girl in my rhetoric class. Her presentation was on the Robin Hood laws...she was against it....She made me feel so... [long pause].

Holly: How did that make you feel? Can you put words with it?

Manuel: No not really. It's just like, it's just a feeling. It's like, what are you trying to say? I mean... Well, some of her reasons were, "My parents are paying property taxes and it's our money so why should you all get it."

When talking about the presentation Manuel inadvertently switched his imitation of the girl's speech to "you all," even though he acknowledged his classmate probably did not recognize she might be talking to one of "you all":

Holly: Do you think she thought she was talking to you?

Manuel: No. I mean, that's why I didn't feel as bad but you know some feelings still come out of it. And I was like you know... [long pause].

Holly: Did you speak up?

Manuel: No. I just didn't feel like it.

In a class of twenty people at SU, it appeared that this young woman assumed that she would be talking to people of her own class and background, or to people she would not offend. Manuel felt this incident was worthy of discussion and recognized that her presentation positioned him as a person who undeservedly took her parents money. Though visibly upset when talking about the moment he still lacked the words to give full meaning to his struggle. A critical reading of this encounter as a local instance (Fairclough 1995), demonstrates how individual conversations and instances are often emblematic of beliefs connected to institutional and societal discourses at work in cultural worlds (Fairclough 1995; Holland et al. 1998).

Manuel frequently discussed encounters with classmates that positioned him in inferior ways. He often drew lines between those who came from "good schools" and "schools like Roland." He sensed others making these comparisons and inadvertently internalized the rhetoric. Manuel's recounting of this presentation is just one example of his frequent exposure to oppressive discourses at the university (Foucault 1977). These were not merely in conversations with people in apparent authority, but also with classmates. In this instance, Manuel remained silent. He did not argue the girl's points. Sitting with Manuel in the focus group, Holly was well aware that he was passionate about this issue: his fists were clenched, his brow was furrowed, and his mouth was set in an angry line. Typically articulate, his inability to discuss the incident in more detail made his frustration clear to all of us.

At SU Manuel was positioned by the discourses of urban education—discourses that circulate certain truth claims. Manuel's choice to remain silent was nuanced by issues of power. He was upset after the fact, but did not speak out in the classroom context. His sense of self, authored collectively in this setting, was impacted by his past as an urban-schooled student and his classmate's perception of what that meant.

Manuel's Advisor: The Discourse of (Poor) Preparation

Perhaps the most intense example of dealing with dominant discourses related to urban education came from an encounter between Manuel and his advisor, a White, middle-aged, middle class male. In a spring semester focus group, he explained it this way:

So I was in my advisor's office, you know, because I had to go in there. I had told him I was having problems with my Bio class. And he's like, "Oh well, I'm assuming you do since you're from Roland, right?" I was like, "Yeah, I'm from Roland, but..." I just didn't have the courage to say, "But what about if I'm from Roland or not?" I didn't say nothing. I wanted to punch the guy or something, but I can't do that. And he's like, "But don't get me wrong. There's plenty of help at SU that you can go to." I said, "I know that." He was talking to me like I was special ed. He gave me all of these brochures and information as if I didn't know. I was like, "Sir, I've been here for a semester. I think I know what I need to do." Then he told me about something at the SSB [Student Services Building], something for mental health. As if I have problems and stuff. I was like, "Do you think I'm crazy or something? I mean, what's wrong with me?" He said, "Just in case you need it. We have problems at SU too and they can help you out a lot. It's open 24 h and there's a phone line." So, I was like, "Okay."

In this brief narration, Manuel responded to the advisor's assumptions about his inferior education. It is important to mention that we are not attempting to judge the advisor's intentions. Because we were not a part of the conversation, what is important in data analysis is the way Manuel recounts the story. The details he chooses to emphasize, along with the choices he makes in telling about this experience, highlight his identity work. Manuel is narrating events as *he* chooses, and this reported speech is a way of positioning himself and the advisor in particular ways. In Manuel's recounting of this instance, he is positioning himself as the target of a particular event—an event that illuminated the competing discourses of his educational experiences.

As in the first example with his classmate, when recounting this event, he chose to resist this positioning. Manuel's initial reaction was extremely agitative; he wanted to "hit him," but he opted to respond practically because he knew how to manage a difficult situation in this figured world. As a successful student, Manuel knew the "appropriate" response in a school setting, especially when dealing with a person in authority: stay calm and refuse any violent outburst. Thus, as Manuel struggled to navigate this world, he both conformed and resisted, responding appropriately, but internally raging.

Manuel approached his advisor, which demonstrated his comprehension of particular academic literacies (Zamel and Spack 1998). He was failing biology and chose to locate a resource. However, upon speaking with the man, Manuel was alarmed by the advisor's view that he knew something about his education because of his secondhand knowledge of Roland High School. Manuel explained that the advisor claimed to understand his situation because his children attended a school on the "Westside," but in the same school district as Roland. Manuel was quick to remind me that it was the same high school that had graduated two daughters of a US President and where the current governor of Texas currently sent his children. The advisor being so insistent in his positioning of Manuel as a Roland student, and therefore as a student

inadequately prepared for university academics, coupled with his suggestion that Manuel needed help, was more than he was willing to digest at the time.

Manuel was struggling; that was evident in the failing biology grade that brought him to the advisor's office. Yet, the assumption that the struggle was a natural or apparent occurrence, borne from Manuel's past educational experiences, made him unable to trust the advice. This positioning contradicted Manuel's personal identifications. Prior to his time at the university, Manuel had typically been positioned as a successful student and had responded positively those who positioned him accordingly. The advisor's perception of Roland undermined the success of Manuel's high school career; he was faced with competing discourses. He was successful, but with a caveat: he was successful at an urban school, which did not necessarily equate with success at the university. Again, data suggest that the relatively common experience of visiting an academic advisor (a local instance) brought out deep-rooted feelings of responding to societal discourses about urban schools, race, and success (Fairclough 1995; Rogers 2004). The conversation with the advisor (e.g., "Oh well, I'm assuming you do [have trouble in biology] since you're from Roland, right?") was indicative of a widely held institutional and societal belief that urban-schooled students are under-prepared for the rigors of university academics rather than universities being ill-prepared for dealing with students' diverse backgrounds.

Manuel's eventual response was to resist his advisor's positionings by ignoring his suggestion to visit the counseling center on campus. However, he did not necessarily understand the consequences of his response. Another student in the original focus group had a similar encounter, took the advice to seek counseling, and was allowed to have his previous grades "forgiven" (the word his advisor used to explain the process) and remain at SU without probationary status. Often, academic literacies, because of their connections to powerful discourses, are not neutral. In Manuel's case, data emphasize how these literacies were subtly nuanced. His rejection of an apparent suggestion, in light of the way in was presented, was a decision with enormous consequences.

Manuel's Rhetoric Class: The Discourse of Possibility

Conversations with Manuel illuminated a general discomfort in his courses. It was typical for Manuel to talk about his unwillingness to participate in class discussions and sit in the back of large lecture halls, even though he indicated he knew this was not an effective study strategy: "I just don't feel comfortable talking. I'm scared to say something where people would be like, 'What are you talking about?'" However, in reviewing both focus group and individual interview data, Manuel mentioned his freshman rhetoric course in positive terms in nearly every interview, even during the spring semester when he was no longer enrolled in the class. While he never gave details about Sharon's class that could offer some sort of instructional roadmap for creating a course like hers, Manuel still pointed out a few characteristics of her course that made him feel accepted, comfortable, and successful.

In revisiting the transcripts, we also noted that he never referred to another professor or teaching assistant by name, nor did he reference any one-on-one conversations with professors, even though he often called his rhetoric professor "Sharon." This class was a part of a transition initiative at SU. Rhetoric courses at the university were partnered with rhetoric courses in urban

high schools across the state in an attempt to ease students' transitions to the university and to college writing; Holly taught Manuel's class at Roland. We did not know Sharon personally. In fact, initially, we were resistant to focus on her. While it might have been easy for us to privilege her past as a secondary teacher because of our similar pasts, in looking at field notes, we found Holly's responses were cautiously optimistic about Sharon because she had no past experience in urban schools. We were also aware that the presentation over the Robin Hood law had happened in this class, and that Sharon had not mediated any sort of discussion afterward. While our biases are equally problematic, it is important to explain that our decision to focus on her more specifically was because of Manuel's constant references to her. Manuel authored himself in responses to the positions afforded him, and the choices he made are vital to our analysis.

Each time he discussed his rhetoric course, even if he was mentioning a struggle or difficulty, he discussed his professor's understanding of his past. In our first focus group he stated, "My rhetoric teacher was a high school teacher for a while, and I know how to approach her because I know she was a high school teacher, but my other professors, it's different." He said the following when referencing another course, "In biology, we have a routine we have to follow when we need help. We have to say our last name, our first name, and bio 301. It's not like you can just say, 'Help please!'" He also frequently discussed her willingness to be of assistance to her students. Manuel said this about Sharon: "She even told us she's willing to help us and we should go to her whenever we need help. *We believe her*" (emphasis mine). He contrasted this course with others: "On the first day they tell you, 'we don't care if you go to sleep or not and if you don't want to be in this class, just leave.'" From this example, it is evident that Sharon positioned herself as a caring instructor, a position that contrasted those of other instructors. Because of his continued use of Sharon's class as a positive counter-example, we interviewed her and observed her classroom, however our analysis relied on Manuel's perception of the course, not on a separate study of Sharon's classroom.

The difference in how Manuel perceived this course was highlighted again when we conducted additional member-checking conversations:

Sharon's class was not like a college class; it was more like your class back in high school. She made the college transition very easy, since the first time I walked into her class she made me feel relaxed and not overwhelmed. I knew I could go up to her without feeling scared or hesitant. In all my other classes I felt intimidated to just even raise my hand, even more so to go up to them to ask a question. I guess that was the main reasons for me, other than that nothing really big.

Even though there were connections between Sharon's course curriculum and Manuel's junior English class curriculum, generally, these were not his central focus when discussing the course. Instead, he frequently highlighted Sharon herself as a determining factor in his comfort, and ultimately his academic success in her course. In Sharon's class, the local instances (e.g. interpersonal encounters between Sharon and Manuel and sharing his writing with her) did not mirror the institutional discourses, demeaning of urban education, to which Manuel had become so accustomed. It appeared that Sharon positioned Manuel as a capable student and situated herself as someone who would help foster his success at the university. He was able to renegotiate his student identity within the confines of this class and in one space, position

himself as “successful student.” Here Manuel was able to reference his high school experience and not refer to it as a “Roland” high school experience. The course was difficult for Manuel; he worked diligently to earn a B. The rigor and subsequent receipt of a B seemed to increase his confidence with reading and writing at the university (personal communication, November 2008). In the two preceding examples cited as a part of this research, Manuel did not speak up or speak out. When discussing Sharon’s class, he made it clear that he was able to voice his thoughts to her, even if it did not do so with classmates.

Conclusions and Implications

We want to reiterate that Manuel was placed on probation by SU, and as of this writing, has not returned to the university full-time, even though he recently wrote and told Holly, “I want to continue with college. I really want to graduate, and all in all I miss school so much!” There are many factors that contribute to a student’s inability to matriculate. In Manuel’s case there were multiple personal, cultural, and institutional barriers that at some point added up to insurmountable. As his former teacher, Holly finds this loss of potential particularly disheartening. As researchers, we find Manuel’s case to be emblematic of what educational theory indicates about the experiences of Latina/os, and important to re-envisioning the university.

The Academic and Cultural Adjustment of Latino/a Students

When discussing the statistics of Latina/os’ college adjustments, we argued that the “how” of increasing their achievement is a complex issue. This work perhaps complicates the issue even further, suggesting more difficult questions about the ways the university functions. However, though a specific and contextualized case of Manuel the findings from this study can offer implications, albeit broad ones. They encourage educators to consider a paradigmatic adjustment that refuses a one-dimensional explanation of students’ apparent lack of success at the university, for the concept of academic success is itself a powerful discourse (Foucault 1977). We argue a view of the university as a “collective ‘as-if’” world that is a “sociohistoric, contrived interpretation or imagination that mediate[s] behavior” (Holland et al. 1998), while simultaneously noting issues of power and knowledge embedded in that very world (Foucault 1977). This allows students’ early college adjustments to become complex processes, steeped in issues of class, culture, race, power, and knowledge (Solórzano et al. 2005). This shift in thought is the first step in locating the systemic changes that need to take place at the university level and encouraging “courageous dialogue” (Assaf and Battle 2008, p. 104) among students, faculty, and staff. Manuel’s experiences demonstrate a need in classroom contexts as well as more systemic contexts like advising, for more direction in possibilities for disrupting the status quo of minority student experiences. More research is needed in a variety of contexts within the university.

The first two examples offered in this study, emblematic of Manuel’s daily, interpersonal interactions, couched in terms of academic assignments and assistance, demonstrate the danger to students struggling to learn the minutia of navigating the university context. In the language of these interactions, there is evidence of manifestations of deeply-rooted societal discourses that function as sorting mechanisms—discourses related to urban education, saturated in issues of

race and class, steeped in Whiteness (e.g. McIntyre 1997; Urrieta 2006). Manuel was positioned by discourses related to urban schooling. In response, he chose to identify in particular ways. These attempts to author himself uniquely illustrate some of the challenges Latina/o students face. Students' lives are multi-dimensional, as are the tools they utilize as they author themselves in collectivity (Holland et al. 1998). As with Manuel, full access to the cultural world of the university is denied to many Latina/o students, and they never fully relocate themselves as part of this world.

Possibilities in Classroom Contexts

We offer Manuel's rhetoric class as a hopeful caveat. Manuel's experience suggests that a certain level of comfort and understanding can make a difference for students (Saunders and Serna 2004). The fact that Manuel cited Sharon's work with him as "nothing really big" can be an encouragement as to what university professors are capable of offering Latina/o students on a daily basis. For Manuel, the shift in how instructors positioned themselves and students shaped how he took up and resisted positions as a student. He wanted to be successful, and was more likely to do so when an instructor situated themselves as caring and their students as capable learners. More research is needed in specific courses, especially those rare courses offered in early college that typically have small numbers (e.g. rhetoric and composition, some science labs, freshman seminar). These courses and pockets of instruction at the university can become vehicles to assist Latina/o students in their exploration of new identities.

Complexity of Latina/o Student University Experiences

Manuel's story highlights the complexity of Latina/o student experiences by recognizing that in the midst of the academic transitions often blithely discussed, students are responding, identifying, and authoring themselves in powerful and profound ways that are not always recognized by universities (Moje and Luke 2009). Centering Manuel's identity work is critical because it complicates the perceived difficulties of Latina/o students at the university. As they transition to the university, their identities are in flux. When discussing his successes and struggles at the university, Manuel emphasized particular interactions. He positioned himself in relation to others and to the university itself. He negotiated a context nuanced with issues of power by doing identity work—responding to positionings and authoring himself in a variety of ways, particularly when faced with competing discourses. The social labels of urban and Latino were operating in powerful ways in Manuel's process of self-authoring. The ways he constructed and connected these categories and their subsequent impact on his personal identifications and his interactions with those around him are imperative to complicating the concept of Latina/o student adjustment to the university.

Manuel's many identifications might be complex, (i.e., college student, urban-schooled student, and Latino), but all of these (and his ability to negotiate them at any given time) were impacted by the context of the university, a figured world. For him, discourses surrounding urban schools were inextricable from race and from others' choices to identify him as a Latino. There are barriers, erected by years of inequities in school systems, but students are not passive participants. When framed through the lens of identity, authorship is not a question; it occurs, only the nature of that response is in question (Lachicotte 2002; Leander 2002; Wortham 2004).

Manuel's experiences indicate that there is more to Latina/o adolescents' transition to college than an acquisition of academic skills; powerful shifts in identities occur as they learn the new literacies of college. Students are positioned by their daily interactions as they struggle to author themselves in this new world. Universities need to continue to address the academic challenges of university life for urban-schooled adolescents. However, Manuel's experiences demonstrate the necessity of an inclusion of critical frameworks as a means of assisting students in the cultural challenges of adjusting to university life by offering them multiple spaces in which they might contribute to and critique their environment. One place to start is with universities recognizing that there are multiple ways of being a successful student in the higher education setting. Universities would benefit from redefining what that looks like in order to meet the needs of diverse students. In the meantime, it is left up to students like Manuel to push back against the fixed understanding of success in college means for students.

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