

**On the Lived Experiences of Latina Undergraduate Students:  
Navigating Identity, Culture, and Beauty**

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## ABSTRACT

This study contributes to and expands upon the existing literature regarding the development of cultural, ethnic, and racial identities as it relates to societal beauty standards. Through conducting nine individual interviews, this qualitative research aims to gain subjugated knowledge regarding the lived experiences of Latina women attending a predominantly white university. Using an intersectional framework, I incorporate theories of social identification, self-categorization, acculturation, and beauty standards. I deploy feminist principles of praxis and utilize a grounded theory approach in my data collection and analysis. My analysis of the data revealed seven major themes: the role of the family, messages about beauty, feeling caught between two spheres, understanding larger social forces, external pressures to identify, creating space for oneself, and defining beauty. The study suggests that despite struggling with elements of ethnic, cultural, and racial identities, the women interviewed ultimately grow to accept and embrace difference, finding value and pride in their identities and experiences. The findings of this study may be of importance to university leaders who seek to better understand ways in which to support this demographic, as well as to other Latina undergraduates who feel isolated in their struggles with identity and beauty standards.

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## INTRODUCTION

“I do feel like I’ve been hypersexualized. And from like an earlier age than white girls,” Becky shares with me. She recounts a story from ninth grade: She and some friends went to her high school’s football game where a senior boy called her, but none of her white friends, “sexy.” Her friends thought it was “awesome,” but Becky went home that night and cried herself to sleep. At 14, she was not ready to be sexy. A “hopeless romantic,” she wanted a boy to have a crush on her or think she was “cute.” “Don’t perceive me like that before I’m ready to be perceived,” she explains. This experience and others like it have shaped how Becky navigates the world, especially dating—conscious of meeting stereotypes of Latina women while still being true to herself.

This story highlights quite well some of the challenges faced by Latin women during the stages of identity development prominent in adolescence. Becky’s experience at the football game is an interaction between her Latin identity, one that differentiates her from her peers, and societal expectations for how Latinas should look. These factors have in turn influenced her behavior, her emerging conceptualization of defining beauty, and how she wants to be perceived by others—something she observes her white friends do not worry about like she does.

This study seeks to gain subjugated knowledge on the lived experiences of Latina women attending a predominantly white university. An intersectional approach to data collection and data analysis is central to better understand how the nine women interviewed navigate culture, identity, and beauty (Crenshaw 1991). The feminist principles of praxis, specifically privileging the voices of the participants, are also relevant and significant throughout all elements of this project (Hesse-Biber 2006; Hesse-Biber and Flowers 2019).

This paper begins with an exploration of the integrated theoretical framework and a review of the literature, bringing to light relevant themes, in Chapter One. Chapter Two consists

of a detailed description of the research design, including grounded theory, in-depth feminist interviewing, and reflexivity. The data analysis revealed seven themes regarding identity development and beauty standards, which are explored in Chapter Three. Chapter Four concludes with limitations and future implications of this study. Finally, the Methodological Note serves as a reflection on the research process.

## CHAPTER ONE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The chapter begins with a theoretical framework to put this study into a broader context. Then, the existing literature is organized thematically to specify some theories and potential patterns that may be important in understanding the lived experiences of Latina undergraduate students navigating identity, culture, and beauty standards.

The literature review seeks to guide the researcher through the data collection and analysis phases of this project. It is important to note that this chapter is not an exhaustive collection of the existing literature; another researcher could add to this compilation, contributing new knowledge, as this area of interest is ever-growing and developing. I hope my study can expand upon the existing frameworks, adding subjugated knowledge to the literature that already exists.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### **Intersectionality**

In her article “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” civil rights advocate and critical race theory scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) coined the term “intersectionality.” The theory of intersectionality purports that each individual possesses overlapping and interdependent social categories and identities, with each category lying on a continuum from dominance to privilege (Crenshaw 1991). Crenshaw (1991) explores intersectionality in “Mapping the Margins” through looking at the case of domestic violence against women of color. Under this framework, Crenshaw (1991:1244) observes that

because of their intersecting identities as both women *and* of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one *or* the other, women of color are marginalized within both... the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately.

In other words, women of color face sexism, as do white women, and racism, as do all non-white people—but their intersecting identities contribute to an experience that is unique to being both a woman and a person of color. Other differences and intersections which are important to consider in my research include socioeconomic status, ethnicity, nationality, and generational status.

Crenshaw (1991:1245) writes that intersectionality “highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed.” Only by examining various overlapping social identification categories can we gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of oppressed groups. In this research, an intersectional approach is integral to better understand how nine Latina women have experienced the development of identity and the interpretation of beauty standards throughout their lives. It cannot be “one size fits all,” as the women come from various racial, ethnic, cultural, and economic backgrounds that influence how they navigate and make sense of the world.

### **Social Identification and Self-Categorization Theories**

Henri Tajfel, a Polish Jewish survivor of World War II, initially explored the ideas behind the social identity theory based on his own experiences with discrimination and intergroup conflict (Ellemers and Haslam 2012). The theory holds that in many social situations people think of themselves and others as members of various groups, not as unique individuals; moreover, people create divisions between “us” and “them,” often treating “them” differently (Ellemers and Haslam 2012). This differential treatment of others is where we see racism, sexism, and homophobia,

amongst a plethora of other forms of discrimination, emerge. The guiding principles of the social identification theory address the following:

- I. The psychological processes behind social identity versus personal identity,
- II. Strategies one can use to deduct a positive social identity, and
- III. Key characteristics of social structures that determine which strategy will likely be used in a given case (Ellemers and Haslam 2012).

In regards to the first core principle of social identity theory, to be in the same social category requires some central group-defining feature to exist. Members of the same category tend to focus on similarities within that category and differences of those in other categories (Ellemers and Haslam 2012). The process of social comparison is through which characteristics of various social categories are valued and interpreted, deemed “good” or “bad” (Ellemers and Haslam 2012). Thus, attaching value to a group characteristic determines the social status and prestige of a group (Ellemers and Haslam 2012). Furthermore, “when specific features are associated with a social group, or when those features are valued in a certain way, the process of social identification determines how this reflects upon the self,” write Ellemers and Haslam (2012:382). This means that the individual begins to associate that feature and its attached value with either themselves or as something distinct from themselves. Therefore, if members of a group care about in-group membership, they will be motivated to emphasize, uphold, and enhance the group values and identity (Ellemers and Haslam 2012). The perceived value of a social identity, and the implications of that, is pertinent to my own research in that it helps to conceptualize the motivations behind women’s cultural perspectives and actions.

The second critical component of the social identification theory is the variety of strategies used to achieve a positive social identity: What can those in a low-status social group do to

improve the value of their social identity? Individual mobility is one way through which an individual of a group may try to escape, avoid, or deny membership of the group, instead trying to “pass” as a member of a higher-standing group (Ellemers and Haslam 2012). This strategy is most applicable to my own research. Individual mobility often includes the individual trying to differentiate themselves in some way from the other members of the group (Ellemers and Haslam 2012). Individual mobility was employed in the transition to a predominantly white college by a number of the women whom I interviewed, though it often failed, resulting in the need to accept and embrace difference. The second and third strategies are social creativity and social competition, neither of which are pertinent to my research (Ellemers and Haslam 2012).

The third major component of social identity theory offers that group members will elect a strategy for social change based on whether or not, by nature of these group-defining characteristics, their access to other groups is limited or if they believe they are able to achieve a position in society that reflects individual merit, regardless of group membership (Ellemers and Haslam 2012). In sum, this permeability of group boundaries is the idea that individuals can act independently within a structured social system, one complete with differentiated social categories (Ellemers and Haslam 2012). If group boundaries are deemed permeable, individual mobility will likely be preferable; if not, then it will likely be group movement and change (Ellemers and Haslam 2012). This concept provides a framework to understand why Latin women may feel the desire or need to employ individual mobility to fit into the dominant group at a predominantly white college.

Branching off from the social identification theory is the self-categorization theory, proposed by Turner (1985, as referenced by Ellemers and Haslam 2012), which elaborates on Tajfel’s original idea that social categorization underlies the understanding of and response to complex social situations. Specifically, the self-categorization theory holds that social categories

can be drawn at “nested” levels of abstraction (e.g., student, undergraduate student, undergraduate student at Boston College) and that one individual can belong to multiple categories based on different “cross-cutting” criteria (e.g., woman, undergraduate student, sociology major) (Ellemers and Haslam 2012:9). To explain how individuals define themselves as one social identity as opposed to another, the self-categorization theory highlights the importance and relevance of the variety of contexts that might make one social categorization more important than another (Ellemers and Haslam 2012).

Furthermore, Haslam and Turner’s theory (1992 as referenced by Ellemers and Haslam 2012:10) predicts “the same objective group membership will be experienced differently, depending on the groups with which an ingroup is compared and the situation in which these comparisons are made.” Therefore, it is not enough to just be a member of one social category; the social context and forces at play when making intergroup comparisons must be considered, as they can impact the experiences of group members. The self-categorization theory also introduced the concept of depersonalization, when an individual defines themselves in terms of social identity rather than personal identity (Ellemers and Haslam 2012). This process of depersonalization makes group behavior possible (Ellemers and Haslam 2012). In regards to my research, self-categorization is helpful to better understand how one experiences and develops a Latin identity when in an environment where the ingroup is similar versus where it is different—when the ingroup is also Latin versus when it is white.

Self-categorization theory builds upon the foundations of the social identity theory, providing a more in-depth account of the psychological mechanisms by which individuals define themselves in relation to group memberships, as well as how to act based on those memberships

(Ellemers and Haslam 2012). It is useful to use the two theories in conjunction with each other in an integrated social identity perspective (Ellemers and Haslam 2012).

### **Acculturation Theory**

Acculturation has consistently been defined and redefined for decades, to the point where it is now a complex psychosocial phenomenon which relates to multiple levels of human functioning (Kim and Abreu 2001). Understanding acculturation can be helpful in better understanding the dynamic and complex process of minority and ethnic communities adapting to dominant culture in the United States (Kim and Abreu 2001). Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936, as referenced by Kim and Abreu 2001:395-396) first defined acculturation as “[comprehending] those phenomena which result when groups of individuals sharing different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups.” This definition is the most fundamental to understanding the process of acculturation.

In 1967, Graves, as referenced by Kim and Abreu (2001), coined the term *psychological acculturation* to describe the individual-level effects of acculturation. These effects consisted of changes in two personal dimensions: behaviors (including the use of language and participation in other cultural activities) and values (including relational style, person-nature relationships, beliefs about human nature, and time orientation) (Kim and Abreu 2001:396). In 1980, Padilla, as referenced by Kim and Abreu (2001), broadened Graves’ definition to include cultural awareness and ethnic loyalty. Cultural awareness is defined as “an individual’s attunement to the cultural manifestations of native and host cultures,” and ethnic loyalty is “an indication of preferences for one culture over the other,” which includes one’s level of ethnic pride and identity (Kim and Abreu 2001:396).

Also in 1980, Berry, as referenced by Kim and Abreu (2001:396), named six dimensions of psychological functioning that are affected and change as one moves through acculturation: language, cognitive styles, personality, identity, attitudes, and acculturative stress. The latest and most complex definition of acculturation was proposed in 1995. Cuellar et al. (1995, as referenced by Kim and Abreu 2001:396) defined acculturation as changes at three levels of functioning:

- I. Behavioral level—including customs, foods, and other cultural expressions. The behavioral level includes language, which is “understood to include cognitive aspects and related processes.”
- II. Affective level, which refers to emotions that have cultural connections. For example, “the meaning one attaches to itself [is] culturally based.”
- III. Cognitive level—including beliefs about gender roles, attitudes toward illness, and fundamental values.

Understanding the evolving definitions of acculturation highlights themes and aspects of life that are important when studying how ethnic and minority communities interact with and adapt to dominant culture. Acculturation is of particular importance to my research in understanding how a woman’s Latin identity influences her experiences at a predominantly white university, as well as her interpretation of beauty standards.

### **The Beauty Myth**

In recent decades women have broken the power structure, accumulating more money, power, and legal recognition than ever before (Wolf 1991). However, as explained by feminist author Naomi Wolf (1991:18), society needed “an ideology that makes women feel ‘worthless’... to counteract the way feminism had begun to make us feel worth more.” The beauty myth is the “violent backlash against feminism,” one which uses images of the ideal female beauty as a

political weapon to diminish women's advancements (Wolf 1991:10). It tells a story: Beauty is objective and exists universally (Wolf 1991). Women must strive to embody this beauty, and men must desire women who possess it (Wolf 1991). The beauty myth and the subsequent overwhelming desire to achieve these rigid and unattainable standards shifts women's focus from their advancing status in society to an appearance-based mindset driven by food and weight (Wolf 1991).

Today, women's unprecedented material strength means, in order to weaken them psychologically, the beauty myth must draw upon "technological sophistication and reactionary fervor" more than ever before (Wolf 1991:16). The circulation of "beautiful" images of tall, thin, blonde, white women with symmetrical, flawless faces reinforces the unattainable standards to which women constantly compare themselves, often fraught with anxiety and feelings of worthlessness (Wolf 1991).

The modern manifestation of the beauty myth is the cult of thinness, which has fueled the epidemic of eating disorders among young women (Hesse-Biber 2007). The thin ideal pressures women to chase a beauty ideal that represents "restraint, moderation, and self-control" (Hesse-Biber 2007:2). Women want to be thin because "our culture considers obesity 'bad' and 'ugly...' [and] fat represents moral failure, the inability to delay gratification, poor impulse control, greed, and self-indulgence" (Hesse-Biber 2007:2). The capitalist system profits off of the thin ideal by pushing endless products and lifestyles through which to lose weight and attain thinness—for example, the multimillion-dollar beauty industry, the pharmaceutical industry, the food industry, books on how to lose weight, and modelling in the fashion world (Hesse-Biber 2007). The thin ideal is cult-like in that there are similarities between women who have eating disorders and cult members: "ritualistic performance and obsession with a goal or ideal" (Hesse-Biber 2007:4). In

regards to the thin ideal, society promises women they will be happy and receive male attention if they are thin, and members of the cult of thinness will use whatever tools necessary to succeed in having the perfect body (Hesse-Biber 2007).

In sum, the beauty myth is fueled by the circulation of controlling images of ideal female beauty in an effort to detract from their societal and material advances. The cult of thinness, proposed by Hesse-Biber (2007), does just that. The beauty myth provides an excellent framework to better understand why the women in my own research sometimes felt their value was tied to their appearance, particularly in discussion with the slim ideal.

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Each of the theories discussed above is useful in understanding the lived experiences of Latina students in regards to navigating culture, identity, and beauty, as the theories contextualize the processes through which these developments occur. Intersectionality, though, most speaks to the overall theoretical perspective I seek to guide my feminist research. The research topic was born from an intersectional perspective, seeking subjugated knowledge on a minority group that experiences the intersection of gender and ethnicity. Being cognizant of this intersection, among others, that the women interviewed face is critical in my approach to reviewing the literature, the data collection process, the continuous practice of reflexivity, the grounded theory analysis, and ultimately writing this paper.

The theoretical framework provides context in the review of the literature, which follows. The literature is organized into categories regarding the experiences of students of color at predominantly white universities; defining and conceptualizing body image; and understanding cultural values regarding the body.

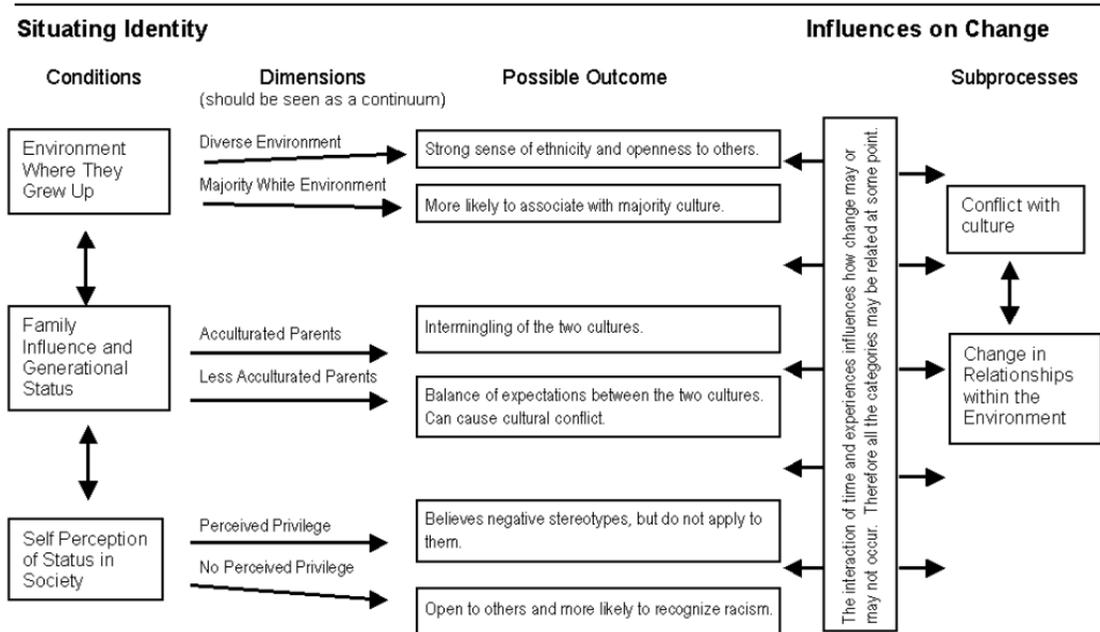
## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **The Experiences of Students of Color at Predominantly White Universities**

A fundamental question in studying ethnic identity is: Is a strong sense of identification with one's ethnic culture likely to act as a positive influence on well-being, by providing a sense of belonging and serving as a buffer against the negative impact of prejudice and discrimination (Phinney 1995)? Or, conversely, might this sense of belonging promote internalization of negative stereotypes and serve to emphasize one's difference from the dominant culture, thus increasing the stress of minority status (Phinney 1995)? These questions underlie this study's analysis of identity development and interpretation of beauty standards.

Torres (2003), through grounded theory methodology, examines the influences on the development of ethnic identity of 10 Latin college students during the first two years at a highly-selective college. Latinos are the fastest growing minority group in the United States, pointing to the need to better understand the experiences of Latin college students (Torres 2003). Torres (2003) identifies two main categories in the data: situating identity (the starting point of identity development in college) and influences on change in identity development. The findings of Torres' (2003) study are included below:

**CATEGORIES**



**Figure 1: Conceptual figure of the categories influencing ethnic identity development in the first two years of college (Torres 2003:541).**

Within *Situating Identity*, Torres (2003) notes the importance of the environment in which students grew up as a factor in their identity development. For example, students from a diverse environment expressed a strong sense of ethnicity, were more likely to enjoy diversity around them in college, and did not view themselves as a minority until they arrived at their institution (Torres 2003:537). On the other hand, students from environments with a predominantly white, European influence tended to associate more with the majority culture at college and found diversity in college to present some conflict (Torres 2003:537). Family influences and generational status in the U.S. also impacted the students' starting points of identity development. For example, all of the students in the sample credited their parents for their views on ethnicity and its role in their lives, and the more parents participated in "culturally relevant" activities, like speaking Spanish, the more students identified with ethnicity (Torres 2003:538-539). Moreover, first-generation

students struggled with balancing different levels of acculturation, between them and their parents, while second and third generation students could feel the influence of both cultures and had less conflict with their parents (Torres 2003). Lastly, students' self-perception of status in society was important; for example, students who perceived certain privileges also then distanced themselves from Latin stereotypes (Torres 2003:540). In sum, the starting point at which Latin students' identity development began in college was influenced by these three main factors.

The second major theme in Torres' (2003) work examines influences on change in identity development over the first two years at a highly-selective, predominantly white university. One factor to this is cultural dissonance, behaviors referring to the experience of conflict between a student's own sense of culture and what other people expect of that student (Torres 2003:540). Another significant influence is changes in relationships within the environment (Torres 2003). The most prominent example of such was participants' peer groups, for example seeking out diverse friend groups and the subsequent impacts on ethnic identity (Torres 2003:543). "Changes in personal relationships and involvement in Latino student groups can influence personal growth and identity development," notes Torres (2003:543). This study serves as an effective reference to the findings of my own study, as there exist many parallels in factors that influence identity development (Torres 2003).

A more recent study on the topics explored by Torres (2003), and one which expands the framework, is that of Adams and McBrayer (2020) on "The Lived Experiences of First-Generation College Students of Color Integrating into the Institutional Culture of a Predominantly White Institution." Similar to the problem Torres (2003) sought to address, Adams and McBrayer (2020) write that as more first-generation students of color enroll in higher education, colleges are tasked with ensuring this group is connected to the university (a variation of one of the implications of

my own study, as well). Adams and McBrayer (2020) conducted in-depth interviews and a focus group to examine these students' lived experiences. There are four major themes in the findings: a college degree is a means to a better lifestyle, money always matters, a heightened sense of safety concerns exists, and there is a desire for a supportive multicultural campus environment (Adams and McBrayer 2020).

Within the first theme, the subthemes are “do not forget where you came from”—highlighting the importance of acknowledging that backgrounds and upbringing are essential components of identity—and “family is essential,” which emphasizes the role that families play in being sources of support, encouragement, motivation, and stress in students' college experiences (Adams and McBrayer 2020:741). Within the second theme “money always matters,” researchers identify two subthemes regarding “financial aid package sways college choice” and “working is not optional” (Adams and McBrayer 2020:741-742). The third theme in the findings, regarding heightened safety concerns, includes subthemes “impact of political polarization on college campus,” particularly in relation to the political divide felt after the 2016 presidential election, and “biased incidents against marginalized groups” (Adams and McBrayer 2020:742). Within the fourth theme, the authors identify three subthemes: “classroom learning environment,” “campus culture,” and “institutional support” (Adams and McBrayer 2020:742). In relation to the desire for a supportive multicultural campus environment in institutional support specifically, Adams and McBrayer (2020:742) note that participants have had positive experiences in race-based organizations and designated spaces on campus—echoing the findings on changes in personal development in Torres' (2003) article.

The literature referenced by Adams and McBrayer (2020) show that many first-generation college students experience a “mismatch” between their home cultures and the culture of the

college which they attend, which forces students to straddle between two cultures and presents additional challenges. Moreover, “reliance on race-based affinity groups and designated cultural, race, and ethnic affinity spaces to provide them a sense of belonging, inclusivity, and safety were denoted in the literature” and also described by the participants in the study (Adams and McBrayer 2020:752). Both of these themes influenced my research and are discussed in my own findings.

Sánchez-Connally (2018) also describes the lived experiences of Latinx first-generation students at predominantly white institutions of higher education. The qualitative study conducted 21 interviews to investigate “gendered, raced, and class mechanisms by which Latinx students utilized three different forms of capital (social, resistant, and aspirational) to cope and succeed within racially hostile academic environments” (Sánchez-Connally 2018:234). Three major themes emerged from the data.

First, “walking stigma” refers to what students described as feeling out of place on their college campus (Sánchez-Connally 2018:241). The displacement that many students felt was described in various ways, including how they were perceived by others because of their race and their own insecurities about their abilities (Sánchez-Connally 2018:241). Moreover, this theme encapsulates the ways in which many students often experienced racism, classism, and sexism (Sánchez-Connally 2018:241). Many described this “walking stigma” as experiencing a “culture shock” (Sánchez-Connally 2018:241).

The second theme is “the role of counterspaces and continued relevance of ASP” (academic support program) (Sánchez-Connally 2018). This refers to the persistent prejudice on campus that not only caused the students anger but also forced them to rely on skills and strategies they learned in ASP to stay focused in high school (Sánchez-Connally 2018:243). Also central in this theme is finding counterspaces on campus, such as affinity groups or organizations that focused specifically

on supporting students of color (Sánchez-Connally 2018:244). It was through access to counterspaces and affinity groups, such as Latinx organizations, that students were able to utilize their social capital to network and share knowledge (Sánchez-Connally 2018:244). “Joining affinity groups on campus and surrounding themselves with other students like them (in regards to shared race/ethnicity) provided a sense of security, support, and safety” to participants (Sánchez-Connally 2018:244).

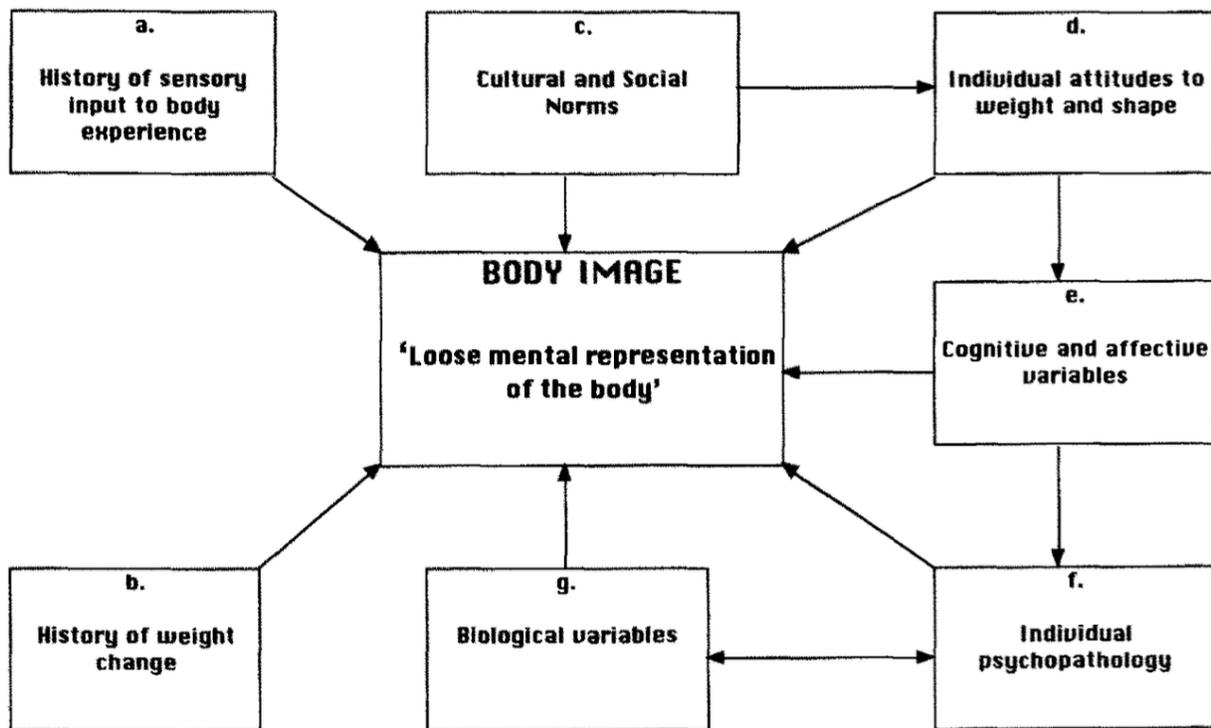
The third theme, “creating a successful college student” refers to students’ persistent and “tireless” efforts to adapt, integrate, and succeed in the college culture and on the campus (Sánchez-Connally 2018:245). Most of the participants described language proficiency as the challenge for which the most effort was required (Sánchez-Connally 2018:245). Many students also reported experiences of not feeling smart enough (Sánchez-Connally 2018). Students were able to utilize aspirational and resistant capital in understanding that failing and quitting was simply not an option because of family expectations and responsibilities, as well as their own (Sánchez-Connally 2018:249). This study sought to highlight the ways in which Latinx students cope in predominantly white institutions of higher education, a theme that underlies and influenced my own research (Sánchez-Connally 2018).

### **On Defining and Conceptualizing Body Image**

The German writer Schilder, as referenced by Peter David Slade (1994:497), was the first to distinguish “body image” as an important psychological phenomenon, describing it as “the picture of our own body which we form in our mind, that is to say the way in which the body appears to ourselves.” Slade (1994:497) later expanded that definition to include “the picture we have in our minds of the size, shape, and form of our bodies; and to our feelings concerning these characteristics and our constituent body parts.” Hesse-Biber and colleagues (2004:54) define body

image as concerns one has about their body, concerns which can manifest themselves as dissatisfaction with any physical trait, such as skin, weight, or height. Grogan (2006:524) writes that body image is related to one’s perceptions, feelings, and thoughts about their body; it is usually conceptualized as including body size estimation, evaluation of body attractiveness, and emotions associated with body shape and size. Everyone has some idea of what “body image” means, and understanding the very meaning(s) of the term and how we can better understand this phenomenon within a sociocultural context is integral to this study.

Slade (1994:500) discusses seven factors which contribute to one’s sense of body image, which is understood as a “loose mental representation of the body.” The figure included below is helpful in understanding body image because it demonstrates how the various complex factors interact to affect body image.



*Figure 2. A model of the factors influencing the development and manifestation of body image (Slade 1994:501)*

- I. *History of sensory input to body experience* refers to the individual's reception of visual, tactile, and kinaesthetic sensory input regarding the form, size, shape, and appearance of their body; this input varies over time and contributes to shaping up the individual's general mental representation of the body (Slade 1994:500).
- II. *History of weight change/fluctuation* is based on the notion that individuals who are anorexic and obese—those who are most likely to have experienced significant fluctuations in their weight—are the ones who seem to have the most variable body image, resulting in “loosening” body image (Slade 1994:500).
- III. *Cultural and social norms* acknowledges that some cultures, specifically Western culture, encourage the thin ideal, particularly for young women—which undoubtedly yields harsh individual attitudes regarding the ideal body size and shape (Slade 1994:500).
- IV. Branching off of the third factor, *individual attitudes to weight and shape* refers to how adherence to cultural and social norms, such as the thin ideal, results in some individuals—most often girls in Western societies—to develop strong personal attitudes about weight and shape (Slade 1994:501).
- V. *Cognitive and affective variables* recognizes that expectations have been found to influence judgements on body size. These cognitions of individuals with eating disorders become systemic and stable, while the individuals are also especially sensitive to the “instructional effect.” This means, for example, individuals with eating disorders may indicate that they “feel fatter” than they actually believe they are because they are more impacted by the affective condition of instruction (how one *feels* about their body) versus the cognitive condition (how one *thinks* they look) (Slade 1994:501).

- VI. *Individual psychopathology* most certainly influences body image; it's most likely also influenced by multiple of the other factors (Slade 1994:501).
- VII. Similarly, *biological variables* potentially play an important role in influencing one's body image; for example, some studies include the significance of menstrual cycle or metabolic rate (Slade 1994:501-502).

Grogan (2006) explores themes and concepts that are important to consider in body image research. Importantly, Grogan (2006) begins with the recognition that the majority of research in this field has been concerned with weight dissatisfaction, particularly the desire to be thinner. Body image, while it does include concerns with weight and shape, encompasses a wider range of issues and concepts, as well.

The first concept discussed is that of the relationship between body image and healthy and unhealthy behaviors (Grogan 2006). For example, body image can impact the decisions to engage in or avoid exercise, to eat healthily or restrict eating, to smoke (particularly if one feels they will gain weight by smoking), or to undergo elective cosmetic surgery (Grogan 2006:525). Social factors such as peer influence, media, and sports participation also play an important role in the development of body image, as "there is growing evidence that body image is subjective, and open to change through social influence" (Grogan 2006:525). Previous research on body image, as referenced by Grogan (2006), has connected social factors to body dissatisfaction, weight concern, and discrepancy between current and ideal body shape and size; furthermore, sociocultural risk factors include the emphasis on the media and family and peer influences on body satisfaction. Grogan (2006), echoing the sentiments of controlling images put forth by Wolf (1991), notes that media imagery, depending on the viewer's perception, may be important in determining the ways

the body is perceived and evaluated. Childhood experiences, as well as peer influence, play significant roles in understanding social forces influencing body image (Grogan 2006).

It is also crucial to consider gender and body image—as Crenshaw (1991) emphasizes in her theory of intersectionality. As referenced by Grogan (2006:526), many researchers have highlighted the sociocultural pressures on women to attain “unrealistically slender ideals,” leading to dissatisfaction and negative health behaviors such as dietary restraint and eating disorders, smoking, and cosmetic surgery. Also, there is much literature dedicated to the impact of weight, size, and appearance on body image. Though “objective body size and shape does not necessarily have a straightforward relationship with body image,” some evidence suggests that females who are heavier tend to be less satisfied with their bodies and also have lower self-esteem than do thinner women (Grogan 2006:527). One potential explanation for this is that Western culture stigmatizes being overweight, which could possibly lead to lowered self-esteem and mood and body dissatisfaction in those who are overweight (Grogan 2006:527). Consequently, lowered self-concept can result in an increase in eating and other unhealthy outcomes, particularly in individuals who are overweight (Grogan 2006).

The thin ideal—also discussed by Hesse-Biber (2007), Slade (1994), Tylka and Sabik (2010), and Wolf (1991)—clearly has various implications on the development of the body image of females in Western culture.

Much research on body image has been on pathology and understanding negative body image, that is the absence of positive body image (Tylka and Wood-Barcalow 2015). Body image, though, is a complex phenomenon, one which is multifaceted and cannot be boiled down to only one approach or framework. To expand upon the existing literature and also to contribute to the field of positive body image, Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015:121) interviewed 15 college-aged

women and five body image experts from the United States and subsequently propose the following definition of positive body image:

An overarching love and respect for the body that allows individuals to (a) appreciate the unique beauty of their body and the functions that it performs for them; (b) accept and even admire their body, including those aspects that are inconsistent with idealized images; (c) feel beautiful, comfortable, confident, and happy with their body, which is often reflected as an outer radiance, or a “glow”; (d) emphasize their body’s assets rather than dwell on their imperfections; and (f) interpret incoming information in a body-protective manner whereby most positive information is internalized and most negative information is rejected or reframed.

The authors emphasize the importance in recognizing that positive body image is *not* simply the other end of a continuum, opposite from negative body image; positive body image is not the negation of, nor is it the lack of, negative body image (Tylka and Wood-Barcalow 2015). Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015:122-123) also stress that positive body image is multidimensional and that it must be viewed holistically, reviewing the multiple facets included in the definition collectively rather than independently.

Moreover, Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015:126-127) discuss how positive body image is likely impacted by various social identities—such as culture, race, age, gender, ability, size, sexual orientation, religion/spirituality, and socioeconomic status—and is not a universal concept. Positive body image must be conceptualized and examined by the intersections of these identities (Tylka and Wood-Barcalow 2015; see also Crenshaw 1991). Specifically related to culture, the authors reference that there likely exist differences in the concept and experience of positive body image across cultures, and cultural-specific experiences may shape embodiment and how individuals relate to their own bodies (Tylka and Wood-Barcalow 2015:127). Understanding positive body image is important to better understand how individuals experience their own bodies and what factors play a role in this development—themes which are present in my own study.

## **Understanding Cultural Values Regarding the Body**

Tylka and Sabik (2010) explore the social norms and culture on college campuses in their study “Integrating Social Comparison Theory and Self-Esteem within Objectification Theory to Predict Women’s Disordered Eating.” Tylka and Sabik (2010) sought to create a new integrative framework to look at the relationship between the following variables: sexual objectification, body surveillance, body shame, body comparison, self-esteem, and disordered eating. The findings show that body surveillance, body comparison, and self-esteem predicted body shame; body shame predicted disordered eating symptoms, as those women with higher body shame were more likely to harm and alter their bodies to lose weight or fit beauty expectations such as thinness (Tylka and Sabik 2010:26-28). In other words, women who often monitored and compared their own bodies to others’ reported the highest levels of disordered eating symptomatology.

An intersectional approach to understanding body image issues among students would include an ethnically and racially diverse sample to paint a picture of the unique experiences faced by women of color (Crenshaw 1991). A diverse sample compounded with collecting qualitative data or narratives may allow researchers to gain subjugated knowledge on the lived experiences of women who fall outside of the dominant white culture.

Though body image encompasses a wider range of issues and related health behaviors than just eating pathology, including disordered eating and eating disorders, it is important to dismantle the assumption that eating disorders occur primarily within affluent white communities, affecting adolescent females. DeLeel and colleagues (2009) sought to longitudinally examine maladaptive eating symptomology and body image dissatisfaction among young children, specifically a racially diverse sample from various socioeconomic backgrounds. The sample consisted of 9- and 10-year-old females, 58% of whom were in the “Minority” group (non-white students) and 42% in

the white category, who were administered the Children's Eating Attitudes Test (ChEAT) and the Body Image Measure (BIM) (DeLeel et al. 2009:769). The results show that disturbed eating behaviors and attitudes develop earlier than adolescence, with 11% of the sample scoring within the anorexic range on Children's Eating Attitudes Test ChEAT at age 9 and 7% at age 10 (DeLeel et al. 2009:772). In evaluating body image dissatisfaction, researchers found around 35% of the 9-year-old children and 38% of the 10-year-olds selected Ideal Figures that were smaller than their own figures on the BIM—suggesting a desire to be thinner (DeLeel et al. 2009:773). This increase with age could be due to society's thin ideal, as discussed by various authors in this literature review, and also supports prior research suggesting that body image dissatisfaction increases with age (DeLeel et al. 2009:773).

In terms of racial difference between the Minority and the white groups, the Minority group, on average, exhibited higher eating disturbance scores at both ages 9 and 10 than did the white group—supporting the growing literature that suggests eating disturbance is not limited to white women (DeLeel et al. 2009:773). One potential explanation for this observation is that the Minority group had a higher BMI than the white group (DeLeel et al. 2009:773). Furthermore, the lack of difference between socioeconomic groups, on either eating disturbance or body image dissatisfaction, “fails to support the assumption that eating disorders occur primarily in upper-middle [socioeconomic status] individuals” (DeLeel et al. 2009:773). DeLeel and colleagues' (2009) research is important in that it begins to break down the stigma of body image dissatisfaction and disordered eating pertaining mostly to affluent, white women. Though my research does not focus explicitly on eating pathology, this topic is intrinsically linked to issues of body image and is discussed in some of the narrative data.

In line with the need to look at ethnic and racial diversity in regards to this topic, Rubin, Fitts, and Becker (2003) conducted focus groups composed of 18 college-educated Black and Latina women with the aim of understanding the connections between ethnicity, self-representation, and body aesthetic ideals. While the participants described experiences resembling traditional discourse regarding women's bodies, such as objectification, their ethnic identities—including “cultural values regarding the care and presentation of the body, as well as personal and political commitments”—often provided them with opportunities to view their bodies and cultural norms and practices in a more positive, affirming light (Rubin, Fitts, and Becker 2003:55). These participants did not seem to support the thin ideal in dominant culture, rather they advocated for a “multifaceted beauty ideal that promotes personal style, self-care, and spirituality” (Rubin, Fitts, and Becker 2003:55). This research suggests that perhaps social and/or economic marginalization and a distance from cultural roots may cause women of color to be less able to call upon these ideals of body ethics, leaving them more vulnerable to the criticism of body and self that is associated with eating disorders (Rubin, Fitts, and Becker 2003:71).

Furthermore, Hesse-Biber and colleagues (2004) found that African American girls often discussed their weight as a “fixed feature,” over which the individual has little control, and as a “God-given feature,” one they ought to respect as built (Hesse-Biber et al. 2004:56). On the contrary, appearance—which includes personality, the way one “carries” themselves, hairstyle, and clothing—was seen as something individuals can control, suggesting that beauty is seen as “something attainable by every woman who invests some time and attention to her appearance” (Hesse-Biber et al. 2004:57). This understanding of beauty as something more multidimensional than solely weight is an example of “non-internalization,” through which individuals ignore, reject, or disbelieve the comments of others (Hesse-Biber et al. 2004:62). The prevalence of non-

internalization among these African American girls is an effect of a strong cultural identity (Hesse-Biber et al. 2004:62).

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This study utilizes an intersectional framework based on the beauty myth and the social identification, self-categorization, and acculturation theories to better understand how Latina undergraduates attending a predominantly white university have experienced the development of identity throughout their lives, as well as their understandings of beauty standards (Crenshaw 1991; Wolf 1991; Ellemers and Haslam 2012; Kim and Abreu 2001). The literature reviewed provide specific themes and patterns which speak to the multifaceted theoretical framework and of which to be mindful in the phases of data collection and analysis. Torres (2003:541), Adams and McBrayer (2020), and Sánchez-Connally (2018) explore themes regarding the lived experiences of students of color at predominantly white institutions that informed my interview guides and provide context for the grounded theory analysis—for example the influences of “situating identity” and “influences on change” on the processes of identity development. Furthermore, the literature on cultural values regarding the body highlight the need for an intersectional approach to understanding body image issues and the interpretation of beauty standards (Crenshaw 1991; Tylka and Sabik 2010; DeLeel et al. 2009; Rubin, Fitts, and Becker 2003; Hesse-Biber et al. 2004). This last section is important to the formation of my research objectives, as this study seeks to expand upon the existing frameworks and explore the development of identity and its relation to the interpretation of beauty standards.

## **Research Aims and Objectives**

The goal of this research is to gain subjugated knowledge on the lived experiences of individuals at the intersection of being Latina. Given the review of the literature, I explore the developments of identity and beauty standards. Contributing to and expanding upon the existing frameworks and literature, the study identifies patterns or recurring themes amongst the narrative data to answer the research questions.

### *Research questions*

- I. What is the lived experience of being a Latina student?
- II. What are some influences that impact the development of identity? To what extent, if any, does exposure to and interaction with the dominant, white culture impact this Latina identity?
- III. To what extent, if any, do white, Western beauty standards impact Latina students' sense of beauty? How does a Latina student develop her own understanding of beauty?

## CHAPTER TWO: RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter describes the data collection process and the analytical strategy employed, specifically the grounded theory approach. It also discusses the importance and relevance of feminist in-depth interviewing, which is integral to this study. The chapter concludes with an understanding of reflexivity and the role of the researcher.

### **Sample**

#### *Recruitment*

Utilizing my personal networks was integral to the recruitment strategy. I recruited nine participants at a predominantly white university through reaching out to heads of departments and organizations that may attract students who could potentially be participants in the study. These included academic departments which include issues of diversity or gender studies in their curriculums and student-run organizations that aim to create communities for students of color, specifically women of color. I emailed the appropriate heads of departments and organizational leaders with information on the study and its aims, as well as my personal contact information, to distribute to their respective students and members.

I also announced my research in various class sessions to speak to students directly. Numerous professors in those classes also shared my contact information and study information with some of their other classes and students. Lastly, I created a digital business card which could be easily shared by students and professors in these classes and within student organizations. Interested students were able to reach out to me personally via email or text message to ask questions and learn more about the study. Personal announcements in class sessions proved to be the most effective means of recruitment—whether it be students who heard me speak in their class,

students who were friends of students in the classes in which I spoke, or students in other classes taught by the professor who allowed me to speak in their class.

### *Sample Characteristics*

A purposive sample was utilized for this study. Participants must fit the following criteria: undergraduate student at a predominantly white university in the northeastern United States, at least 18 years of age, identify as female, and identify as Latina.<sup>1</sup>

I interviewed nine women in this study. Four participants are seniors in college, three are juniors, and two are sophomores. Data from the demographic survey show that all nine students in this study identify as cisgender female, and eight identify as heterosexual and one as bisexual. All nine are full-time college students who have never transferred from another university and generally live on or around campus with other college students in a regular school year; the COVID-19 pandemic changed this for only one student, who chose to stay home and attend classes remotely for one semester. This information is important to understand the extent to which these women are typically engaged with and exposed to their college culture.

Five participants were born in the United States. Collectively, these women have family from and/or living in Guatemala, Venezuela, Mexico, Colombia, and the Dominican Republic. One woman, though she was born in the U.S., has lived in Mexico for her entire life. Of the four women who were not born in the U.S., two were born in Venezuela, one in Ecuador, and one in Nicaragua. The time for which these four women have lived in the U.S. varies, ranging from moving as an infant to moving as a college student. One woman describes herself as coming from a working-class background, five from middle-class backgrounds, and three from upper-class

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<sup>1</sup> I recognize and understand that gender identity falls on a spectrum outside the female-male binary. However, a female identity is central to the purpose of this particular study in order to maintain some constant among other differences.

backgrounds. All nine women self-identify as Hispanic and Latina. Furthermore, five also identify as white, and one also identifies as indigenous.

### **Data Collection**

This study was completed in accordance with IRB regulations and approval, and I completed the appropriate training on conducting research with human subjects. Written informed and voluntary consent was obtained from each participant. In the first round of recruitment, four participants were emailed a PDF consent form to print out and sign, of which they then forwarded me a copy for the study records. This process of obtaining consent proved to be inhibitive to recruiting interviewees, so for the second round of recruitment, I, in accordance with advice from the IRB, streamlined this process. Participants were emailed a link to a Qualtrics survey which contained all of the informed consent information; they then signed electronically. Furthermore, I reminded participants of their ongoing and voluntary consent rights at the beginning of each interview. Consent did not pose any problems in this study. I discuss this shift in consent procedure and my work with the IRB further in the Methodological Note. Students were not compensated for their participation in this study.

Upon receiving written consent, participants completed a brief demographic survey on Qualtrics. They did not use their name or any personally identifying information but rather a unique coded identifier that I assigned to them. I then utilized the website Calendly to schedule a private, one-on-one, semi-structured interview with each participant. In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer prepares a list of questions across various themes about which she would like to learn more, but she is also granted the flexibility to ask follow-up questions, use probes, or go in another direction completely based on the participant's responses. The semi-structured interview was ideal so that I could address topics of interest to this project while allowing

participants the freedom to talk about what they felt was most important and relevant. After the first wave of four interviews, and with guidance from my advisor, I altered my interview style to be more unstructured, allowing the participant to answer more freely. Interviews took place on Zoom, a video conferencing platform, so as to avoid meeting in-person during COVID-19 regulations and social distancing measures. Interviews lasted anywhere from 27 minutes to 44 minutes.

With consent, the audio of each interview was recorded using a stand-alone, digital recording device without internet capabilities. After each interview, I uploaded the audio to a secure, university-controlled server and deleted the audio from the recording device. The interview was then transcribed using the web app oTranscribe, and the transcript was kept on the secure server. Transcription was carried out in accordance with the principles and guidelines laid out by McLellan, MacQueen, and Neidig (2003). Each transcript was assigned a unique identification number, and all personal identifying information in the transcript was removed and kept in a separate file to maintain participants' confidentiality. Contact information for each participant was kept separately and secure, and participants were given the opportunity to later review the transcript of their interview and provide feedback. Two women opted to receive a copy of their narrative, and one provided positive feedback regarding her interview experience.

Given the time constraints of this project, I did not transcribe the final four interviews in full. Rather, I wrote in-depth memos on the interview audio, with direct quotations that were transcribed. These four women were therefore not offered an opportunity to review their narratives. I did, however, inform them of this change in procedure and continuously welcomed any feedback, questions, or additional comments from the participants. I did not receive any negative feedback as a result of this change.

## **Feminist In-Depth Interviewing**

Hesse-Biber (2006:118) describes in-depth feminist interviewing as “[seeking] to understand the ‘lived experiences’ of the individual... [and] the ‘subjective’ understanding an individual brings to a given situation or set of circumstances.” Throughout the data collection process, I, in accordance with the tenets and goals of feminist research, was concerned with minimizing the power hierarchy between the researcher and the researched, ensuring the two parties remained on the same plane (Hesse-Biber 2006). The goal of feminist research is to obtain an understanding of the lives of women and other oppressed groups, promoting social justice and social change (Hesse-Biber 2006).

The praxis of feminist interviewing maintains a balance of power by practicing reflexivity throughout the data collection and analysis. To engage in reflexivity is to engage in the process of recognizing, examining, and understanding how the researcher’s own social background and assumptions can intervene in the research process (Hesse-Biber 2006). Also, as previously stated, I gave participants the opportunity to review their interview transcripts and provide feedback, further including them in the research process. I also engaged in practices of self-critique throughout data analysis to continuously become a more effective feminist interviewer.

## **Data Analysis**

As put forth by Hesse-Biber and Flowers (2019:497), one of the guiding principles of feminist research is to privilege the voices of the research participants. In order to “reinforce” this tenet, I utilized a grounded theory approach in data analysis (Hesse-Biber and Flowers 2019:497). The goal of grounded theory in feminist research is, through the processes of data collection and analysis, “to develop new knowledge...[and] to generate a range of theoretical ideas that remain closely tied to real world social processes” (Hesse-Biber and Flowers 2019:498). Integral to the

grounded theory approach is theoretical sampling—the process of data collection for generating theory through which the researcher simultaneously collects and analyzes data to decide what data to collect next (Glaser and Strauss 1967:45). This enables the researcher to develop theory as it emerges (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Central to my data analysis was writing memos. Immediately after each interview, I wrote a memo including major themes in the narrative, ideas or anecdotes that surprised me to hear, anything that resonated with me or that I could relate to, and any apparent connections to other interviews. These post-interview memos were crucial in informing themes I wanted to discuss or specific questions I wanted to ask in future interviews. I was able to ask new participants about themes that were brought up by the other women, themes I would not have otherwise considered. This practice is central to a grounded theory approach. Previous interviews truly did shape the direction of future interviews. I also wrote memos throughout the entire process of data analysis, especially on patterns I saw emerging and anything that surprised me. These memos provided an easy and accessible reference when looking back on each interview, as well as inspiration when writing this paper.

My data analysis process had two main iterations: one for the first four interviews and another for the final five. As previously mentioned, I fully transcribed the first five interviews. I then utilized the software HyperResearch to do line-by-line coding of each transcript. Through this coding and subsequent categorizing, I was able to distill numerous themes that were emerging from the data. Not only did these themes inform the next five interviews, but they also served as the framework for analyzing the next interviews.

Due to the time constraints of this project and the recruitment crisis that ensued, which I discuss in the Methodological Note, I was not able to fully transcribe and code line-by-line for the

second wave of interviews. Given that I had a solid foundation and understanding from the first four, though, I felt confident in my shift in analysis. Instead of transcribing each interview, I continued the practice of writing in-depth memos and only transcribed certain sections or quotes of the interview. I used these memos, along with those I had written for and what I had observed in the first four interviews, to identify themes and patterns from all nine interviews. I was able to use the next five interviews to either confirm, contradict, or expand upon ideas I had found through coding and categorizing the first four interviews. It was through this process of memoing and comparison that I was able to put all nine of the interviews into conversation with each other. The themes discussed in the Results section are an outcome of this compounded data analysis process.<sup>2</sup>

Qualitative research differs from quantitative research in that it is iterative. The concurring processes of data analysis and collection are ongoing and evolving—which means even the finalized version of this paper is simply the point at which I decided to pause for the purposes of this project. Moreover, as previously mentioned in the explanation of feminist research, I used the process of data analysis as an opportunity to engage in self-reflection and self-critique. As the data collection and analysis processes are intrinsically linked in a grounded theory approach, this self-assessment of my own interview style and biases allowed for continuous development and improvement of my interviewing style and skills.

### **Reflexivity: Role of the Researcher**

I am a white, Latin-American woman. This identity comes from both my mixed racial identity and the strong Latin culture in which I grew up. My mother is first-generation in the

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<sup>2</sup> For the sake of clarity, as the numbers may be confusing, I transcribed the first five interviews in full; this includes the four interviews in the “first wave” and the first interview in the “second wave,” the fifth interview overall. I coded the first four interviews. This shift in data analysis occurred after transcribing the fifth interview but before I was able to code it. Therefore, there are full transcriptions for five interviews, of which I coded four.

United States, with her parents coming from the Caribbean islands of Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, and my father's side are multi-generational white Americans with ancestry in Europe. I am also a minority student at a predominantly white university. My time at college has made me reflect on my own identities and how I embrace these parts of myself. I have numerous female friends, both Latin and non-Latin, who have struggled with body image and beauty standards, as well as experiencing some of this myself. Much of my coursework at college has focused on the effects of racism, sexism, oppression, and societal beauty standards—among other pertinent topics. My personal background, relationships, social experiences, and academic interests catalyzed my desire to gain subjugated knowledge on patterns of behavior related to these topics, as well as to generate theory.

I took various steps to limit personal bias in this project. Throughout the data collection and analysis processes, I employed multiple practices of reflexivity, such as asking participants for clarification or further explanation, limiting assumptions throughout the interviews, and writing memos on what elements of the interviews resonate with me personally. If they chose, participants also had the opportunity to review and provide feedback on the transcript of their interview. I also met frequently with my faculty advisor to discuss the research process. More on my role in this research is discussed in the Methodological Note at the end of this paper.

## CHAPTER THREE: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As discussed in the Research Design, feminist research seeks to build knowledge centering on the lives of women and other oppressed groups, so the organization of this chapter is grounded in the narrative data (Hesse-Biber and Flowers 2019). I have observed, analyzed, and constructed seven major themes in order to shed light on the processes through which these nine Latina women have developed their various identities and navigated beauty standards throughout their lives.<sup>3</sup> Building on the existing literature, the following are themes identified from my grounded theory analysis: the role of the family in identity development; the messages women received about beauty while growing up; feeling in between two different spheres; understanding larger social forces to navigate one's own experience; external pressures to adopt a specific identity; finding and creating spaces for oneself on a college campus; and defining beauty.

### **Theme 1. Familial Influences on Identity Development**

Many of the women talked about their family as integral to the development of their identities. Looking at the role and importance of the family provides an effective and interesting backdrop with which to frame and better understand how identity is developed over time and what factors contribute to this.

Central to the way she was raised in Ecuador is Kate's family. She grew up with an understanding that family is "by far" the most important thing and was surrounded by people who will "do anything" for their family. While she was always close with her extended family, her parents always prioritized her and her brothers. They always created a space for the four children to "just be [themselves]." Kate's parents instilled in her the values of working hard, following your dreams, making the best of a situation, and making things happen for yourself. Kate notes

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<sup>3</sup> I have used pseudonyms in place of the participants' real names in this paper.

that her family, both nuclear and extended, is one that is supportive and full of kindness and respect. At the same time, she observes that being close with a “big” family can be unhealthy or complicated at times. For example, there is sometimes a lack of honesty or directness when communicating within the extended family to avoid “fighting.” This can also be viewed as a positive, though, as Kate loves that people in her culture are “flowery when they speak,” meaning they try to be careful and avoid making others feel uncomfortable.

These familial values and the prioritization of one’s family are deeply-rooted and have stuck with Kate throughout college. She notes her parents supported her and pushed her to be brave and venture outside of her comfort zone, leading her to find and create spaces for herself on campus. Furthermore, the characteristics she seeks and values in her friends parallel those of her family: She values kindness and support “a lot, a lot, a lot.” Kate also views this frequent indirectness in communication as “beautiful...[because] people are able to like really consider the other and, uhm, in a way that I find to be a lot more empathetic and compassionate.” Kate values her family relationships in Ecuador, which in turn have influenced how she navigates college in the United States.

Bianca echoes some of those same sentiments that Kate discussed. Bianca says she loves that in Venezuelan culture one is “expected for be very tightly-knit with” parents, siblings, and extended family. She enjoys how close her entire family is, and even though her extended family live in Venezuela while she attends college in the United States, she feels “very connected” to them. In regards to her nuclear family in particular, Bianca says that her mother raised her and her siblings to be nice to each other and not to fight. Her parents were very supportive and encouraged them to do well in school but did not pressure them to do anything they did not want to do. She describes her family unit as having a “loving nature.”

On the other hand, Bianca's family experiences posed a challenge to her while growing up in the United States: English is both of her parents' second language. Bianca discusses how she was self-conscious about her parents, who are from Venezuela, having an accent while "[other students'] parents [didn't] have an accent, like they [could] speak good English." She was aware that her parents' interactions with other parents from school were not as "easy" because they "didn't talk about the same stuff," which stemmed from their very different cultures. She says both of her parents are "charismatic people" so it did not matter so much to them, but rather this cultural difference was an "internal thing" Bianca held onto and judged her parents for. This anecdote is important in understanding Bianca's growth towards accepting her differences. The reality of her family's history and culture proved to be a very direct insecurity for Bianca, but she has "obviously" since grown out of this internal judgment.

While Bianca's experiences with her parents' different culture made her insecure growing up, Emma credits her parents and grandmother with instilling in her a sense of pride in her cultural and ethnic identities from a very young age. Her parents are divorced, so she lived with her mother and grandmother, who stepped in to play the "mom-role" while her mother worked. Emma's grandmother is Guatemalan, so Emma grew up very "invested in" Guatemalan culture—whether it be speaking exclusively Spanish at home or watching *novelas* with her family. Emma has a "small, tight-knit family at home," comprised of her and her brother, mother, and grandmother, but she says it never felt small for her mother and grandmother. "Something that was like interesting to me is like they [her mother and grandmother] would never see it [the small family] that way because on holidays they're thinking about like all of their family and sisters and brothers, like extended family, who still live in Guatemala," she says. So, the first way in which she got to know her extended family in Guatemala was through speaking with her mother and grandmother.

Emma would talk to her family on the phone, and though she did not know them personally, “[she] always felt like a sense of family and like welcome.” Emma insightfully describes this experience as learning about her culture through dialogue, meaning she learned about her Guatemalan culture and family exclusively through narratives until she was able to visit the country at a later age, which she describes as learning about her culture through experience.

Moreover, Emma’s father is of Italian heritage, so he enrolled her and her brother in Italian camps to learn about this part of their cultural identities. When talking about her parents, Emma says, “I feel like they just always tried to like invest us into culture and like tell us like, ‘Oh, like, you’re Italian and like Guatemalan, and that’s awesome. Like be proud of that.’ It’s like cool to grow up like that.” Emma credits her parents with raising her to take pride in all aspects of her cultural identities.

Like Emma, Gabby’s family has instilled in her a sense of cultural pride. Gabby was born and raised in the northeast United States, and her parents are immigrants from Guatemala and Venezuela. She credits her grandmother with teaching her and her brother about their indigenous Guatemalan culture, “which is a completely different from uhm, you know, from other Hispanic or Latin culture.” Perhaps most importantly, Gabby’s grandmother has taught them to speak K’iche’ in order to communicate with their family members still living in Guatemala. Her family lives on indigenous territories in Guatemala and speaks primarily K’iche’—Spanish is their second language. Indigenous food is also a major part of Gabby’s cultural identity, one taught to her and embraced by her grandmother, as well. Gabby talks about the traditional foods she grew up eating—dishes like *tortillas* and *tamales*—which are made from *masa*. *Masa* is a staple in the diet of her indigenous Guatemalan family and has affected how “their body develops physically, as well.” Gabby recently learned that *masa*, when eaten for long periods of time, can affect people

biologically, contributing to the physical attributes—such as her nose and eyes—that identify her as indigenous. For Gabby, her culture not only affects how she emotionally identifies as indigenous but also how she identifies based on her physical appearance. Gabby’s grandmother has been an influential figure in this development.

Gabby also talks about struggling to balance her American nationality and identity with her indigenous and Latin identities, something that mainly started in college. She “still [has] like a lot of questions to this day” about how to navigate these intersecting identities but has found that researching these topics and talking to people helps her “understand more like who [she is], too.” Becoming more engaged with her culture and talking with her family in and from Venezuela and Guatemala has helped her overcome some of her doubts and struggles when it comes to her identity. In this sense, Gabby’s family is supportive in helping her discern who she is and how she identifies.

Having a close-knit family is one of Becky’s favorite parts of her Latin culture and identity. She describes her culture as “very Guatemalan-heavy” because her grandmother, who is first-generation Guatemalan, is “very much the matriarch of the family.” Becky observes a difference between her experience and those of her white, non-Hispanic friends when it comes to family. “It’s not really a choice to be close to your family or not. Like that’s just how it is,” she explains of her own experience. Compare this to her white friends who either do not have that pressure or have a choice in it. Becky does not see this tight family culture as a negative, though. She values learning where her family is from, her family’s history, and she admires how her family of immigrants has—particularly how the women in her family have—been “so proactive..., [used] agency..., [and] fought for themselves.” She is grateful for the immigrant work ethic that has been passed down. Being part of a close-knit family has cultivated a sense of cultural pride and

admiration in Becky, both for Guatemalan culture but also the integrity that comes from being an immigrant.

These values are exemplified in the ways in which Becky's parents raised her, *who* they raised her to be. Becky explains how her parents raised her, especially as the eldest girl, to be able to "protect the family." They wanted her to be "confident in any situation," to feel like she could do anything; it was unacceptable for her to be too shy to say or do something. Becky recounts a story when her dad challenged her to sneak into the movies without paying to test her people skills. Oftentimes traits such as confidence or "people skills" are seen as masculine, but Becky thought of this more as "Oh, girls can do that, too. Girls can do that, too."

These lessons on confidence from her parents have been a source of contention for Becky as she has gotten older, though. She definitely felt a pressure that "boys don't really like it when you're loud," when you speak what is on your mind and are not afraid of anyone or anything—*especially* as a woman of color. Starting in college, she thought these traits that her parents valued, and that she once valued, were unattractive and something she should change about herself. She did not want to always be "this loud, chaotic person" when she already stood out at a predominantly white university. Internalizing the male gaze, Becky began raising her hand less frequently in class.

Now, Becky is trying to find a balance between being herself and defying the stereotypes about Latinas, who are thought of as "fiery" and "quick to snap." "How do you walk that line between being confident and knowing who you are and like wanting to say what you're gonna say and like taking up space in a room, but also not fitting into this stereotype?" she asks. "Because I don't want to be what everyone expects me to be." Extending this question to her pride in and love for her family, Becky says she is proud of her family history, "but being proud of the Latina

trope is something else.” Becky is actively trying to navigate being an authentic and confident version of herself, as her parents encourage her to be, without embodying the stereotypes of Latina women, something she must grapple with because of her ethnic identities.

## **Theme 2. Comparing Messages Regarding Bodies and Beauty**

To understand the messages these women received regarding their bodies and beauty growing up, it is helpful to conceptualize their experiences as if on a spectrum, with Becky on one end and Bianca on the other. Becky did not receive affirmations or comments from her parents about her beauty, leading her to feel valued for other characteristics. Bianca felt the influence of two conflicting perspectives on beauty from her parents, causing her to develop negative body image. The other narratives fall somewhere in between.

Becky says her mother did “a very good job of not talking about beauty at all,” meaning she never commented on the way Becky looked. Rather, as discussed above, Becky felt more valued by her parents for skills and traits other than how she looked, like confidence and people skills. She admits that growing up she did wish her mom would compliment her more, as the lack of comments made her question whether she was pretty. Because she was never complemented on or valued for her beauty or appearance, Becky says that even today she “[doesn’t] have a good idea of what [she] look[s] like, really. Or how that comes off.”

Becky recognizes, though, that society sets a beauty standard whether or not you—or your mom—are looking for it; there will always be external forces telling you what is pretty, especially with social media. Navigating through that, Becky says, is “never easy,” especially in predominantly white societies and colleges. Now, upon reflection, she feels that to be beautiful is to be authentic and free from societal expectations of beauty. Becky thinks about how she would

potentially want to raise her children, saying she would never want to validate a daughter based on her physical appearance “when women are so much more complex than that.”

In stark contrast, Bianca was hyper-aware of her appearance growing up, and she suffered from body image issues in high school. The women in her family perpetuated diet culture, always “eating low-fat, low-carb, low-whatever.” This was the language she grew up around. At the same time, her father cooks a lot and loves food, so there was always a lot of food in her house. This led to two conflicting voices: (1) Don’t eat too much so you do not get fat, but (2) eat the food that you are given. This played into Bianca inability to listen to her own body, which she recognizes was not intuitive eating. Bianca explains to me how her father would give the kids plates of food at dinner and they could not leave until they had finished their food—which is counterintuitive when she tried to say she was full or wanted more. This “threw everything off” in terms of not only how much she ate but also her relationship with food. Bianca’s friends at school also perpetuated this diet culture, always trying to eat well or trying to eat healthy: “Just typical diet culture...[and] typical diet conversations.”

This dichotomy of diet culture and the constant pressure to eat made it so that Bianca believed body weight and body image were a big part of how beauty was evaluated. Moreover, her mother always encouraged Bianca and her sister to “dress up more,” as she could not understand how some people left their homes in “sweatpants, pajamas, [and] flip flops.” Upon reflection, Bianca realizes that she did not like how she looked back then as much as she does now. “I think it was hard for me to fully love myself and love all the parts of me. Like it was, it was so—like emphasized that you had to be pretty and you had to look good and look nice,” she explains. These negative experiences growing up are what later encouraged her to engage in body positivity and nutrition work to combat diet culture on her college campus.

The messages Anna received about her body and beauty growing up fall more in line with Becky's experience than with Bianca's. Anna talks about the beauty ideal in Nicaragua: "You have to have curves, but you have to be skinny at the same time. And you have to have beautiful hair, and the lips, and the this. So yeah." She discusses the stereotypical Latina as having an hourglass figure. Furthermore, lighter skin is preferred and more appealing in her culture because it is associated with wealth—a connection that Anna observes stems from the colonial history in many Latin American cultures. Anna then talks about how it is common for Nicaraguan parents to pay for their daughters' plastic surgeries and gym memberships because "they want their daughter to be like the perfect little Latina" and fit that specific ideal. Anna's parents, though, just wanted her to be happy; they did not raise her expecting to change her body. "My parents are like, 'As long as you're happy, we're good. You don't have to change your body. Like stop,'" she says. When Anna was younger, she wanted breast augmentation surgery, though she has since grown out of this desire. Her parents, despite cultural norms and pressures, encouraged Anna to be happy with her natural self, a sentiment that ultimately changed her own views regarding her body from desiring alteration to accepting it.

Kate's narrative has similarities to both Becky's and Bianca's experiences. Similar to Bianca, Kate experienced the influence of two opposing perspectives on beauty and on her body growing up. She grew up with two grandmothers who are "very skinny." When she goes home to Ecuador to visit, the first thing they comment on is whether she has gained or lost weight. Sometimes these opinions made her feel insecure, but at the same time, her parents were not pushing this emphasis on weight—similar to Becky's parents. Both of Kate's parents always had less concern about her appearance and more on her health. Kate's mom grew up with a mother (Kate's grandmother) constantly telling her she was "too fat," so that inspired her to teach Kate

and her brothers that how one looks “is not a big deal.” Rather, it is more important to be healthy; it is important to value oneself but not to center life around their body. Kate’s mom emphasized the importance of who you are as a person, who you want to be. It is more about who you are striving to be and how you act versus the way you look. These sentiments echo those of Becky’s parents. Kate says her parents have definitely influenced the way she sees herself, though sometimes she wishes they gave more attention to her body growing up. Kate feels like she sometimes pushes her body aside, as if it does not matter that much. She has taken her parents’ beliefs as guidance to push her body aside and find her value elsewhere. Her body is “not a source of insecurity [for her] but not a source of security either.” While Kate is grateful to have parents who encouraged her to find value in parts of herself other than her body, she simultaneously regrets that this came at the expense of sometimes prioritizing or taking care of her body—a theme which Maggie discusses, as well.

Maggie’s experiences also echo the presence of two opposing definitions of beauty as in Bianca’s narrative. Growing up in Mexico, “beauty was very much a feminine thing” and encompassed much more than appearance. Beauty is “complete” in the sense that “it’s about the way that you carry yourself around others, and how you act, and what you do, and how you speak, and what others think of you.” It includes not only physical beauty but also mannerisms. Beauty was discussed frequently in school—with students conversing about “Who looks the prettiest today? Who looks like they just rolled out of bed?”—and also between the women around which she grew up at home—asking questions like, “Oh, who eats like a pig? Who only eats like grapes for lunch? Who sits with their legs open versus who crosses their legs when they sit down?” Maggie was very aware of who was considered beautiful and for what reasons. Another key facet of beauty in Mexico was that it was “mutually exclusive” from intelligence: Picture a Venn

diagram with beauty and intelligence in two separate categories with minimal overlap. Maggie observes that “people that were beautiful were also always very dumb uhm because they would like focus more on beauty,” suggesting that a woman has to choose to be either beautiful or intelligent.

While she never thought she was “the most beautiful,” Maggie was very focused on her school work as a student with hopes of coming to college in the United States—that is, until around the age of 16. At this point in her life, Maggie wanted to focus more on the beauty aspects. She wanted to “get noticed, and have boyfriends, and feel beautiful when [she] went to parties and all that”; she no longer wanted to just be “the smart girl.” This led her to developing “really bad” body image. While she does not think she had an eating disorder, Maggie realizes she had body dysmorphia at this time in her life, during which she put her attention towards beauty instead of intellect. Maggie would describe herself as on the “heavier spectrum of girls in Mexico.” And while other Mexican mothers may encourage their daughters to lose weight because “you have to be slim to be beautiful,” Maggie’s American mother never instilled that value in her. Her mother let her eat whatever she wanted and made her feel “very good about [herself] as a kid.” Here, similar to Bianca’s experiences, Maggie received mixed messages about beauty and her body, from Mexican culture at large and from her American mother. As she got older, Maggie resented her mom “for a bit,” blaming her for letting Maggie be overweight—though now Maggie realizes that she was never “fat.” She has since grown out of the mindset that weight is tied to beauty and can now think of herself and others as beautiful regardless of weight. Maggie now considers health, mental wellbeing, and happiness better standards for beauty.

As in Bianca, Maggie, and Kate’s narratives, the influence of two opposing definitions of beauty is central to the messages Isabel received growing up: “Beauty is different in like white

and Hispanic communities, or at least like to my friends versus my family.” First, Isabel observes that her friends in high school, all of whom are white, “always had to be like super insanely skinny, super straight hair, uhm, usually like small curves but not very curvy.” This was in stark contrast to her Latin family who are “kind of bigger boned, have more curves, and stuff like that” and emphasized the importance of, embracing their natural beauty. Her mother always encouraged Isabel to wear her naturally curly hair, and if she was beginning to look skinny, her family is “gonna be shoving food down [her] throat” and question, “Why are you skinny? Why are you doing that?”

These conflicting opinions of beauty left Isabel stuck balancing wanting to look like her friends and listening to her mother. An example of this dichotomy is body hair. Isabel says she “[is] just a hairy person” while “[her] white friends are like basically hairless...they shave once a week, and they’re fine.” Isabel once asked her mother if she could use Nair—an at-home hair removal cream that “basically just burns off your skin”—on her stomach and back before going to the beach with her friends. Laughing, she says her mother could not understand why Isabel would want to remove her body hair: “Like why are you messing with your hair? Like what? That’s just how you are, like no one’s gonna look at that.” Her mother’s perspective on body hair removal, Isabel notes, comes from cultural differences: Her mother grew up in a diverse area with lots of different types of people, while Isabel grew up around only one (white) type. But when Isabel compared herself to her white friends, her body hair was a source of insecurity. Contrasting perspectives on beauty made it difficult for Isabel to reconcile the two standards.

The messages Sara received about her body lean more towards Bianca’s experiences in that her parents did set certain expectations for her. In her family, as in many Venezuelan families, how one looks and presents themselves is important, and there are certain rules to follow regarding

appearance. Respecting your body is important so that “other people...have that respect of your body.” This means not exposing your body too much by wearing short clothes, a perspective Sara notes comes from Catholicism. Also central in her family’s beauty expectations is looking presentable. This includes having your hair well-brushed and “looking nice,” wearing at least a little bit of makeup, “obviously” wearing clothes that match, and always wearing earrings. Her family is also “big on having your nails done nicely.” Sara also discusses how the expectations for appearance are subjective and dependent on the masculine figure in the home. For example, her father is “a huge makeup guy” and “always” tells her and her mom to put on some makeup, or “at least” some lipstick. Sara “hates” putting things on her face, so she wonders, “Why does it matter to you [her father]? Like it’s me.”

While Sara’s parents have certainly played a role in how she presents herself, as that is the way she was raised to think about these topics, she no longer looks to them for affirmations on her appearance. She still values their opinions and they remain a part of her decision making, but her parents’ opinions are no longer all that she takes into consideration, they do not entirely make her what or who she is. “I feel like I have power in how I look now,” she says. Sara recognizes that part of this difference between her and her parents is that she was raised in the United States, leading to somewhat of a different perspective on topics like beauty and presentability.

Gabby’s experiences with beauty growing up parallel Bianca’s because both women were left with a negative sense of body image. Gabby says that in Venezuela and Guatemala, and in Hispanic culture at large, “it’s more of, you know, the thin ideal uhm and beauty being number one if you’re a girl.” Because of this, it was “pretty difficult” to feel comfortable with herself growing up “when there are always flaws that are pointed out.” A major source of insecurity for Gabby was her weight. When she started playing sports in middle school and therefore wearing

shorts and short-sleeved shirts for practice or as part of the uniform, she would “hear comments” from other adults about how she “shouldn’t be wearing clothes for, you know, skinny girls, or [she] shouldn’t be wearing shorts because uhm [she was] showing everything” because she “was a bit in the heavier side.”

Growing up and not fitting into that thin beauty ideal was certainly a struggle for Gabby. It “really affected the way, you know, not only how I thought about myself but also the way I thought about, you know, how like smart I was. So, it wasn’t just like one day like just physical, how I am physically, but also like uhm how, you know, I was mentally,” she explains. These comments and insecurities stuck with her, to the point where she would wear sweatpants to volleyball practice instead of the uniform shorts. Gabby believed weight was tied to “the aesthetic part” of beauty. For example, if she found even the “smallest thing” that made her upset about her appearance, she thought, “Yeah, like that makes sense, you know. I’m above, you know, this weight.”

Unlike some of the other women who perceived two opposing definitions of beauty, though, Gabby did not receive validation or reinforcement from her parents when she brought up these issues because, as she explains, mental health is not often talked about in Latin culture. When she was younger and brought these comments about her weight to her parents, “they would just say to like either not listen to them or uhm just to wear a different dress”—an answer that left Gabby feeling confused and frustrated. When she got to high school though, Gabby became more vocal about these comments and her insecurities, and her mother started to become aware that “words do hurt.” Gabby understands the cultural difference between her upbringing in the U.S. and those of her parents in Guatemala and Venezuela, a realization that has helped her understand these issues as cultural problems and not just a personal issue. Through conceptualizing this

problem on a cultural level and through finding supportive friends at college, Gabby has since begun to shift this narrative in her head, and though “it took a while...[she] think[s] [she is] getting closer to just like that confidence, too.”

### **Theme 3. The In Between**

Isabel is a first-generation American, with Dominican and Colombian heritage, and grew up in a predominantly white town in the Northeast; she identifies as Hispanic and Latina. However, it was difficult for her to embrace her Hispanic identity in such a homogeneous town and school, and she started exploring this side of herself once she got to college and joined a Latin student affinity group on campus. She tells me about a group she recently created with other alumni of color from her high school who have been working on social justice projects, such as volunteering and writing articles, to create progressive change in her town.

One of the themes they have discussed is “the In Between.” It is not something Isabel realized she was a part of until she got to college, and it is “this feeling of feeling like you’re in between two different cultures, two different spheres.” She provides an example: At college she found herself walking into parties and gravitating towards white students, because that is what she was surrounded by and used to in high school, but also “feeling the need to prove to white students at [college] that [she is] like, like them.” At the same time, she felt “scared” to approach various Latinx groups on campus, worrying, “They’re not gonna accept me, I don’t speak Spanish. They’re probably like, ‘What is this girl doing over here?’” She struggled to find where she fit in both of those spheres. A doubt she often experiences is, “I’m not Latina enough”—stemming mostly from her insecurity of not speaking fluent Spanish. Isabel describes being in the In Between as “this constant feeling like I have to please both sides and wanting to please both sides but feeling

like I don't fit in in either one." Isabel's description of the In Between serves as a framework to understand how some of the other women share similar experiences.

Similar to Isabel, Gabby was born and raised in the United States, though she grew up in a community with a strong Latin, specifically indigenous Guatemalan, influence. When she came to college, she had two roommates who were international students from South America and realized "there's a huge difference because [she's], you know, American, like nationality's American, compared to them." This difference in Americanization led Gabby to wonder, "Okay, like then how am I like actually, you know, Latina," a doubt similar to the one Isabel experiences. Gabby had never felt her Latin identity was not "enough" until she met students who were actually from Latin America. This proved to be difficult for Gabby, as "[she] still has a lot of questions to this day" about balancing these two parts of herself. It is hard to find a balance between being American and also having such strong indigenous and Latin identities, especially when she is at college because "[she's] very attuned with, you know, American culture here." Part of her journey in navigating these challenges has been to become more engaged with her culture and speaking with her family about these topics.

Emma's experience in the In Between stems from navigating the social scene at school growing up. Friend groups in her school were "an interesting case" because people would group together with other people who "looked like them," leaving Emma in a difficult situation of trying to discern which groups would accept her. Emma identifies as white, Hispanic, and Latina, identities that stem from her mixed Guatemalan and Italian heritage, and she grew up very engaged with her Guatemalan culture. Noting the cultural differences at her school, she says

If I tried to be friends, I feel like, more of the people who I thought had a more similar background to me, I like didn't always feel uhm super welcomed because they like associated me with like being more white, I guess. And so, they didn't think that I had like these connections to them that like I felt like I did.

Her overlapping identities of being Latina and also white left her grappling with what groups she belonged to. The groups she personally felt connected to did not fully accept her because of her lighter skin and physical appearance.

Becky and Bianca both discuss being white-passing, a reality that falls into the In Between. Becky always knew she was part white but would not identify herself as white until reflecting on her privilege in high school and into college. She identifies as a woman of color and recognizes the privileges she has that many non-white people do not; so, she is also white-passing. Though she now identifies as white, Hispanic, and Latina, she knows that she is not “as white” as some other people because she faces the intersection of ethnicity. Bianca also identifies as white, Hispanic, and Latina because she is white-passing, as most of her family is also white. This causes other people to have different assumptions about her because it is not “as clear” that she is *also* Hispanic and Latina. Therefore, saying she is just white would not be all-encompassing. Becky’s and Bianca’s experiences with being “white-passing” Latina women puts them in a space in between two separate spheres. These women experience some privilege but are also not “as white” as people who may solely identify as white, without the added identity of being Latina.

Maggie’s experience in the In Between is unique in that she grew up as Mexican American in Mexico while the other women grew up in the United States. Maggie grew up wanting to hide her American side because she wanted to fit in with her Mexican peers. She would tell her mother, who is American, to speak in Spanish—even though her friends could understand her English and her Spanish was “quite broken” at the time—and she also tried to fake a “bad American accent” in class. It is interesting, Maggie explains, because students would call her *gringa* in school, but once she came to the U.S. for college, people began calling her Mexican. Maggie feels as though she never really completely fit in growing up, though now she has accepted that she is both.

#### **Theme 4. Recognizing Larger Social Forces**

All of the women interviewed have faced some challenges stemming from their identities and differences. One way that many have navigated these experiences is by learning about and recognizing the larger social forces at play, helping them understand their own positionality.

In her discussion of being a woman of color but also someone who is white-passing, recognizing her own privilege was crucial in Becky's understanding of her role in navigating social justice issues. She learned about intersecting and complex issues of white privilege in high school, leading her to reflect on the privileges she has that many non-white people do not. She entered college thinking it was going to be another private Catholic school, similar to high school, but was confronted with social justice issues and her role as a woman of color at a predominantly white university. Becky says it is difficult being the only woman of color, or sometimes person of color, a lot of the time at college, something she balances with trying not to be tokenized. She notes that this is an interesting experience because she still experiences "way more" privilege than other people, some of which has to do with ethnicity and some of which does not. Learning about her own privilege, a social force much broader than her own experiences, has helped her discern when it is her time to speak on issues as a woman of color—and when it is not—and reinforced the importance of standing in solidarity with other people of color. This is something that has changed for her over the past year.

Another facet of Becky's privilege is wealth. She observes that there is "pressure for a lot of white-passing people of color to use like money as a way to like erase ethnicity in some sense." In other words, "you get a white pass if you have money." Becky's observations on the intersections of wealth, race, and ethnicity and privilege show that wealth is associated with whiteness. Coming from an upper-class background and also identifying as white-passing,

Becky's discussion here sheds light on how she views and makes sense of her various identities and positionality.

Another area of her life that Becky has been able to better navigate by understanding larger social forces at play is in regards to beauty standards. When talking about how societal beauty standards pose pressures on women, specifically Latina women, to look a certain way, Becky says, "Why is that aspect of beauty even a thing? Why does society value that specific thing? Once you can understand the construction of that value through a usually male, white, hegemonic power, then you can come to accept that standard or reject it." Moreover, Becky says that she walks a fine line between "wanting to be desired and also any sense of being hypersexualized." She finds a tension between wanting to look pretty, feel confident, and "be sexually desirable without being hypersexualized." As a young Latina woman, it can feel good to be seen as pretty but not hypersexualized and objectified. Part of walking this line and navigating these contrasting forces, especially when it comes to dating, has been "being sensitive to Latinas being hypersexualized in the media [and] recognizing that this is what a lot of what white society values about Latina women." Again, understanding the "Latina trope" and why these hypersexual stereotypes for Latina women exist has aided Becky in striking a balance in her own life.

Emma has also learned to navigate beauty standards by looking at the larger social forces that play into how we define beauty. When she was younger, Emma leaned into much of what other people considered beautiful: "Uhm and so I guess like I kind of would take like other people's forms of beauty before I would like accept my own definition. And like I think I was kind of using their definition to form like this universal definition that I should accept, as well." Growing up and throughout her time at college thus far, though, she has been working towards "acceptance... and how to value different, different things and like value yourself." Emma has grown to

understand that, “Okay, wait, I can actually like find my own definition [of beauty], and it’s not going to make you happy if you try to compare yourself to one beautiful thing.” While this is something she had to work on, learn about, and grow into, she is on a path of understanding that one size does not necessarily fit all when it comes to beauty. This is an interesting point because it ties into her inclusion of diversity when defining beauty, as mentioned in the final theme of this chapter. For Emma, learning to understand that one universal definition of beauty can inhibit one’s happiness has helped her discern what beauty means to her personally. It has given her the power to define beauty in her own terms, not society’s.

Anna also discusses the liberation that comes from separating oneself from societal beauty standards. Growing up in Nicaragua, she was overwhelmed with the idea that the ideal Latina “[has] to have like big boobs, a tiny torso, and like a big butt,” referencing actress Sofia Vergara as the model. When she was younger, Anna wanted breast augmentation surgery because she “kind of [has] a big butt, but [she doesn’t] have boobs.” She believed that while she had naturally achieved one part of the beauty ideal, she still needed to alter her body to meet the other half. But when she turned 18, Anna changed her mind: “Why would I do that? That makes no sense. Like no. That’s an ideal that, that isn’t for me. Like I don’t have to do that.” While she could not recognize that the beauty ideal was unattainable as a child, she has grown to accept that she does not have to meet all of society’s expectations for her body. Anna says she no longer “bother[s]” comparing herself to others because there are so many unattainable beauty standards; she is more concerned with how she feels about herself.

Moving away from beauty standards in particular, Bianca talks about comments she received growing up about her differences—such as looking different in a predominantly white area and the assumptions people have about her because of her appearance. Growing up, these

comments were certainly frustrating and made her feel different than her peers, a feeling she says is common amongst people of color or mixed kids: You look different, so you feel different. However, over time, she has learned to accept herself and appreciate her differences rather than wish she was like the majority. This growth comes from identifying internal pressures and judgments—such as asking, “What are you telling yourself?”—and external factors, such as microaggressions and comments that make you feel isolated. Being conscious and aware of these factors has helped her navigate differences and learn to accept them; Bianca has grown, matured, and learned how to better handle these experiences. Moreover, she has learned not to put the blame on an individual person but rather on other societal impacts and stereotypes “or things like that that affect the way people talk to each other.” It seems that shifting this blame from individuals with whom she has had negative experiences to larger social phenomena has helped Bianca grow to accept her differences and move past people’s assumptions or comments about her.

A major theme in Gabby’s narrative, if not the main takeaway, is the importance of realizing that beauty standard problems are a cultural issue and not a personal struggle that one faces alone. As discussed above, Gabby received many negative comments about her weight as a child that manifested as long-held insecurities. One way through which she was able to work on overcoming these insecurities and gain self-confidence is through identifying the larger cultural issue. This has allowed her to be more attuned with herself and has helped her realize that she is her own person with agency to do what she pleases. Moreover, at the end of each interview, each woman had the opportunity to share their own thoughts or reflections, during which Gabby reiterated this theme of collective struggle in the midst of cultural problems. “Everything seems uhm like it’s a personal, like personal problem or even a journey that only you’re facing, or like perhaps any immigrant student is facing. Uhm, but what surprises me the most and like what I

always think about is how like uhm it's such a like wide issue, like it's a cultural issue," she says. Gabby recognizes that immigrant children face many challenges with self-esteem and beauty, and women face completely different issues than do men. She wants to emphasize that no one is alone in their struggle with beauty standards, it's just "how the world sees women." It is clear that pinpointing, researching, and reflecting on broader social issues has been critical in Gabby's overcoming of these childhood insecurities.

### **Theme 5. American Culture and Ticking Boxes: External Pressures to Identify**

Many of the women I interviewed, when expanding upon their identities and how they began to form these opinions of themselves, spoke about being put into a situation in which they had no choice but to identify themselves. While some identities stemmed from the way the women were raised, others developed through life experiences—such as coming into a new and different environment or ticking a box on a standardized test—or having other people push an identity onto them.

Sara spoke of her time growing up in South Florida, particularly about the diversity and significant presence and influence of Hispanic and Latin culture. Laughing, she said she "[doesn't] think South Florida is a part of the United States. It's a totally different place." Something as seemingly basic as her name, which people often have trouble pronouncing at college, is quite common in South Florida. It was only once she got to college in the Northeast that she started identifying as Latina because "[at home she] didn't have to." She observed that her college is predominantly white, everyone wore similar brands, and everyone was raised the same way, so she "was different in that aspect."

Sara had a difficult transition to college. "I'm telling you, I had the realization that, where, even though I had been living in the United States so many years, I hadn't realized that like I

wasn't really in the United States until I got to the Northeast," she says. Another significant difference for Sara was her accent, which she personally did not realize she had until other students at college pointed it out. This new and shocking experience of being different, of being a minority, left her searching for her "clique" and friends to whom she could relate. During her first year of college, she became friends with other students from South Florida, with whom she shared similar experiences. Her friends, many but not all of whom are Hispanic or Latin, "made [her] feel more at home [at college]." For Sara, even though she has spent most of her life living in the U.S., the transition from a diverse hometown with a strong Latin culture to a predominantly white college put her in a situation where she, for the first time, identified as Latina. It was not until she was in an environment where she was different that this identity took form.

Gabby had a similar experience to Sara. Though she is from the Northeast, Gabby also grew up in a community with a strong Latinx presence, specifically indigenous Guatemalans. "So uhm I just grew up alongside, you know, my peers or my friends like uhm coming to an understand that uhm, you know, we have this background and this culture that we all share," she describes. Her identities as Latina, Hispanic, and indigenous "definitely grew more as [she], you know, entered college coming in, you know, a predominantly white institution." Gabby experienced cultural, physical, and moral differences from her new peers. During her transition her first year was "when [she] really realized [her] identity uhm being, you know, a Latina in university, which [she] had never really thought about because [she] grew up alongside [her] peers." She calls her transition to college a "culture shock," which is striking considering she grew up not too far away.

While the transition to college made her Latin, Hispanic, and indigenous identities even stronger because she was suddenly different, exposure to different people at college also led Gabby to reconsider and doubt her identity. She had two roommates who were international students

from Latin America and realized “that even there, there’s a huge difference because [Gabby is], you know, American, like nationality’s American, compared to them [her roommates].” This realization made it difficult for Gabby to identify, as she thought, “Okay, like then how am I like actually, you know, Latina?” Important in discerning who she was after this realization was meeting like-minded people who felt similarly. Gabby’s friends, many of whom are Latina and American, have helped her reflect on what being Latina can mean.

Just as Sara and Gabby said they “didn’t have to” identify as Latina at home, Anna did not identify as Latina until she moved from Nicaragua to the U.S. for college. “I never really thought about it before until I got to the States when it’s like actually like an identifier, I guess, and it sets you apart, but yeah,” she says. “For college, it’s become like my main like source of identity, and it’s just, I don’t know, my culture’s just so different from people that live here [in the U.S.] and are originally like, from here. Uhm and it, I don’t know, it just, it’s so dear to my heart.” Anna did not identify as Latina because it was not something that made her different growing up, whereas in the U.S., her culture is something that makes her different. While Anna does discuss the personal struggles she faced being different at college—such as initially trying to hide being from Nicaragua because it “halted” many conversations with American students and trying to lose weight to fit the beauty ideal at college—this identity, being Latina, is now incredibly special to her and central to how she identifies. Anna says being different is “the most amazing part” because “not a lot of people can be like, ‘Oh, I’m from Nicaragua.’ And it’s like, it’s just, it’s like who [she is].”

Living in Mexico her entire life, Maggie had a personal understanding of who she was. Growing up alongside her peers, she never felt different: “We were just Mexican,” she says. While she has always considered herself white—she specifically notes her “very pale” skin tone as part

of this—there were not really “denominations” for race or ethnicity in Mexico like there are in the United States. In the U.S., how one racially or ethnically identifies is part of their identity, but this was not really on her mind in Mexico. Therefore, it was “weird” when people put identities on her when she moved to the U.S. for college. “I feel like some people wanted to have all these different like identities, which is like totally fine, but then they also kind of impose them on other people,” she observes. Maggie never came to the U.S. saying she was white and Latina, she just came saying she was Mexican American. “That’s just what I am,” she says. But then people started categorizing her into identifying groups, which was “a little odd” since she did not necessarily want to be put in those groups yet “was simply placed into them by others.” Though it was a different culture with pressures to identify and categorize people at first, Maggie has since “very much grown into them [her identities of Hispanic and Latina]” and appreciates having these various facets of herself. She is “not one to shy away from them,” as they are now a big part of who she is.

In a similar vein, Kate’s Hispanic and Latina identities were not something she had thought about often while growing up in Ecuador because issues of race and ethnicity were not really talked about. Everyone is considered *mestizo*, unless one is “obviously” something else, like indigenous or first-generation European.<sup>4</sup> “That distinction really creates itself when you’re exposed to people that aren’t like you, right,” says Kate. While she did attend an international high school in Ecuador and therefore was exposed to people from other countries, she was typically surrounded by people like her.

Identifying as Hispanic and Latina really started when Kate moved to the United States for college: “All of a sudden, you’re asked like, ‘Oh, what’s your race? What’s your ethnicity?’ right.

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<sup>4</sup> “*Mestizo*” means “mixed” in Spanish. It is a term referring to someone who is of mixed Spanish and indigenous ancestry (Pew Research Center 2015).

And you're like, 'Oh, shit. Like what am I?'" Unlike in Ecuador, in the U.S. there exists an option to be Hispanic or Latinx, "so I'm just ticking that off," she explained. "There's just nothing else I could say." Kate's experiences growing up in Ecuador, where she was mostly surrounded by and exposed to people similar to her, did not foster the development of identity—or the requirement and expectation to identify—as she has experienced in the U.S. Her exposure to a new and different environment, in which the people were also different, led her to now identifying as Hispanic and Latina.

Kate's references to "ticking" off an identity parallel Becky and Emma's discussions of standardized tests in their development of identity. Becky always grew up knowing she was Latina. She was raised with the idea that "Oh, you're Latina," that is simply how it was, and she did not really have a choice. She says it was "very common and normal" to be Latin in her hometown on the West Coast. On the other hand, Becky did not know she was "technically" white until high school. That is, she knew she was part-white but would not identify as such. She recounted a story of when she took a standardized test in high school and had to "check" white; then under white there was ethnicity, either Hispanic or non-Hispanic. She went home to Google this distinction and have a conversation with her parents: "Am I white?" In high school and into college Becky then further developed these identities, saying she reflected on her identity as a woman of color but also someone who is white-passing. She recognizes her privileges that non-white people do not have but also notes that she is "not as white" as some other people.

Becky says she faces the intersection of ethnicity. She did not really think much of growing up with a Latin identity and attending a predominantly white high school because her friends, the vast majority of whom are white, did not treat her any differently; the main differences setting Becky apart were her name and being better at Spanish than her classmates. These simultaneous

Latina and white identities were not necessarily apparent or clear to Becky until she had to tick off boxes on a standardized test, even though she grew up in predominantly white spaces. Becky grew up with a secure Latin identity, but her whiteness was something she came to terms with once a standardized test forced her to choose. In this sense, her experience differs from those of Kate and Sara because it was not a culture that put this pressure on her but rather a bureaucratic exam. But in a larger sense, the theme of being confronted with a situation that pressures one to identify in a certain way is the same.

Emma's experience is similar to Becky's in that she identifies as Latina and Hispanic and white, as well. She grew up surrounded by Guatemalan culture, as well as Italian. She talks about her unique social experiences since people in school often formed friend groups with people who "looked like them," leaving her feeling not entirely connected to people with whom she thought she shared a similar background. Emma went to a "pretty white" private high school and said she started thinking about these things (issues of race and ethnicity) and developing these identities "when [she] would have to take the like exams, like SATs or ACTs or something, and you have to like check the boxes or whatever. Uhm and [she] remember[s] like, it being like kind of confusing for a little while." This confusion stemmed from knowing she is white but also knowing there is indigenous ancestry in her bloodline. Now she self-identifies as Latina, Hispanic, and white to reflect the mix from her ancestors. So, while Emma was cognizant of her whiteness growing up, she never thought to put a label on it in such a way that the standardized tests require of students.

### **Theme 6. Creating Spaces to Cope with Difference**

A consistent and significant theme in the interviews was students finding or creating spaces for themselves on their college campus. This extends beyond a strong and supportive friend group to include student-run service organizations or affinity groups on campus.

Though the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted her social life at college in many significant ways, Emma is confident that she is now able to make a space for herself where she feels welcome. She knows that social circles are quite important, though sometimes it is hard to find people to relate to at a university that does not have a super diverse student body. She is mindful of what clubs she prioritizes and with whom she spends her time, something she struggled with during her transition to college. Crucial in finding and creating spaces for herself was joining an on-campus student service organization this year. Emma is interested in immigration and human rights, particularly in Latin America, so this organization has proven to be a welcoming space for her because everyone is also interested in these same topics. The groups will sometimes have immigrants come share their stories with the group, “which is so cool,” and then the students often have discussion groups. Though she did not really consider diversity when choosing a college, Emma now “kind of wishes” she had thought about it more. Her time in this student service organization group provides her with a space to speak with other students who share similar interests; it provides her with an opportunity to relate to other people in ways that were sometimes difficult during her first year in college. This student service organization has also allowed Emma to reflect on the values and benefits of diversity, something she did not necessarily prioritize earlier in her life when choosing a college.

Becky’s involvements on her college campus are social-justice oriented, something that has been a significant part of her identity development, as well. Over the past few years, Becky has been working on learning to navigate various social justice issues and recognize when it is her time to speak as a woman of color—and when it is not. Some of her campus involvements include student body government, political groups, and mentorship programs. Throughout her time at school and in the wake of multiple hate crimes that have occurred on her campus, she has realized

that you just have to “work within the boundaries of the school because it’s part of a bigger institution that is larger than the small group of students who want to change it.” Becky’s involvement with the student body government has not only given her a space where she can be involved in and work towards solving the social justice issues about which she is so passionate, but it has also provided her with an understanding of the systems and institutions that create these very issues.

Becky’s political involvements on campus extend beyond creating an activist space; she has also formed many friendships through these various organizations. Most of her friends at college are white (as are the majority of her friends from high school), and she has two friends who are half-Asian. Her white roommates are open and accepting and good advocates, though she finds it hard to be the one who always has to speak about “things like that,” meaning social justice issues pertaining to people of color. At the same time, the friendships she has made through the student body government are naturally more geared towards political and race-related conversations since the organization is “very diverse.” The spaces on campus in which Becky finds herself have allowed her to create and build relationships grounded in the social issues that are so important to her.

Similar to how Becky’s political engagements on campus have helped her navigate social justice issues as a woman of color but also someone who is white, Bianca does extensive body image and nutrition work through one of her roles at school, allowing her to navigate toxic cultures on campus. Bianca talked about the diet and body-obsessed cultures at college—referencing specifically the “super big” gym on campus, the jokes about the long line for salads at lunch, and everyone wanting to be physically fit. She says this is “a very big focus on this campus,” and there is “lots of concerning talk” about dieting, losing weight, and looking good. She is extremely

conscious of these harmful practices and conversations because she used to have negative feelings towards herself and her body—stemming from the perpetuation of diet culture in her own family growing up—so she now knows that negative self-talk is not helpful. Some of her work on campus has helped Bianca navigate the culture at college, and she actively tries to fight against these body-obsessed messages. Even listening to other people talk in these ways is detrimental to her own thoughts about herself.

Bianca now tries to step into these negative conversations about weight or food choices, countering comments by saying something more positive. She tries to help people look at it differently and wants other students to feel comfortable in their bodies, clothing, and food choices. Overall, Bianca feels she has learned to manage this harmful aspect of the college culture through her continued work in an on-campus office promoting healthy and positive body-image. This space has provided her with the opportunity to learn more about these topics, as well as acquire some strategies to tackle this negative self-talk on campus.

Kate has found, in her classes, a space where she can learn what she loves, she can be challenged, and her voice is heard. She has been able to learn about topics she would have never otherwise learned elsewhere, such as through her required theology classes, or about topics that are “taboo” in Ecuador, where she grew up. Kate referenced two professors in particular who “will forever be one of my favorite two people in the world.” These professors, ironically two white men, made her feel heard by listening to her questions and showing they believed in her. Kate said it was really important for someone else to see it in her, but she also saw it in herself: She deserves to have a space at college, and she wants to have a space here. She also pays tribute to her parents and friends who “pushed [her] to be brave” and go outside of her comfort zone at college. Because of this, she has been more willing to try new things and put herself out there.

Her classes in particular have been the highlight of her time in college, through which she has learned to love the U.S. and has found her own voice.

Sara has found a space for herself in a Latin student affinity group on campus. It is within this organization that she has been able to discern who she is. She has learned about other cultures within the Latinx culture at large, which has made her proud of being Venezuelan in particular. She exudes pride in her country and in her culture, which shows through her desire to teach people about her traditions. Moreover, her friends have been a huge part of her community and experience at college, making her feel more comfortable and “at home” in an environment so different than what she is used to. Her friends “have accepted [her] for who [she is] and like actually like take pride in [her] and show off that they have a friend like [her].” She recounted a story of when she brought some traditional Venezuelan food to her friends at college, about which “they were super happy, and like, it was like, it was [her] bringing them a gift of who [she is], and they enjoyed it so much.” Her friends, who come from similar backgrounds to her, as well as the student affinity group, have made her proud of her cultural identity, particularly being from Venezuela, and have helped Sara create a space where she feels welcome on campus.

Isabel, like Sara, has found value in her involvement with a Latin student affinity group on campus. While she did not engage with her Hispanic culture much during her time at a predominantly white high school, being a part of this organization at college has allowed her the space and opportunity to embrace it more. Isabel was hesitant to join this group at first because she is not fluent in Spanish, which is a major source of insecurity for her. But she joined this past year and “definitely feel[s] very at home, and [she doesn’t] feel judged.” Being a part of this affinity group has given her more exposure to other Latinx students on campus—who have become her close friends—whom she would not necessarily have met otherwise because of her experience

in the In Between, as discussed above. She is grateful to have these experiences because “in high school it just, it just wasn’t an option for [her] at all.” Being a part of a Latin affinity group on campus has given Isabel the chance to further explore and embrace her Hispanic identity and navigate the In Between—as well as begin to overcome her insecurity about not being fluent in Spanish. This insecurity no longer holds her back from speaking up or participating in the group meetings, “and it’s less of a weight weighing on [her] just cause [she] know[s] they know [her] for [her], and it’s not something that would change [their] relationship.” Having close friends who are Latin, whom she met through this organization, has been pivotal in the development of her Latin and Hispanic identities, as well as embracing these parts of herself.

Anna has also created a space for herself at college with her friends, “90% [of whom] are Latinos.” In a difficult transition from Nicaragua to the U.S. and to college, “even though [she] tried to like, become friends with [American students], it was just kind of different, different priorities and stuff.” When she came to college, Anna was shocked by the ideal of beauty being “a stick thin girl with blonde hair,” something she had never experienced growing up in Nicaragua. She also noticed that for certain groups of people on campus, “what you are wearing is very important, for some reason”; some people were considered “cool” for wearing specific brands. Moreover, American students were experiencing independence for the first time, wanting to “go out, get drunk, and like, you know that sort of thing,” which is something she “got out of [her] system” much earlier since the drinking age in Nicaragua is 18. These are just two examples of the “different priorities” that made Anna feel “so different” from American college culture and made it difficult to make friends at first. Creating genuine friendships with other Latin students at college, though, has given Anna a support system. Her friendships with people who have “very similar, like, values and cultures to [hers]” have reminded her that her struggles were not hers

alone, that others had similar experiences. She feels supported by her friends and more confident in herself and in her cultural identity.

Gabby's space on campus has also been in her friend group. Though she used to be insecure about her weight, Gabby is now more accepting of her beauty and how she looks physically. "I'm happy to say that, you know, I'm no longer in like a toxic community where uhm looks is everything that's talked about and judged," she says. Her friend group at college has been pivotal in this growth in confidence, as they all "hype each other up" and understand that everyone is different. She would not consider her friends at home judgmental, but when they would sometimes make comments about themselves, this led Gabby to think, "If you think that about yourself, like what do you think of me?" In her friend group at college, though, everyone has different body types and looks "completely different." To this point, Gabby says she and her friends have "managed to find, you know, the beauty in that, too, so we like, we never judge. It's a very non-judgmental part." Creating friendships with people who support her even when beauty is not that important has helped Gabby gain more confidence in her body and what she wears.

### **Theme 7. On Defining Beauty**

Of all the questions posed and subsequent discussions during the interviews, this question remains my favorite: How do you define beauty? I often asked this question towards the end of the interview, after discussing growing up and life at college. It served almost as a reflection of the student's experiences and where she stands at this point in her life. Most of the women discuss beauty as something that comes from inside, extending beyond the superficial. I find the answers inspiring.

Emma considers one's heritage and culture as a central aspect of beauty. It is important to [focus] on like how you were like born and like natural beauty and just like uhm accepting yourself for your own skin and the way you, the way that you are and the way uhm—you come from your family and like your ancestors and your cultural history and things like that. Like all that for me like play a role in like your beauty and how you should value beauty.

An example is that Emma has brown eyes, which she can say, “Oh, I got these from my grandma.” For Emma, beauty is deeply tied to her culture—which is evident through physical traits which can be traced through her family, as well as through recognition and affirmations from those who know and love her. She feels most beautiful when she is at home, connected to her family and her culture, when she is surrounded by the people who know her best. This definition of beauty echoes the close ties she has with her family and the importance of and pride in her culture with which she was raised. Emma's discussion of culture and ancestry in relation to beauty is unique among the participants.

Many of the students discussed beauty in terms of feeling comfortable and confident with oneself, a feeling of authenticity regardless of societal beauty standards. At first, Kate would rather not believe in beauty, as it is subjective and dependent on the people in power at any given point in time. Expanding on this, though, beauty is, in part, about being comfortable with oneself. “That is my hope for people, more than like a definition of your beauty. Like who cares what you look like?” she adds. This *feeling* of beauty comes when she can be herself in a space: “Who I want to be and who I love myself for being, then that is when I feel the most beautiful.” She feels most beautiful when she could not look at herself in the mirror and still feel like she is “owning the world.” To Kate, it is also perfectly acceptable if you want to change your body, such as through plastic surgery. “Beauty is about respecting what other people choose,” and everyone should create their own beauty standard that feels right for their body. In sum, Kate's opinion of beauty

is that it comes from how we feel about ourselves, and we have the power and agency to change this to make ourselves feel best.

Anna's definition of beauty echoes Kate's. It has taken her a long time to get here, but

Anna

think[s] the only way that someone can actually be beautiful is like with them being comfortable with themselves and happy with themselves. Because at the end of the day, there's so many different ideals and so many like types, you're never really gonna fit into one. And as long as you're happy and confident and comfortable with yourself, then you can like...I don't know, you can thrive, and actually that's like, like when someone is most beautiful, I feel, cause they show it in their face. Like they're happy and stuff.

Anna feels most beautiful when she gets dressed up and puts on some makeup to go to dinner with her friends, when she can just enjoy the night because there is nothing to make her nervous. This reinforces her belief that beauty is about how someone feels about themselves and also how they present externally to compliment that. To make her point even further, Anna says she feels the least beautiful when she is with "extremely thin and blonde" people, whom she finds intimidating and against whom she compares herself. Her feelings of insecurity make her feel less beautiful. Beauty, therefore, is about feeling comfortable with and secure in oneself.

Similarly, Becky believes the best way to define beauty is "finding something that feels authentic and that you don't want to change about yourself." Choosing to express oneself in authentic ways, accepting the parts of oneself that are unique, learning to desire oneself—this is what she looks to achieve. Learning to move through boundaries, like the pressures for Latina women to fit a specific look, without caring what society says is an authentic way of living, a beautiful way of living. To this point, Becky feels most beautiful when she does not put much effort into the way she looks and still likes her appearance; not caring about how she looks "feels so good." Her perception of beauty is almost synonymous with authenticity and learning to free

oneself from social judgment and expectations. This interpretation is reflected in her discussion of balancing being true to herself and defying the Latina stereotype, as discussed above.

Gabby describes beauty as one's outlook and perspective. "I would say I would define beauty as more of a like where you are intellectually, like how you see the world. Uhm, I feel like that is more important than, you know, how the world looks at you, or how you present yourself," she says. "Who you are, what your morals are, I think that's like what makes you beautiful." Gabby feels most beautiful when she is working out at the gym, wearing clothes that she would not have typically worn at earlier points in her life, like leggings, shorts, or a short-sleeved shirt. This is in stark contrast to the insecurities she felt at sports practice in middle school. Her growth in perspective and confidence that has taken place throughout college has allowed Gabby to feel at her best in a moment where she would have otherwise felt her worst because now, she does "not [have] to worry about, you know, what other people think of [her]."

When asked to define beauty, Bianca hesitates to simply use the word "confidence." She elaborates by explaining that the "parts of you that you are loving and feeling confident about, like that is what your beauty will translate into." Bianca's idea of beauty is not superficial but rather internal; it is about how you carry yourself. To give an example, Bianca says when her parents notice she is in a good mood "they'll just say like, 'Oh, you look so good today.' And [she's] like, 'Yeah, because I'm happy,' or something like that." Bianca believes beauty is an internal feeling or an attitude that can express or manifest itself externally.

Maggie describes three components of beauty. First is intellectual beauty, "that like can't be denied." Intellectual beauty refers to the ease to understand things and engage in conversations even if one does not know much about the topic; it is being inquisitive and wanting to know more. This echoes her discussion of the separation of beauty and intellect growing up in Mexico. Second,

Maggie thinks “physical, like apparent beauty” is also part of this definition. Making an effort to “look nice” for yourself and for others is important. The third component of Maggie’s definition of beauty is the ability to “be good.” This refers to “the values that a person holds, separate from their [intellect].” One does not have to be “the most attractive person in the world,” but if they have community-oriented values and help others, then “that’s definitely something that’s beautiful.”

Sara denotes a difference between beauty and looking presentable. Beauty is something that everyone has, it is natural, and “being presentable compliments that beauty.” Natural beauty means taking and embracing one’s own beauty, and that is how beautiful one is. Sara feels best about her body—though perhaps this is not the most beautiful, per se—right after her menstrual cycle, when she looks good and is proud of her body. She also feels good when she receives positive affirmations from her family and the people to whom she is closest. These two moments are not about the clothes she wears or how she looks physically, which would fall under presentability, but rather they are moments in which she feels proud and loved.

Isabel thinks someone who looks “put together [and] neat” but not “too altered” is beautiful. Beauty is “just being like your best self.” Isabel feels most beautiful when her body looks toned—“skinny but also having curves, not being like super, super skinny that it’s like unmanageable”—and her hair is naturally dried so that it is curly but not frizzy. She loves having a “big, big beautiful smile and eyes” and having her eyebrows done. Isabel’s description, she feels, is when she looks like the best version of herself. She does not necessarily view this as natural beauty, though, since that description is “definitely” influenced by societal expectations of beauty, whereas natural beauty would just be accepting as her beauty the way she looks when she wakes up in the morning.

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The narratives included here, organized into seven themes that were revealed in the grounded theory analysis, explore the lived experiences of nine Latina women in regards to navigating culture, identity, and beauty standards. The Discussion section aims to fit these narratives and themes into the context of the study's research objectives.

## DISCUSSION

The nine Latina undergraduate students interviewed in this study describe their experiences regarding cultural, racial, and ethnic identities and understandings of beauty. I approached this study utilizing an intersectional framework incorporating theories on social identification, self-categorization, acculturation, and societal beauty standards (Crenshaw 1991; Ellemers and Haslam 2012; Kim and Abreu 2001; Wolf 1991). The integrated theoretical framework can be well understood in the context of the seven emergent themes presented here. All of the theories are interrelated and provide insight to the research objectives, to understand the processes through which these women develop their identities and understand beauty.<sup>5</sup>

The importance of intersectionality—understanding that overlapping and interdependent social identities yield unique experiences—cannot be understated in this study (Crenshaw 1991). From the onset of this project, I prioritized using an intersectional approach to understand the lived experiences of individuals at the intersection of being female and also Latin. Some of the differences—the intersections—which are important to consider in the data include race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, nationality, generational status, physical appearance, and culture. The very

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<sup>5</sup> Again, the research objectives are as follows: (1) What is the lived experience of being a Latina student? (2) What are some influences that impact the development of identity? To what extent, if any, does exposure to and interaction with the dominant, white culture impact this Latina identity? (3) To what extent, if any, do white, Western beauty standards impact Latina students' sense of beauty? How does a Latina student develop her own understanding of beauty?

nature of identity categories and intersectionality reflects the implications of the social identification and self-categorization theories.

There are overt and explicit discussions of intersectionality in the data. For example, Becky's reflection on her simultaneous identities of being white-passing and a woman of color, as well as the influence of wealth, in determining her privilege is something she attributes to the intersection of ethnicity. There are also more covert discussions of intersectionality, such as when Emma discusses the challenges she experienced navigating her school's social scene growing up, specifically not fitting in with one particular group because of her lighter skin tone but feeling she shared a similar background with this group. Again, this is the intersection of ethnicity.

Intersectionality is perhaps the most effective approach to understand the first research objective: What is the lived experience of being a Latina student? This is because the first objective is all-encompassing and addresses a broad range of issues and experiences, each of which is likely impacted by the intersections faced by the women interviewed. All of the themes included in this chapter address some aspect of navigating the world as a Latin woman, of the lived experience. Similarly, the first research objective can be well-approached through any aspect of the integrated theoretical framework because, again, it is a broad question. There is not one answer to this question, but the subjugated knowledge presented here, through an intersectional lens, helps to paint a bigger picture of this experience.

The acculturation theory is an effective approach in understanding the second and third research objectives: What are some influences that impact the development of identity? To what extent, if any, does exposure to and interaction with the dominant, white culture impact this Latina identity? Furthermore, to what extent, if any, do white, Western beauty standards impact Latina students' sense of beauty? How does a Latina student develop her own understanding of beauty?

Acculturation theory is helpful in understanding the process of members of minority and ethnic communities adapting to dominant culture in the United States (Kim and Abreu 2001).

Pulling from the narrative data, a great example to highlight acculturation in relation to the development of identity is Gabby's experience during her first year of college. She struggled with reconciling her American nationality with the indigenous culture and ethnicity to which she feels so connected. Her acculturation to and connection with American culture challenged her to reflect on how she was "actually" Latina and what being Latina can really mean. Differences in acculturation between Gabby and her roommates from Latin America forced Gabby to address and explore further her own ethnic and cultural identities.

In relation to the third research objective regarding beauty standards, Isabel and Sara's experiences versus those of their parents provide are understood well within the framework of acculturation. Both women grew up in the United States and have parents from Latin American countries. In Isabel's narrative, her Dominican mother could not understand why her daughter felt pressure to remove her body hair—an insecurity that stemmed from comparison to her white friends. Isabel realizes that this difference in perspective between her and her mother stems from the communities in which they each grew up: Her mother lived in a diverse city with an ethnically diverse friend group, and Isabel is from a predominantly white town and has all white friends. Sara, though her parents had strict expectations for what they considered a presentable appearance, has become more lenient with these unspoken rules, giving herself agency in the ways she presents herself. She attributes this difference to the significant amount of time she has spent living in the U.S., specifically going to college in the Northeast, while her parents are immigrants from Venezuela. Again, the degrees to which individuals experience acculturation leads to varying opinions on and expectations about beauty standards.

Self-categorization and social identity go hand-in-hand and effectively address the second research objective—perfectly exemplified in the theme on external pressures to identify. The main component of the theory of social identity is that people think of themselves and others as members of groups that have perceived value, not as unique individuals (Ellemers and Haslam 2012). Moreover, members of a group can employ individual mobility, which means they will try to “pass” as a member of a different group (Ellemers and Haslam 2012). Expanding upon this, the self-categorization theory purports that social categorization underlies the understanding of and response to various social situations, making specific nested identities more relevant and important depending on the social context (Ellemers and Haslam 2012).

Sara, Gabby, Anna, Kate, and Maggie all say they did not identify, or need to identify, as Latina while growing up because they were surrounded by people who were similar to them. The ingroup was similar to them, which did not make their Latinness a difference. It was once they transitioned to college that they were surrounded by the dominant, white culture—the ingroup—making their Latinness important and relevant. At this point, many of the women say they then felt the need to identify as Latina or that this preexisting identity became stronger. Maggie elaborates, saying she felt other people at college felt the need to place her into a category, though she did not necessarily want to be placed. Upon reflection, all of the women have grown to embrace their Latin identities, often describing it as a central component of who they are now. Intrinsic to these shared experiences is the social desire, or need, to identify people and place them into identity groupings depending on which difference is important and relevant.

The Beauty Myth is also quite overarching in this study, as the third research objective is to better understand how these nine women make sense of and navigate societal beauty standards. The three identity-based theories discussed above also help to understand how the women

experience or respond to the Beauty Myth at multiple points in their lives. Comparing the messages which women received about beauty growing up to their current definitions and understandings of beauty showcases this development quite well. For example, when she was younger, Anna wanted to breast augmentation surgery, as this was a part of the beauty ideal around which she grew up. Moreover, when she first moved to the United States for college, Anna tried to lose weight to fit the thin, white ideal dominating her campus. As she has grown, though, Anna's perspectives towards her body and her understanding of beauty have fallen more in line with the beliefs of her parents. She now prioritizes happiness with oneself over fitting a specific beauty ideal, which she describes as impossible to achieve. Through the process of identity development and ultimately accepting and embracing differences, many, if not all, of the women interviewed now understand beauty differently than when they were younger.

The word "difference" implies a comparison, between an ingroup and an outgroup. Different *than*, or different *from*, what? From dominant, white culture. From an unattainable beauty ideal. The narratives included in this chapter aim to shed light on the processes through which nine Latina women experience the development of identity and navigation of beauty standards. Limitations of the study as well as future implications are discussed in the Conclusion.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

Contributing to and expanding upon the existing literature, this study seeks subjugated knowledge on the lived experiences of Latina undergraduate students in regards to culture, identity, and beauty. Using an intersectional framework incorporating theories of social identification, self-categorization, and acculturation, as well as the Beauty Myth, the study sought to answer the following questions:

- I. What is the lived experience of being a Latina student?
- II. What are some influences that impact the development of identity? To what extent, if any, does exposure to and interaction with the dominant, white culture impact this Latina identity?
- III. To what extent, if any, do white, Western beauty standards impact Latina students' sense of beauty? How does a Latina student develop her own understanding of beauty?

The study used a grounded theory approach in accordance with the praxis of feminist research to identify seven emergent themes in the data: the role of the family in identity development, messages about beauty growing up, feeling caught between two spheres, understanding larger social forces to navigate one's own experience, external pressures to identify, creating spaces for oneself on a college campus, and defining beauty. These themes help to understand how nine Latina women have experienced the process of identity development, as well as how they have understood beauty.

There are several limitations to this study. First, the sample size is relatively small, which means it is impossible to make any generalizations from the data. The narratives included in this study reflect only those experiences of the nine women whom I interviewed. Though other Latina undergraduate students may have similar experiences, the sample size of this study does not allow

for any predictions regarding or generalizations on Latina undergraduate students at predominantly white colleges at large. As is often the case with qualitative studies such as this one, the data is not representative of an entire demographic or community. In future research, perhaps a mixed methods approach would be effective. A quantitative component could likely reach a larger audience—grounds for generalizations—and individual interviews, as done in this study, could provide deeper insight on participants' lived experiences.

A second limitation is the shift in data analysis. Given the time constraints of this project and the subsequent recruitment crisis, which I discuss in the Methodological Note, I was unable to do complete transcription and line-by-line coding for the entire body of data, as discussed in Chapter Two. The shift to extensive memoing and partial transcription did prove to be sufficient, though the process of analysis was not what it could have been under other circumstances.

A third limitation in this study is bias. It is nearly impossible for an author to remove her own personal bias from a project. The data I have included in this paper, as well in the ways in which I have organized them, are a reflection of the perspectives and biases I bring to my work—though I tried my best to minimize them. There exist more stories and meaning in the data, but this is the story I can tell at this point.

This study allowed nine Latina women to share their experiences with identity development and beauty standards; it allows for these women's voices to be heard. The theory generated in this study may be of importance to institutional leaders who seek to better understand ways in which to support Latina women at predominantly white colleges. Understanding how these women were able to navigate their college campuses to create a positive experience, as well as the experiences and factors that influenced their time at college, could potentially help in the creation of outreach programs or communities on campus catered to this demographic. More

importantly, though, the findings of this study may also be important to other Latina undergraduates who feel isolated by their experiences and challenges. As Gabby has highlighted, you are not alone in your struggles to understand and develop your identity or to navigate societal beauty standards.

## METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

Recruitment, specifically securing interviews, was by far the biggest methodological challenge in this project. I began my first wave of recruitment with, what I thought was, a simple procedure to obtain informed consent and schedule interviews. Once they expressed interest in this study, I sent students an email with three separate sets of directions to provide informed consent, complete the demographic survey, and schedule an interview. Four women scheduled interviews with me, though three women did not follow through the steps. I did not think much of this at first, as many students are busy over the winter break.

When the spring semester started, I still used this process. Again, I ran into trouble with students completing all of the steps and scheduling interviews. Though at this point, I was under the pressures of completing interviews in a timely manner so I could move on to analysis and writing. With no new interviews scheduled yet in March, solving the recruitment crisis was vital to continue this project the way I envisioned. My advisor reminded me that all students are facing unique challenges this semester, as we neared the one-year mark of the COVID-19 pandemic. My email containing consent information, the survey, and information to schedule interviews was likely overwhelming and too complex for students to follow; it was likely just another task on their list, but one they did not even have to do. I would need to revise it.

I spoke on the phone with an administrator from the Boston College IRB to talk through potential revisions for this process. We talked about possible obstacles from the perspective of participants and subsequently created a new process. My revised consent process was designed with the student in mind: I wanted to make it as simple and convenient as possible for someone inevitably juggling exams, coursework, and pandemic fatigue in general. The most significant alteration was the inclusion of a *single* direction in the email. I sent participants one link to a

Qualtrics survey on which to electronically sign consent, and then the link to the demographic survey was at the end of the consent form. Likewise, at the end of the survey was the link to the interview scheduling site. This streamlined and simplified the process, resulting in five more scheduled interviews and bringing my sample size to nine.

I am incredibly grateful for the support I received from the IRB; I genuinely could not have completed this project the way I envisioned without their guidance. A unique element of my research is this partnership with the IRB, which is usually perceived as an obstacle to institutional research. The IRB served as an ally in my research, not as opposition.

On a separate note, the role of pandemic fatigue cannot be overlooked in this project. The COVID-19 pandemic has, for over a year, persistently impacted the ways in which we all function on a daily basis. The collective accumulation of anxiety, distress, undermotivation, isolation, and disappointment permeates a college campus in particular.

As a soon-to-be college graduate, this year has been challenging and frustrating in an endless number of ways. The senior year I had envisioned is quite different than the reality in which I find myself now. While trying to make the most of every moment in class and with a small circle of friends, I have nevertheless found myself struggling to cope with my world. I have had to come to terms with how I have been affected in ways I did not even realize and learn to be more forgiving with myself.

This thesis in particular is a stellar example of just that. My advisor and I had numerous discussions about reflexivity and the role of the researcher—which ultimately came back to taking care of oneself while conducting research, *especially* in the midst of a pandemic. I have certainly felt the pandemic fatigue, which has affected my motivation and drive in my school work. This project, though, has been one constant in my life, a concrete goal I can work towards regardless of

the circumstance. Persisting through its completion has been a challenge and ultimately a lesson in perseverance, forgiveness, and managing anxiety.

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