

Hispanic College Choice: A Sociocultural Anthropological Perspective

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Abstract

The college choice process is best described as the decision of whether and where to attend college (Bergerson, 2009) and traditional college choice models have been presented by various scholars (Hanson & Litten, 1982; Holland, 1958; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler & Palmer, 2008). These models, however, do not appropriately capture the intricacies of the college choice experience for Hispanic students. By examining the theoretical frameworks of chain migration and familismo within the sociocultural anthropological perspective, we conclude that these frameworks offer a more appropriate approach to better understand the college choice process for Hispanic students. The purpose of this manuscript is to examine the Hispanic cultural role within traditional college choice models, the community college choice, and the importance immediate and extended family networks have on the college choice process. A new college choice model for Hispanic students is proposed in consideration of the demographic shift currently taking place in the United States.

Keywords: chain migration, college choice, college choice models, *familismo*, Hispanic, sociocultural anthropology

Introduction

Anthropology allows researchers to study humans both past and present in order to question the notion of “human nature” and culture in various contexts (Koyama, 2007; Omohundro, 2008). Sociocultural anthropology diverges from anthropology to examine social patterns or practices among different cultures (Garbarino, 1983), and is dedicated to finding both similarities and differences based upon fixed characteristics such as race, sexuality, class, or gender (Koyama, 2007; Omohundro, 2008). The purpose of this study is to examine the Hispanic cultural role within traditional college choice models, the community college choice, and the importance immediate and extended family networks have on the college choice process. It will demonstrate the interconnectedness within chain migration and *familismo* as appropriate theoretical frameworks to explore Hispanic college choice under the umbrella of sociocultural anthropological research, including the lived narratives of Hispanic siblings and scholars who experienced the college choice process.

According to the U.S. Census (2012), the Hispanic population is expected to double between 2012 and 2060, concluding that by 2060 one in three U.S. residents will be Hispanic, as compared

to one in six residents in 2012. This anticipated dramatic population increase calls for educators to view access to higher education for Hispanic students as an educational priority. According to the U.S. Census (2013) report, Hispanic college enrollment increased during 2011 to 2012 from 8.8% to 9.5%, even while total college enrollment decreased in that same time period. The college enrollment increase is primarily attributed to enrollment at the community college level (Perez & McDonough, 2008; U.S. Census, 2013). While enrollment numbers continue to rise, high school dropout rates are also on the rise, from 101,000 Hispanic student dropouts in 2000 to 134,000 in October, 2012. At the same time, college graduation rates for Hispanic students have only modest improvements, up 4.7% between 2009 and 2011 (Pew Research Hispanic Trends Project, 2013; Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, 2004). The increased Hispanic drop-out rates from high school are critical for future college enrollment. These rates indicate a need for further networking and access to resources in the college choice process. A clear difference exists in regards to access to resources for Hispanic students and their non-Hispanic counterparts. Research demonstrates that Hispanic students are the least likely racial group to participate in an extensive college choice process (Hurtado, Inkelas,

Briggs, and Rhee, 1997; Perez & McDonough, 2008). Thus, the need to think innovatively and develop new college choice models to more appropriately fit this growing population.

The phenomenon of college choice is best described as the process through which students decide whether and where to attend college (Bergerson, 2009). Evidence demonstrates that not all students have access to the same resources in order to make an educated college choice decision. Factors including race, socioeconomic status, gender, and first generation status influence access to resources when navigating the college choice process (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perez & McDonough, 2008). Hispanic students who do not receive access to higher education and guidance about the college choice process are at a tremendous disadvantage (Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs, & Rhee, 1997; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, 2004). Perez and McDonough (2008) present a study on the college choice process from a sociocultural anthropological perspective and their findings suggest the importance of creating networks to establish social and cultural capital.

We propose that the traditional model is not the most appropriate for Hispanic students and present a new model based on evidence put forth from the theoretical frameworks of chain migration and *familismo*. The implications of this new model present the opportunity to better inform educators on how to more successfully provide higher education access options to Hispanic students and their families. These opportunities also provide a window to improve persistence and graduation rates.

College Choice

College choice, in the traditional college choice framework, is the process through which students decide whether and where to attend college (Bergerson, 2009), yet this traditional framework does not appropriately fit the Hispanic college choice experience. College choice theories center around three major questions- who goes to college, where students matriculate, and why they select a specific college (Hanson & Litten, 1982; Holland,

1958; Hossler & Palmer, 2008). According to Furukawa (2011), there are five distinct influences on a student’s college choice: family, peers, institutional characteristics, institutional communication, and institutional fit, as seen in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Furukawa (2011) College Choice Influences

College Choice Influences				
Family	Peers	Institutional Characteristics	Institutional Communication	Institutional Fit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parental education Parental influence on where to find information Family alumnus Parental involvement in choice process Parent role in paying for college Importance of other resources varied by ethnicity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student high school peer group Peers influence perception of institutional quality Influence motivation for attending college Affiliations such as GLBTQ influence choice Guidance of counselors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cost of education and sticker price Amount of financial aid Reputation of the institution and selectivity State policies affecting public institutions College rankings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specific marketing strategies Communication with parents College catalogues and viewbooks Online web content Social media Admissions portals Investment in research and planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Institutions searching for particular characteristics in students High-SES, middle-range academic performers view it as a rational process Campus environment Cultural artifacts

While these college choice influences are certainly important, it is clear that culture/ethnicity differences are not captured in this chart. Students can access college information in a variety of different ways: contact with secondary school counselors, teachers, parents, friends, college representatives, print materials, and college websites (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). The level of access and subsequent use of resources, however, varies widely based on family income, race/ethnicity, and parent education level. Hispanic students from low socioeconomic status families and Hispanic students with parents who did not attend college are at a disadvantage compared to their non-Hispanic counterparts (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; McDonough, Antonio, Walpole, & Perez, 1998; Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, 2004).

More recent college choice models and research tend to draw on Hossler and Gallagher’s three-stage model: *predisposition, search, and choice* (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The first phase, *predisposition*, is a new phase in college choice models, in which a student decides whether or not to attend college. If the student decides to attend college, he/she moves into the second phase of decision-making, *the search process*, and the final stage is *choice*, when the student makes a final decision on which institution to attend.

The variations on college choice models tend to give less consideration to underrepresented student populations and the effect of culture and ethnicity in the decision-making process. King (1996) studied the role of high school counselors, who play an important role in the traditional college choice process, on low-income students' postsecondary education plans, and noted that students who meet more frequently with their counselor are more likely to plan on attending college. Previous research demonstrates the disparity among Hispanic, Native American, and African American students attending college as disproportionate in comparison to the number of students who begin elementary school (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Corwin, Venegas, Oliverez, & Colyar, 2004). The disparity is also attributed to a lack of adequate public school counseling because of over-crowding in public schools as well as a high ratio of students versus secondary school counselors (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Corwin, Venegas, Oliverez, & Colyar, 2004). In a qualitative study, examining the problem of access to higher education for underrepresented students, one student noted, "The counselor, she's for the white kids and the Asian kids. I mean, the Mexican kids go to Ms. Y [a teacher]" (Corwin, Venegas, Oliverez, & Colyar, 2004, p. 452). Educators should be aware that Hispanic students may assume their family network or network of trust can provide all of the necessary advice about the college choice process.

Chain Migration and Hispanic College Choice

Community colleges play an important role in educating Hispanic students. More Hispanic students enroll at two-year institutions in comparison to four-year institutions. Relative to other racial and ethnic groups, Hispanics enroll at community colleges at a rate of 51.9% whereas American Indian/Alaska Natives attend at 44.2%, Blacks at 39.5%, Asian/Pacific Islanders at 36.8%, and Whites at 34% (Aud, Fox & Kewal Ramani, 2010). This trend is perhaps better understood within the theoretical framework of chain migration developed by MacDonald and MacDonald (1964). Chain migration is defined as, "that movement in

which prospective migrants learn of opportunities, are provided with transportation, and have initial accommodation and employment arranged by means of primary social relationships with previous migrants" (p. 82). While chain migration is patterned on research of European immigrant communities, the phenomenon of providing information and assistance by family and friends serves as the premise for other researchers to inform on Hispanic college enrollment decisions at two-year institutions (Perez & McDonough, 2008; Person & Rosenbaum, 2006).

Perez and McDonough (2008) delve deep into the influence of family, friends, and other networks relative to college choice. Their findings align with the current literature that family and friends are influential on the college decision. However, there is one outcome of this study that expands upon the current literature involving trust; trust within and beyond the immediate family. "The relationships that students cultivated through parents or through other trusted individuals set the foundation for the bridges that allowed the chain migration contacts and networks to form" (p. 256). The authors argue that because the college choice process is not as linear for first-generation Hispanic college goers, that chain migration is a better suited framework to explain the influence of family, friends, and their extended network. This could be described as an intricate web of the Hispanic culture used in the college choice process. We then take this concept one step further and suggest that a new college choice model is necessary to better adapt to the growing needs of the Hispanic college going population because previous linear models simply no longer suffice.

Before presenting this model, we continue with the premise of chain migration patterned on research of European immigrant communities. Choldin (1973) provides additional examples of the migration experience, to further solidify its significance and value within the college choice process. First, "the kinship network is operative before the actual move" (Choldin, 1973, p. 166). Second, travel occurs in company, and third, because migrants are received by someone familiar to them, the social connection remains intact.

Person and Rosenbaum (2006) interpret this experience and translate it to the two-year college choice for Hispanic students as “expect[ing] students to choose colleges where a primary social contact is or has enrolled, enroll with members of their network, and look to contacts already at the college for assistance once enrolled” (p. 52). Choldin (1973), continues by writing,

The migrants receive three kinds of help: material assistance, intermediary help, and help in making new social connections. By intermediary help we mean activities which aid the migrant in overcoming his ignorance of customs, geography, and other facts about the new community. By help in making new social connections we mean activities which aid the migrant in meeting new friends and joining organizations. The migrants receive all three types of help from kinfolk and friends. (p. 167)

These additional types of assistance are applicable to the Hispanic college student upon enrollment. Material assistance, for example, might be given in the form of transportation or tuition. Intermediary assistance might be interpreted as educating the newcomer to the customs of the institution, and geography of the campus might be the location of the cafeteria, bookstore, administrative offices, classrooms, etc. The social connections could also mean helping the new student become familiar with the various organizations on campus, which would lead to meeting new people and establishing new relationships. All of this can be offered by family members and friends already attending a particular institution.

Familismo

Chain migration offers an appropriate cultural context for the two-year community college choice process given that Hispanics are more likely to enroll in two-year institutions (Perna, 2000). It is inclusive of family members, friends and other trusted relations. However, further examination of the family role, *familismo* (Marin & Marin, 1991) provides a deeper understanding into the college choice process. *Familismo* is considered a cultural

trait among Hispanic families. It is value laden and includes the perceived and reliant extended family responsibility to provide needed material and emotional assistance. This is a characteristic very similar to that mentioned by Choldin (1973). *Familismo* is defined as “the tendency to hold the wants and needs of family in higher regard than one’s own” (Martinez, 2013, p. 21). As such, Hispanic students tend to choose an institution close to home in order to help support the family financially. The Hispanic student may also opt to begin the college journey locally then transfer to a four-year institution. If the decision is to depart to an institution away from home, this decision is centered on the notion of betterment; to improve the socio-economic status for the Hispanic student and his/her family. These “familial bonds and cultural beliefs and traditions of many Latina/o families can be sources of strength for students during the college choice process” (Martinez, 2013, p. 22), but they are also felt as a sacrifice when a Hispanic student parts from the family unit. Such interdependence is contrary to the “individualistic, competitive, achievement-oriented cultures of the nonminority groups in the United States” (Marin & Marin, 1991, p. 11). While Hispanic families recognize these characteristics and understand the importance of these in order to succeed within American culture, the value of family reciprocity is considered a priority (Martinez, 2013).

If other family members or friends are familiar with a particular college environment, the already established network provides the support similar to a family structure. However, many Hispanic parents lack the ability to guide their children through the college choice process. In such circumstances, if an older sibling attends college, the older sibling takes on the role of guiding the younger sibling. This value is again characteristic of having someone close to inform and personalize the college choice process (Ceja, 2006). It is important to note that the literature in reference to Hispanic parents specifically of Mexican descent “exert a positive influence on their children’s college aspirations, [but] many voids remain in college choice studies regarding their role during the college choice process” (Ceja, 2006, p. 89).

While there is no doubt that family plays a significant role in shaping the college choice process for Hispanic students, the role of friends within the Hispanic culture also requires consideration. For first-generation Hispanic students, where older siblings have not attended college and/or where parents have limited, or no access to college information, friends can play an important role in the college choice process. Alvarado and Lopez Turley (2012) found that “college-oriented friends increased the likelihood of applying to any college and to 4-year colleges, both for White and Latinos students” (p. 1451). The influence of friends, however, was found to be less influential on Hispanic students in comparison to their White counterparts. While the authors do not directly test for the influence of family in this study, they do point to previous research supporting the importance of Hispanic family influence on post-secondary educational decisions. Therefore, future studies on the influence of Hispanic parents on the college choice process become even more critical.

One Family, Five Scholars, One Narrative

The theoretical frameworks of chain migration and *familismo* posit the college choice discussion within sociocultural anthropology. The operational definition of sociocultural anthropology provided is concerned with social patterns or practices among different cultures, and the differences and similarities within and between societies (Garbarino, 1983; Koyama, 2007; Omohundro, 2008). The more linear, traditional college choice models do not fit as succinctly to the Hispanic college choice experience. However, it is sociocultural anthropology that allows the human story, the narrative, to come alive when people describe their personal college choice journeys. Jimenez-Silva, Jimenez Hernandez, Luevanos, Jimenez, and Jimenez Jr. (2009) bring life to their individual voices as five Hispanic siblings and scholars who have personally experienced the college choice process. The authors begin by sharing their parents’ individual stories of limited educational opportunities; yet their hope is to provide their children with the educational opportunities that they did not have. The authors

honor their parents by engaging the reader “into the fruits of [their] parents’ labor as each of [them] experienced college” (Jimenez-Silva et al., 2009, p. 731).

Margarita, the eldest sibling, describes being the “engine of the train and [her] siblings were all the cars behind [her]” (Jimenez-Silva et al., 2009, p. 731). She bears the responsibility of knowing that if she fails her siblings might also fail. She chooses an institution seventy-five miles away from home and drives every weekend to maintain family connections and work in the family business. She drives the car purchased by her maternal uncles whose material gift also includes a gas card. This is an explicit example of Choldin’s (1973) material assistance. Margarita is also geographically connected to her high school boyfriend, and later fiancé, who attends a nearby institution. He provides her with the emotional support she needs to balance school, work, and home as described by Marin and Marin’s (1991) *familismo*. Margarita goes on to graduate from Harvard’s Graduate School of Education and writes, “On graduation day, when I walked across the stage and saw all of my uncles and aunts smiling along with my parents, siblings, and fiancé, it felt as if *my* success was truly *our* success” (Jimenez-Silva et al., 2009, p. 732).

Margarita’s siblings: Norma, Abel, Ruth, and Monica also describe their personal college choice journey. Norma followed Margarita to the same undergraduate institution. Margarita as the oldest sibling fills the intermediary assistance role for Norma as Choldin (1973) describes. Unlike Margarita, however, Norma did not find a positive social connection. Her parents intervene and decide that it is best for Norma to live with Margarita instead of with her freshman cohort on campus. Even while enrolled in college, family decisions are valued and the family connection supersedes a traditional college experience. Norma’s trips home fill her with a sense of familiarity amongst her family, but “[the university’s] culture value[s] independence—[her] classmates [do] not understand why it [is] necessary for [Norma] to go home every weekend or why [she] call[s] [her] parents on a daily basis—whereas [her] family thrive[s] on [their] interdependence” (Jimenez-Silva

et al., 2009, p. 733). This is a direct correlation to Marin and Marin's (1991) *familismo*. Norma, like her older sister Margarita, goes on to graduate from Harvard's Graduate School of Education. While their third sibling, Abel, does not choose to attend the same undergraduate institution as his sisters, he attends the same institution as Margarita's fiancé. He too visits home every weekend feeling the need to help his father with the family business. Abel's emotional support from Hispanic friends who understand his need to travel home to offer financial support to the family, allows him to continue to be successful. Unlike Norma's social experience, Abel describes the importance a student organization plays in his graduation achievement. This is the social connections aspect of chain migration that Choldin (1973) discusses, and it is this particular support network that fuels Abel's desire to improve his academic trajectory. Ruth, the fourth sibling, is the first to make a college choice across the country. This decision to be at such a distance from her family can be attributed to notion of *betterment* in Marin and Marin's (1991) framework of *familismo*. Weekly telephone calls to the family asking for family recipes and care packages from home keep her family and culture close in her new surroundings. Holidays are spent with her sisters who are geographically closer. Monica, the youngest, writes,

Even though some of my classmates and teachers referred to our Hispanic family as 'enmeshed,' or deeply involved—beyond what they had ever experienced or deemed as healthy—I knew that our culture provided the framework for a support structure that could not be broken. (Jimenez-Silva et al., 2009, p. 740)

Monica's institutional choice is twenty minutes from her family home. This small liberal arts, top fifty institution has a reputation for recruiting and retaining students of ethnic minority. Norma, the eldest, visits the campus while doing her own field research while at Harvard to ascertain its fit for Monica. The presence of other Hispanics provides a culturally supportive environment for Monica. However, due to a severe medical condition, it is family support and advocacy that leads her to

educational completion. The authors close by quoting their parents, "Our children's achievements are *our* achievements" (Jimenez-Silva et al., 2009, p. 742). This sociocultural anthropological narrative provides the foundation for our proposed model. Our hope is that institutions of higher learning will learn how to better recruit and retain Hispanic students so that the Hispanic college choice, as the largest growing minority population in this country, becomes the choice for their particular institution.

Proposed Model

With so many models present in the literature regarding college choice, we believe that a new model focused on the Hispanic student college choice process will not only improve access to educational information for the Hispanic population, but will also encourage other researchers to examine how college choice differs for various populations. Our proposed model, Figure 2 below, places trust as the most important aspect of the college choice process for Hispanic students. We contend that trust in family, extended family, friends, in essence, *familismo* (Marin & Marin 1991), are the most important roles in the college choice process for Hispanic students, which is where this model is differentiated from previous college choice models. This influence is what then leads to Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model of predisposition, search and choice. Factors impacting the college choice for Hispanic students include concerns and types of support during as well as after the college choice process (Alvarado & Lopez Turley, 2012; Ceja, 2006; Choldin, 1973; Jimenez-Silva et al., 2009; MacDonald & MacDonald, 1964; Martinez, 2013; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Person & Rosenbaum, 2006).

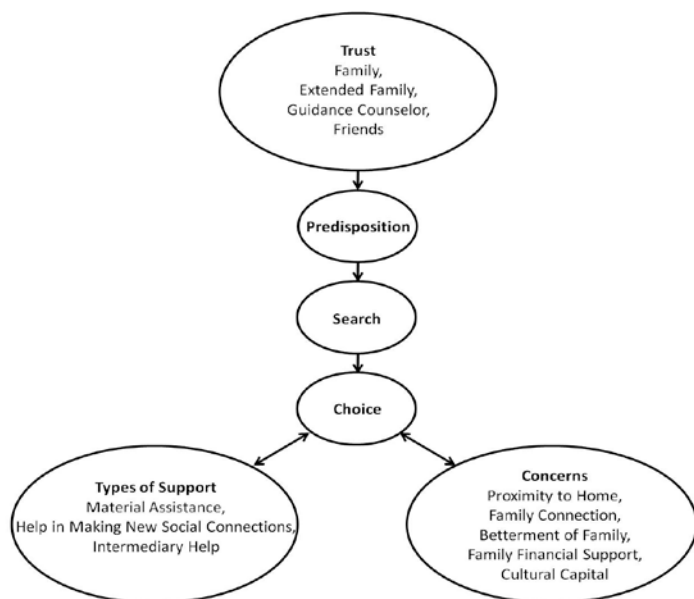


Figure 2. Hernandez & Okerson (2014) Model of Hispanic College Choice

Next Steps

This new proposed college choice model is intended to assist institutions of higher learning to better recruit and retain Hispanic students. As the largest growing minority population in the country, educators, counselors, and members of society must come together to create solutions and eliminate barriers to education. Research demonstrates that students who receive early college information are likely to consider a wider selection of schools and options (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perez & McDonough, 2008). In order for the next generation of recruitment and retention models to take effect and be successful, it is important to understand the *familial* role in the college admissions process, the trust entailed, and the types of support and concerns involved in the final college choice decision. Connecting Hispanic students to information and allowing them to network with other students and alumni extends this initial trust relationship. Without taking these steps, the traditional college choice models fail for Hispanic students, and institutions of higher learning lose the potential to recruit and retain a more diverse population onto their college campuses.

Many Hispanic students may begin the process of planning for college later than their peers. Family guidance and predisposition at a young age, affects a student's ability to qualify for scholarships, meet college application or financial aid deadlines, and/or may limit their ability to study for college admission tests (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs, & Rhee, 1997). Focus on early college planning and early access to comprehensive information on various institutional types (Perez & McDonough, 2008) improves the possibility of college and student fit from the onset. Debunking financial aid myths is another priority as many Hispanic students may overestimate the cost of attendance or not be connected to various financial aid resources (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, 2004) hindering their final college choice.

This paper demonstrates that Hispanic students rely most on those they trust in their immediate and extended family network (Perez & McDonough, 2008). High school sophomores and juniors who are seeking information on the college search process can benefit from this extended network as they build trust relationships (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Perez & McDonough, 2008). The *familismo* network can also help to promote campus visits to allow students to engage with campus communities and connect college planning with nearby institutions (McDonough, 1997; Perez & McDonough, 2008). Educators can also connect students with various outreach programs for race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and first generation college students to provide additional support and resources for students who may not receive support and guidance on the college choice process at home. Next steps include building upon what is currently known about the Hispanic college choice process and applying that knowledge to a new generation of college goers.

Conclusion

Sociocultural anthropology provides a method that allows researchers to better understand the similarities and differences between various cultures. This manuscript presents evidence to support that Hispanic students are at a disadvantage

and do not have access to the same resources and networking to navigate the college choice process equitably (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, 2004). Race, socioeconomic status, gender, and first generation status influence the ability for students to make educated college choice decisions (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perez & McDonough, 2008).

Much of Hispanic higher education takes place at community colleges and we propose that the reasons for this are best understood through the theoretical framework of chain migration (MacDonald & MacDonald, 1964) and *familismo* (Marin & Marin, 1991). Hispanic students are also influenced most by their family, friends, and networks of trust (Perez & McDonough, 2008). By examining traditional college choice models, it is evident that these models no longer suffice to adequately and fully understand the types of support and concerns faced by the Hispanic student college choice. Educators must focus on increasing access to higher education by providing early college planning, access to financial aid information, connecting students with recent high school graduates, providing networking opportunities, organizing college visits, and connecting students with appropriate outreach programs. These next steps will no doubt have a positive effect on future Hispanic college choice. The model presented is inclusive, but expands upon Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase model of college choice. It is intended to reflect the cultural considerations of the growing Hispanic student population within the chain migration and *familismo* frameworks. We hope that this proposed model will assist institutions of higher learning to not only improve recruitment efforts, but also persistence and graduation rates for the betterment of our society as a whole.

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