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At a Crossroad: The Intersection of Fraternity, Sexuality, and Masculinity

Marco A. Blanco

Within the college environment, gender roles serve a unique purpose when it comes to finding a partner, interactions with other students, and personal identity development. Masculinity and sexual orientation stand as two of among many of identities that college men hold. In this article I will review existing literature on masculinity and sexuality within the Latino culture. I will also address the implications and practices of membership within a Latino fraternal organization and how these two ideas intersect.

Introduction

Fraternity membership is a way in which any male-identified student can access and begin to explore involvement in a collegiate organization, as well as explore different identities that they hold. From personal experience, I was encouraged to look for opportunities that existed outside fraternal membership. Institutions of higher learning foster critical thinking, discussions of different topics, as well as personal reflections on beliefs and identities. In knowing that Latino males are statically less likely than Latino females to attend college (Saenz and Ponjuan, 2009), a context is set to understand how Latino males in fraternities seek and create meaning from their fraternal experience and their involvement in a student organization.

Vasti Torres provided a useful tool to understand identity development through the Model of Hispanic Identity Development (2003). While the model gives depth to how the environment and other factors influence identity, it is limited to the analysis of one identity. It does not address the complexity of student development for a gay Latino male, and furthermore, does not address the experience in the context of fraternity membership. Currently student services practitioners use Torres' (2003) model as a blanket theory for identity development of all Latinos, which can create some confusion to those who use it as a foundational theory.

Marco is the Fraternity & Sorority Life Coordinator at the University of Vermont and is a member of the 2014 HESA cohort. Having the experience of advising and working with fraternities and sororities at a extremely predominant white institution, and using his personal identities, he explores the intersections of student, sexuality, masculinity and racial identity development within the context of the fraternal collegiate experience.

Furthermore, the idea of intersecting identities has become an emerging topic in the field of higher education. The emergence of these ideas in the field gives space to focus on critical practices that professionals, such as fraternity and sorority advisors and directors of LGBTQA, centers should consider.

This gap in Torres' theory challenges us to reexamine gay male Latino identity development and identity intersections within fraternity membership in the collegiate experience. The article will review existing literature on machismo, particularly how machismo is defined through homophobic behavior in the Latino culture. Additionally, it will provide some concepts regarding fraternity membership and the role of community and brotherhood. The hope of the review is to provide an understanding of the challenges associated with being a gay Latino fraternity man and the depth of confusion that can exist.

A Cultural Construct of Masculinity

The difficult part of entertaining the idea of how all these identities intersect is the scarcity of research around the topic. Extended research shows that ideals of masculinity and homophobia continue to pose challenges for gay White men (Hesp & Brooks, 2009). Moreover, fraternity membership in White fraternities continues to show homophobic tendencies that exist in their practices. Hesp and Brooks (2009) found that, of the fraternities observed, there was a general acceptance of gay men. However, issues arose with being labeled as the "gay" fraternity. The study also identified several gay men who mentioned through personal reflection that they felt the need to be more masculine during their membership process. Hesp and Brooks mentioned, "some gay participants felt it was necessary to behave in a more masculine manner or not invite same-sex friends or partners to events" (p. 409, 2009).

It is uncertain that this would be the same for Latino men and research suggests that masculinity is entrenched in the foundation of fraternity membership. While most boys are socialized to conceptualize manhood in a hypermasculine context, the Latino culture exacerbates this issue (Addis, Mansfield & Syzdek, 2010). Regarding issues of masculinity, research primarily addresses *machismo* as a means to understand Latino masculinity and primarily focuses on Mexican and Mexican-Americans (Arciniega, Anderson, Tovar-Blank, and Tracey, 2008). Arciniega et al. (2008) differentiates *machismo* into positive and negative attributes, which resulted in the idea of *caballerismo*. As a result, *machismo* in the context of their study and for the purposes of defining it in this article is characterized through "negative characteristics of sexism, chauvinism and hypermasculinity" (p. 19). Arciniega et al. (2008) later explained that the origins of *machismo* came from Mexican culture, but was not limited to address masculinity in Latino males as their study is bracketed between Mexican or Mexican-Americans and all other

ethnicities. It also holds positive attributes that they call *caballerismo*. They measure *caballerismo* through the measures of “masculine chivalry” (Arciniega et al., 2008, p. 20). These measures include education and awareness of their own cultural identity, which reflects on the way in which Latino men contribute positively to society and their personal relationships. Their goal was to tie family and chivalry to the idea of *machismo* and create two different scales: one reflecting *machismo*, and another reflecting *callaberismo*.

They concluded that various factors had higher levels of *caballerismo* and *machismo*, including levels of education. Higher education led to an advanced level of *caballerismo* and a lower of the scale of *machismo* (Arciniega et al., 2008). Although they do not mention a direct correlation of how different factors lead to a higher measure of *caballerismo*, they recognized the importance of family and acceptance of others. This led them to identify themselves as having higher levels of *caballerismo*. Estrada, Rigali-Oiler, Arciniega & Tracey (2011) furthered the research to empirically use the scales as a way to address internalized homophobia and *machismo* expression. They found that “callaberismo could be positively associated with measures of ethnic identity, problem-solving skills, and life satisfaction, whereas traditional *machismo* has shown positive relations with measures for aggression, antisocial behavior, and alexithymia” (p. 363). This differentiation between *machismo* and *cabellerismo* is important in giving context to some of the issues surrounding joining a Latino fraternity as a gay man. Ideally a student would join a fraternity based on values associated with *cabellerismo* rather than the values associated with *machismo*.

In an effort to connect to culturally based organizations, DeSantis and Coleman (2008) first examined gay membership and the stigma around gay men in historically Black Greek lettered organizations (BGLOs). In their research they defined masculinity similarly to traditional *machismo*, which emphasizes hypersexuality, manliness and aggression. The authors found that the mere mention of someone being gay would deny them membership. Religion, according to DeSantis and Coleman (2008), is one of the more defining reasons that gay men are not allowed entry to the organization. Study participants often emphasized the Bible as the guiding rule for not accepting gay men. BGLOs hold strong roots in religion, allowing those values and beliefs to guide policies and protocols regarding membership. Guardia and Evans (2008) mentioned, however, no specific religious connection to the origins of Latino fraternities. They explained, “Latino fraternities began in the late 1800s as secret societies whose members were elite and wealthy students from various Latin American countries attending prestigious colleges and universities in the United States” (Guardia & Evans, 2008, p. 165). This serves as a distinct difference between Latino and Black fraternities as their initial missions and visions have stemmed from different sources and served two different communities. As time passed, the visions and mission of both BGLO’s and Latino fraternities

began to emphasize themes of social and political awareness.

The Cultural Definition of Community

The links embedded between *caballerismo* and family, allow us to understand how community is weaved into the fraternal experience, specifically within Latino fraternities. Hesp and Brooks (2009) addressed that although gaining membership into a historically White fraternity as an “out” male can be difficult, “outing” yourself after gaining membership can lead to conversations surrounding sexuality and masculinity. When some members of their study discovered that a brother was gay, positive reactions seemed hopeful for the gay member, and believed that the comfort of being able to “out” themselves was a result of a “breakdown of each member’s façade of hyper-masculinity, a direct result of the absence of women” (p. 408). The researchers emphasized the fact that the gay participants “perceived that [their] brothers viewed him as just another chapter member who happened to be emotionally and sexually attracted to men” (p. 409). Although the implications are that brotherhood and friendship are important, it still does not recognize Latino men and how membership in a Latino fraternity encourages or discourages their process of coming “out” Hesp and Brooks (2009) used their research to explain how a hyper-masculine façade is a way of ensuring membership into a fraternity and foster male friendship.

In hopes of understanding the development of Latino fraternity men, Guardia and Evans (2008) conducted research based on various Latino and Hispanic identity development models and focused on environmental influence, depicted by of Bronfenbrenner’s (1995) bioecological theory of human development. Through their investigation they were able to identify that family, both biological and fraternal, heavily influenced Latino fraternity men. Fraternity or *hermandad*, as Guardia and Evans (2008) explained, “provides a family atmosphere on college and university campuses” (p. 173). Family is of importance within the context of cultural organizations and they “provide support as well as cultural education to individuals who are still defining the many aspects of their identity” (Castro as cited in Guardia and Evans, 2008, p. 173). Moreover, Guardia and Evans expressed that one participant in the study struggled to define his racial identity, and by joining a Latino fraternity grew to understand what being Latino meant to him.

While there is research that emphasizes community and family as important components of membership, there is no research that explores the intersection of sexual identity and Latino fraternity membership. This allows for the continuing towards discussion and research to determine the accessibility and inclusion of gay men in Latino fraternities.

Conclusion: Author's Perspective

Knowing that masculinity and creating community are two major parts of pursuing and maintaining fraternity membership, it is difficult to know where the future lies in understanding students who have these complex identities. From my own person experience I know the challenge of reconciling the male Latino identity that my parents understood with the one that I continue to redefine and reclaim as my own. My fraternity membership experience also served as a catalyst to explore other identities such as sexuality and masculinity. The support I received from my chapter members helped me engage in conversations about these identities. The conversations then led to explore my own sexuality and “unpack” critical identities that I never expected to internally examine. Nonetheless, it was still a gruesome process of creating and molding an identity that did not exist in my prescribed molds of identity.

The conversation around this issue is just beginning as the future of the conversation lies in how to support students within higher education and advocate for them. Research is critical in keeping relevance and momentum in higher education. There is a research focusing on the White male narrative, but with looking at the other underrepresented groups, Latinos still hold a void in literature regarding the college student experience and their development. In writing this article I hope to inspire the advancement of more research dedicated to people of color.

Examining this literature and gaining better perspective of Latino male issues might lead to a better understanding of other student development complexities that exist on a college environment.

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