

SYSTEMIC ISSUES CAN'T BE FIXED OVERNIGHT: HOW LATINA UNDERGRADUATE
STUDENTS ENGAGE IN ACTIVISM AND CRITICAL HOPE

By

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ABSTRACT

The Latinx population has significantly transformed the demography of the United States and its institutions of higher education. Yet, despite the increase of Latinx students obtaining their bachelor's degrees (U.S. Census 2021) and having one of the highest college enrollment rates, Latinxs have the lowest college attainment (Ayala and Chalupa Young 2022). Despite the changing demographic compositions of universities, students from marginalized racial and ethnic backgrounds experience various forms of racism and oppression on campus (Broadhurst and Velez 2019). And so, engaging in activism is one avenue in which students challenge these forms of marginalization and oppression. Still, there is not vast research which explores Latina undergraduates' engagement in activism and more importantly how their positionalities shape their experiences. In particular, this dissertation sheds light on how the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement shaped Latina undergraduate students' experiences with activism.

For this dissertation, I adopted Critical Race Theory (CRT), Latina/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), and Chicana Feminist Epistemology (CFE) lenses. I drew on data obtained through thirty demographic questionnaires and thirty semi-structured, open-ended interviews. Findings suggest that Latina undergraduate students participated in a variety of activities such as engaging in difficult conversations, raising funds and providing resources, political activism, and online activism as means to engage in activism. Yet, the insights of these experiences shed light on how their positionalities impact the causes that are important to them, the activities they participate in as means of activism, their support systems, and their relationships and their sense of allyship to communities. While I found that all the participants identified as Latinas, those existing at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities were more frequently allies for

multiple communities and causes than white Latinas. Furthermore, the findings also highlighted how Latina undergraduate students engaged in critical hope in their activism by specifically relying on small, but meaningful changes and centering their communities. Lastly, while exploring various hurdles the participants endured during their experiences in activism and as students at their institutions of higher education, I found that the Latina undergraduate students experienced colorism and gendered forms of oppression from men inside and outside of the Latinx community.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BIPOC	Black, Indigenous, People of Color
BLM	Black Lives Matter
CFE	Chicana Feminist Epistemology
CIRP	Cooperative Institutional Research Program
CRT	Critical Race Theory
DACA	Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals
IRB	Institutional Review Board
LatCrit	Latina/o Critical Race Theory
LULAC	League of United Latin American Citizens
MU	Midwest University
MUASO	Midwest University Associated Students Organization
MUCC	Midwest University Climbing Club
MUCME	Midwest University Council for Menstrual Equity
MUFLE	Midwest University Future Latinx Engineers
MUFLP	Midwest University Future Latinxs in Policy
MUGI	Midwest University Global Impact
MUILSO	Midwest University Indigenous Latinx Student Organization
MUSEBA	Midwest University Students Empower Body Acceptance
NEDA	National Eating Disorder Awareness
MMIW	Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women
PWI	Predominantly White Institution
SMO	Social Movement Organization

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

“Be ready for a gun show.”

These words echoed in my head as I read them on the Yik Yak¹ app on my phone. The anonymity of the message added an additional layer of fear to the threat. This occurred in 2015, when I was an undergraduate student and the vice president of the Council for Minority Student Affairs (CMSA) at Texas A&M University. CMSA was in the process of organizing a demonstration in support of the Texas Tuition Equity movement for undocumented students at Texas A&M University and in the days leading up to this demonstration we saw posts online, and specifically on the Yik Yak app, spreading misinformation, regurgitating hateful messages about the cause, our organization, our members and supporters, and posting threats of violence against us. Yet, out of all the hateful messages posted online, “Be ready for a gun show,” stuck with me. I feared someone would confront us at the demonstration, and the anonymity amplified this fear as I didn’t know who I should be looking out for. And so, the CMSA executive board (e-board) discussed the various threats made with our CMSA members, reported these threats to our organization advisor and the university administration, and decided to still move forward with our demonstration. Fortunately for everyone, there was no gun show that day.

Unfortunately for me and many other students at Texas A&M University, threats of violence were not an unusual occurrence. And so, my entire undergraduate experience was shaped by my involvement with CMSA and the various causes that were important to the organization as a whole and the current members at the time. While CMSA focused on the immigrant and undocumented community on and off campus, our activism was not restricted to

¹ YikYak was a proximity-based, anonymous posting phone application aimed at college-aged adults (Black, Mezzina, and Thompson 2016).

immigration. We organized voter registration drives and “Ask me about DACA” tabling events. We led “Sanctuary Campus” rallies and “Defend Texas DREAMers” demonstrations. We attended and co-organized anti-racism demonstrations. We protested white supremacists on campus. We attended and supported Black Lives Matter protests. We also attended the Women’s March in Austin. Overall, these were just a few instances of activism that marked my undergraduate experience. And yet, as it will be discussed in this dissertation, my experience with student activism and the experiences of the participants of this dissertation were not restricted to the boundaries of an institution of higher education.

I graduated from Texas A&M University in 2017 while racial tensions continued to skyrocket under the Trump administration. At that time, scholars found that at predominantly white institutions (PWI) of higher education, campus climates were overwhelmingly hostile toward historically marginalized students (Logan, Lightfoot, and Contreras 2017). And so, as I ended my time as an undergraduate student activist, I moved into a new role as a graduate student. This shift reshaped how I was involved in activism, yet it also enabled me to stay connected with undergraduate students engaging in activism. Through my previous research experiences and the relationships established with undergraduate communities, I saw the ways in which a new wave of undergraduate students were engaging in activism.

Background of Study

This dissertation examines the engagement in activism by Latina undergraduate students that are enrolled in a predominantly white institution of higher education in the U.S. Midwest. My work focuses on the lived experiences of thirty Latina undergraduate students, and how their vast positionalities have shaped their experiences with activism. Through the use of demographic questionnaires and interviews, I focused on understanding the participants’ experiences at

Midwest University, their identity as activists, their causes of interest for their activism, and their experiences with activism. The data revealed not only how these Latina participants with vastly different positionalities and different lived experiences engaged in activism, but also how the COVID-19 global pandemic and the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement shaped their experiences.

While there are many drivers for students' activism, scholars find that a hostile campus climate can serve as a catalyst for students to engage in activism (Linder, Quaye, Lange, Evans, and Stewart 2020). Among my participants their catalyst ranged from being inspired by a family member's activism to a personal experience with injustice, a drive to be involved in social issues, or a combination of these. Moreover, the causes ranged from very broad causes such as inequality, to very specific causes like the Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women. And so, what remained was understanding my participants' commitment to activism amidst so many challenges and disappointments. In responding to this question, I turned my attention to critical hope.

Problem Statement

Student activism is not new and continues to change. While scholars have found that “[s]tudents’ intersectional identities significantly influenced how they engaged as activist[s]” (Logan, Lightfoot, and Contreras 2017: 266), there is not vast research that explores Latina undergraduates’ engagement in activism and more importantly how their positionalities shape their experiences. Relevant research focuses on the larger Latinx community as a whole. However, research on Latina activists is limited (Tijerina Revilla 2004), which is an issue I intend to address through this work. And so, my work not only adds to the limited literature on

Latina students, but does so in a way that positions them as valuable contributors of knowledge and challenges various deficit and reductionist narratives of Latinas.

Furthermore, there is limited research on the concept of critical hope and little understanding of its role in student activism. Scholars like Urrieta (2009) discuss the selfless act educators commit to giving back to the community, and an awareness of working within a system that isn't meant to work for marginalized folks to make even minimal changes for their communities. However, both Urrieta (2009) and Duncan-Andrade's (2009) work are restricted to the context of educators and the classroom. Quaye's (2007) concept of critical hope, on the other hand, presents critical hope as existing outside the bounds of a classroom. In my work, I explore how critical hope drives activism and how it interacts with the vast identities and lived experiences of Latina undergraduate students.

Significance of The Study

This dissertation makes important contributions to the literature on Latina undergraduate students' experiences in institutions of higher education by examining their experiences with activism and their relationships with various organizations and communities in and outside their institution of higher education. My work also contributes to literature on Latina undergraduate student experiences with activism by specifically providing a nuanced discussion on the vast positionalities Latinas hold and how they impact their activism.

Research Questions

And so, this dissertation addresses the following research questions:

1. How do Latina undergraduate students engage in activism to address injustices?
 - a) How do Latina undergraduates' positionalities factor into their engagement in activism?

- b) How do Latina undergraduate students engage in critical hope?
2. How do Latina undergraduate students engage with injustices from members within the Latinx community?

Organization of Chapters

This dissertation is organized in chapters, starting with Chapter One: Introduction. I present the background and statement of the problem. An overview of the relevant literature on activism and higher education is presented as well. I also share my own lived experiences as an activist, first-generation college student, and various identities that have shaped my experiences on- and off-campus.

Chapter Two: Literature Review begins with a review of Latinxs in institutions of higher education. Next, I discuss the epistemological lenses I adopted that draw from Critical Race Theory (CRT), Latina/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), and Chicana Feminist Epistemology (CFE). One of the aims of this chapter is to contextualize institutions of higher education as ongoing sites for eurocentrism. These lenses enabled me to discuss the ways in which microaggressions, sense of belonging, and campus climate are all interconnected. I then shift to an overview of activism, providing a brief insight on various means of engaging in activism. I then introduce the concept of critical hope and how it is connected to student activism. I then present a section discussing Latina students' engagement with activism, specifically highlighting the various racialized and gendered challenges they face. Lastly, I conclude with a brief insight on how the historical moment in which this dissertation was written has shaped the participants and various aspects of this dissertation.

Chapter Three: Methodology presents a brief overview of the epistemological lenses used with a specific focus on how it drove the methodological process. These epistemological lenses

enabled me to weave together and reflect on the lived experiences of the Latina undergraduate students. I included a section on data collection which discusses the demographic questionnaires and open-ended interviews that were used to explore the participants' engagement with activism. This section also provides an insight into the recruitment process and its accompanying challenges. Furthermore, I also include a section on reflexivity and positionality to engage in an ongoing examination of what I know and how I know it and how it is tied to my own lived experiences.

Chapter Four: Findings details the findings of this dissertation into three sections: Latinas' causes, Critical Hope, and Considerations. However, I begin with providing a background for the participants' definitions of activism and their various catalysts for engaging in activism. In this section, I explore tradition, personal, social issues, and a combination of these as the various catalysts driving the participants to engage in activism. I also detail how the historical context involving COVID-19 and the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests shaped this dissertation. The "Latinas' causes" section is broken up into racism and discrimination, immigration and deportation, education justice, women's and menstruating people's rights, and Latinx identity. In this section, I discuss the various ways the participants engaged the issues mentioned above, the challenges they encountered, and how their positionalities shaped these experiences. The section on critical hope focuses on the participants' understanding of not solving the issues that are important to them, but rather engaging in activism to be part of the change even if they never get to witness that change. Lastly, the considerations section is divided into the following subsections: intragroup inequities, risks and challenges, working within the political system, leadership and activism, and value assessment. These subsections highlight the intricacies experienced by various participants as they engaged in activism.

Lastly, Chapter Five: Discussion provides a discussion on the findings on Latina undergraduate student engagement in activism. I first revisit the problem statement and provide a review of the study. I then engage in a discussion of the findings and how they relate to existing relevant literature. Next, I include a section exploring the implications for higher education. I then discuss the limitations of this dissertation and possible areas for future research. And lastly, I conclude this chapter with final reflections on the dissertation and my own lived experiences.

Summary

In this chapter, I introduce the problem statement, significance of the study, and research questions driving this dissertation. I opened this chapter and dissertation with my own experiences as a Latina undergraduate student that engaged in activism. My experience with activism started by centering immigrant rights, however, starting in 2015 with the 2016 presidential elections changed my experience dramatically. At that time and the years that followed there were injustices occurring near and far. And so, my experience, engagement, and commitment to activism reflected that. This dissertation was deeply shaped by my own lived experiences and my gained knowledge of relevant literature.

As mentioned above, the following chapter, Chapter Two Literature Review, provides an overview of the relevant literature for this dissertation. Chapter Two: Literature Review sets the foundation to situating the participants' lived experiences in institutions of higher education as Latina undergraduate students. I present the historical and ongoing legacies of colonialism in institutions of higher education, as well as more personal experiences like those of experiencing microaggressions. I then provide an overview of the literature on activism and student activism specifically. I then move to a discussion on the concept of critical hope and its role in maintaining

the participants engaged in challenging various injustices and inequities through their activism.

Finally, I describe CRT, LatCrit, and CFE and how these lenses shaped the dissertation.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This dissertation explores the experiences of Latina undergraduate students' engagement in activism. To begin, this chapter examines literature on higher education, activism, and critical hope to situate this dissertation in relevant literature and to contextualize the experiences of Latina undergraduate students. First, I explore literature on Latinxs² in higher education. This section details demographic trends of the Latinx population in the United States and higher education. I also highlight that the demographic trends do not entirely account for the challenging experiences Latinxs experience in institutions of higher education. Next, I expand on the epistemological lenses adopted for this dissertation, highlighting the ways the Critical Race Theory, LatCrit, and Chicana Feminist Epistemology shaped this dissertation. The following section examines how the eurocentric foundation of institutions of higher education continue to impact the lived experiences of students of color, with specific attention on Latinx students. Then I review literature on activism and injustices where I detail the ways in which students continue to engage in activism despite encountering various obstacles. I then segued into a discussion on the concept of critical hope and the ways it shapes engagement in activism for my Latina undergraduate student participants. Lastly, I provide an overview of student activism broadly and then specifically as it pertains to Latina undergraduate students. The sections in this literature review serve to explore the various ways the Latina undergraduate students engage in activism, how their positionalities impact their activism, how they engage in critical hope, and lastly, the challenges they experience within the communities they are a part of and how they respond.

² The term Latinx is used as a gender-neutral term to refer to individuals of Latin American descent. It is also a “term that emerged from feminist and queer communities to contest the masculine plural used in Spanish and articulate a more inclusive understanding of Latinidad” (Montoya and Seminario 2020).

Latinx Students in Institutions of Higher Education

Over the past few decades, the Latinx population has significantly transformed the demography of the United States and its institutions of higher education. The Pew Research Center (2021) stated that there was a 23 percent increase in the Latinx population from 50.5 million in 2010 to 62.1 million in 2020. In 2019, 21.7 percent of undergraduate students in the United States were Latinx (PNPI 2019). And between 2005-2009 to 2015-2019, there was a 30 percent increase of Latinx students obtaining their bachelor's degrees (U.S. Census 2021). And while Latinxs have one of the highest college enrollment rates, they have the lowest college attainment (Ayala and Chalupa Young 2022). So, the increase of Latinx undergraduate students entering college and graduating with their bachelor's degree only gives a partial insight to the experiences of Latinx undergraduate students on college campuses. What these trends miss are the complex experiences of Latinx undergraduate students within institutions of higher education. Despite the changing demographic compositions of universities, students from marginalized racial and ethnic backgrounds experience various forms of racism and oppression on campus (Broadhurst and Velez 2019).

Institutions of higher education continue to uphold racist, sexist, and colonial systems of oppression that marginalize and oppress Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) undergraduate students existing within them (McCabe 2009; Ballinas 2017; Garcia 2017; Shotton et al. 2018; Ayala and Ramirez 2019). The legacies of colonialism and eurocentrism show up in institutions of higher education by normalizing whiteness in knowledge and curriculum, undervaluing Latinx students' cultural capital, racial exclusion in representation, and the minimization of racial minorities' contributions (Moore and Bell 2017; Ayala and Ramirez 2019). For example, Latinx students have had their academic merits questioned by peers when

they are wrongfully accused of being admitted into institutions of higher education due to affirmative action (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, and Solórzano 2009). Latinx students are also subjected to racist jokes by their peers, experience stereotype threat³, racial assaults and microaggressions, and navigating a hostile campus racial climate (Yosso et al. 2009). Latinx students are seen as perpetual foreigners, they are “alien in their own land” (McCabe 2009:141). And Latinas face additional marginalization as they are stereotypically viewed as sexually available and exotic, which has led to unwarranted attention and harassment (McCabe 2009). These wide range of microaggressions reinforce the narrative that Latinx students are “other,” and that they therefore do not belong on college campuses and in the United States in general (Ayala and Ramirez 2019).

Whereas higher education is framed as a meritocratic site that is universally accessible (Liu 2011), for non-white students, institutions of higher education are not sites of equal opportunity nor are they sites of “leveling the playing field.” McNamee and Miller (2004), for example, reject the myth of meritocracy and suggest that institutions of higher education in the United States are “not governed by strict principles of meritocracy, but instead, [reflect], [legitimize], and [reproduce] class inequalities” (112). Moreover, Liu (2011) proposes even when institutions of higher education attempt to mitigate social inequities, such as affirmative action, they reaffirm the myth of meritocracy. Therefore, further work is needed to understand the gaps between the myth of meritocracy and the actual unequal and unjust lived experiences of Latinx students in institutions of higher education. To understand this issue, I adopt the following epistemological lenses.

³ Stereotype threat is described as when a student is “threatened by the possibility that they may be judged or treated stereotypically by their teacher and peers and facing the prospect that their academic performance may confirm the negative stereotype” (Tuit and Carter 2008: 53).

Epistemology

In this dissertation, I adopt Critical Race Theory, LatCrit, and Chicana Feminist epistemological lenses. These lenses are adopted to focus on justice while challenging ideas of objectivity, meritocracy, race-neutrality and colorblindness especially as they are rampant in institutions of education (Smith-Maddox et al. 2002; Delgado and Stefancic 2012).

Latinx experiences have been historically erased in higher education research (Guzman 2022). And so, I adopt Critical Race Theory (CRT) to address racism and oppression rooted in white supremacy (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). CRT draws from literature in critical theory in law, sociology, history, ethnic studies, and women studies to “examine and transform the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Garcia, Lopez, and Velez 2017:151; Delgado and Stefancic 2012). Critical Race Theory contains five foundational tenets, which are the “1) *intercentricity of race and racism* with other forms of marginalization; 2) *challenge to dominant ideology*; 3) *commitment to social justice*; 4) importance of *experiential knowledge*; and 5) use of *interdisciplinary perspectives*” (Benavides Lopez 2016: 83).

The first tenet, the *intercentricity of race and racism*, emphasizes the permanent aspect of race and racism and its centrality in a critical race analysis. However, critical race scholars view race and racism as they intersect with other forms of oppression. And so, a “critical race methodology in education also acknowledges the intercentricity of racialized oppression - the layers of subordination based on race, gender, class, immigration status, surname, phenotype, accent, and sexuality” (Solórzano and Yosso 2002: 25). The *challenge dominant ideology* tenet focuses on challenging objectivity, meritocracy, colorblindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunities claims that are dominant in institutions of higher education. Critical race theorists challenge white privilege, reject ideas of neutral or objective research, and expose deficit

narratives that harm people of color (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). For example, in institutions of education, attendance policies are viewed as race neutral when in reality they are based on a white middle class cultural norm (Barajas and Ronnkvist 2007). And colorblind ideology is seen in institutions of higher education when university policies embrace equal opportunities regardless of race. However, embracing equal opportunity ignores the differences in experiences due to racism and therefore cannot appropriately address the inequities that exist. The *commitment to social justice* tenet focuses on eliminating racism, sexism, and poverty, and empowering marginalized groups. Critical race scholars thus recognize that “educational institutions operate in contradictory ways, with their potential to oppress and marginalize coexisting with their potential to emancipate and empower” (Solórzano and Yosso 2002: 26). And yet, many of these oppressive and marginalizing systems are challenged and met with a variety of forms of resistance in educational settings. The *centrality of experiential knowledge* tenet recognizes that the “experiential knowledges of people of color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination” (Solórzano and Yosso 2002: 26). Critical race scholars center storytelling, family histories, biographies, cuentos, and testimonios while rejecting traditional texts and theories used to explain and often reproduce deficit narratives of people of color (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). Through these means, experiential knowledge provides further understanding of racism and marginalization and they expose and document injustices (Daniel 2007; Guzman 2022). And lastly, the *transdisciplinary perspective* tenet uses knowledge from ethnic studies, women’s studies, sociology, history, and other disciplines to understand race, racism, sexism, classism, and other oppressive systems experienced by people of color.

And so, I engage the *intercentricity of race and racism* tenet by contextualizing my participants' lived experiences in institutions of higher education as sites of on-going colonialism. I employ the *challenging of dominant ideology* and *experiential knowledges* tenets by positioning participants as experts in their lived experiences especially as they counter deficit dominant narratives. Moreover, the *commitment to social justice* tenet is employed through my participants' activism and by my commitment to elevate their narratives. Lastly, I employ the *interdisciplinary perspectives* by engaging literature and theories in sociology, Chicanx and Latinx studies, and women's and gender studies throughout this dissertation.

Additionally, CRT expands to include various branches that address the gaps that came as a result of critical race theorists recognizing that there was a vast history of racism and intersecting forms of oppression experienced by a multitude of racial and ethnic marginalized people. Latina/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) scholars explore issues concerned with the Latinx community, specifically issues of language, immigration, ethnicity, identity, and phenotype (Delgado Bernal 2002). LatCrit is essential to this dissertation as it will explore issues of immigration, ethnicity, culture, identity, and phenotype that are specific and unique to the Latina undergraduate student participants and how these identities impact their engagement in activism. LatCrit focuses on advocating for social justice and does so through the inclusion of various perspectives and disciplines to better address the injustices Latinxs face (Guzman 2022: 22). And so, LatCrit in education "provides the opportunity to accurately understand the Latinx population's history within the United States, the impact of colonization on generations, and how the history of racism and segregation in education sets the foundation for the lived experiences of Latinx students in postsecondary education" (Guzman 2022: 65-66). In this dissertation,

adopting a LatCrit lens enables me to center Latina undergraduate students' experiences and expose the various forms of oppression they have experienced (Benavides Lopez 2016).

Furthermore, I employ a Chicana Feminist lens to challenge knowledges that are seen as legitimate, valid, and foundational (Calderón, Delgado Bernal, Pérez Huber, Malagón, and Vélez 2012: 515). For example, education scholars have used a deficit lens to examine the academic experiences and success of marginalized students throughout their educational careers. Scholars have explained away marginalized students' academic challenges due to their "culture of poverty." Thus, deficit narratives shift responsibility and often blame students and their families while ignoring the structural and institutional barriers that impede their pathways to academic excellence (Ladson-Billings 2017). Yet, concepts like community cultural wealth⁴ disrupt deficit narratives and position Black, Indigenous, people of color and their communities as rich sources of capital and knowledge. And so, LatCrit theorists and CFE scholars challenge deficit narratives by embracing strength- and asset-based and community cultural wealth perspectives. CFE scholars in particular use counterstories and testimonios to "expose oppression, disrupt repression, and build solidarity" (Cervantes-Soon and Carrillo 2016:291-292). Testimonios disrupt the enforced silences, it invites connections, and it encourages collectivity and work towards social justice (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, and Flores Carmona 2012). Latinxs in the United States have been framed in a deficit way throughout history, specifically in the ways in which the Latinx community has been racialized as uneducated, dangerous, criminal, threatening, foreign, and un-American. So, Chicana Feminist theorists have countered these narratives by centering the lived experiences of women of color specifically by positioning "Latinas and Chicanas [as] the channels of intellectual theory and praxis" (Nuñez 2022: 2611).

⁴ Community cultural wealth is defined as an "array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by communities of color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (Yosso 2006:77).

Chicana Feminist Epistemology (CFE) “goes beyond quantitative versus qualitative methods and lies in the methodology employed and in whose experiences and realities are accepted as the foundation of knowledge” (Delgado Bernal 1998: 558).

Moreover, CFE is essential to this dissertation because it is “grounded in the rich historical legacy of Chicanas’ resistance and translates into a pursuit of social justice in both research and scholarship” (Delgado Bernal 1998: 56). CFE locates Chicanas within their research and positions them in a way where they are able to tackle issues of race, class, and sexuality in a way that patriarchal, white, and white feminist scholarship cannot (Delgado Bernal 1998). The lines between scholar and scholarship are blurred, there is no separation of the researcher from the research. Scholars are pushed to reimagine their role and intersecting identities. They are also constantly pushed to reflect on how their identities change within the settings of their work. Fierro (2016) further states:

“It embodies who we are and requires us to grapple with our activist-scholar role, embrace alternative ways of knowing, and confront those aspects of ourselves that render us the colonized or the perpetrator, particularly if we are working with marginalized communities (i.e., the immigrant, the queer, youth, and people of color) even if we are from these communities” (102).

Chicana perspectives enable scholars to challenge dominant and deficit narratives, knowledges, and methods and explore the role of scholar-activist, engaged community member, and co-producer of knowledge. An authentic co-producer of knowledge requires constant confrontations of their blind spots and ongoing commitment to the process and community (Calderon et al. 2012). This commitment to the work recognizes that priorities lie within the community and not academia. There may be deadlines and pressures within academia that can lead to conflicts with

the researcher's commitment to their work and impacted community which must be resolved in a way that does not harm the community.

In sum, Critical Race Theory provides the tools needed to understand racism, colonialism, and the eurocentric realities that are on-going and permanent in society. In particular, CRT establishes how racism, colonialism, and eurocentricity shape the experiences of Latina undergraduate students on and off campus. Furthermore, LatCrit provides a nuanced understanding of the intersecting systems of oppression that impact Latinas' lived experiences, and in particular how that impacts their engagement in activism. And lastly, Chicana Feminist Epistemology enables me to position the Latina undergraduate students as creators of valid knowledge. This leads to centering their understandings, their definitions of activism, injustice, and justice. Yet, to begin to understand the experiences of Latina undergraduate students' engagement in activism, we first need to understand why Latinx students continue to have these unequal and unjust experiences in institutions of higher education.

Institutions of Higher Education as Eurocentric Sites

Institutions of higher education are historically white, male, elite, and uphold colonial values and systems of oppression. In doing so, higher education institutions are often exclusionary spaces for marginalized individuals, specifically, BIPOC (McCabe 2009; Ballinas 2017; Garcia 2017; Shotton, Tachine, Nelson, Zape-tah-hol-ah Minthorn, and Waterman 2018; Ayala and Ramirez 2019). The exclusion perpetuated by institutions of higher education are seen in the ways that the institutions embrace eurocentric curriculum, ideas of objectivity and meritocracy, the perpetuation of racial and ethnic discrimination, and the essentialism of non-white individuals. Predominantly white institutions⁵ (PWI) of higher education in particular are

⁵ PWIs are institutions where fifty percent or more of the student population is white (Lomotey 2010), yet the predominance of whiteness is also established through practices that uphold whiteness (Bourke 2016; Wong 2021).

founded and maintained by the racial hierarchy that elevates whiteness (Moore and Bell 2017). The racial hierarchy enables whites to rationalize and legitimize processes and policies that maintain white privilege and the subordination of racially and ethnically marginalized individuals (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, and Solórzano 2009; Ayala and Chalupa Young 2022)

Microaggressions

Students experience the legacies of colonialism and eurocentrism in a variety of ways. One of those ways are the ongoing racial microaggressions which are subtle, verbal, visual, unconscious, or intentional degradations, putdowns, and insults which are rooted in white supremacy (Garcia and Johnston-Guerrero 2015; Ballinas 2017). There are three types of racial microaggressions, they are microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Microassaults are described as explicit and derogatory attacks. For example, this can appear in the use of racial slurs which reproduce racial subordination, inequities, and systemic racism (Ballinas 2017; Feagin 2014). Microinsults are subtle snubs which degrade a person's identity or heritage. Ballinas (2017) provides the example of a Mexican American woman sharing with other students that she is a science major. They do not believe her, and she is questioned and teased about her major. The experience detailed above highlights the belittling of racial and ethnic identities, specifically in this example, how Mexican women are questioned for their educational pursuits as it's seen as not compatible with traditional values or stereotypes. Lastly, microinvalidations are comments that attempt to nullify a person's experiences, thoughts, and histories (Ballinas 2017). Ballinas (2017) shares that Mexicans, regardless of citizenship, are often perceived as perpetually foreign, told that they are "illegal," or told to "go back to your country." This example of microinvalidations details the invalidation experienced by Mexican and Latinx students and their families. And it reinforces the idea that Latinx communities are not American.

In short, racial microaggressions suggest that Black, Indigenous, people of color are criminally inclined, foreign, unintelligent, and deserving of the various inequities and injustices that they experience (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, and Esquilin 2007; Ballinas 2017).

And still, students have found ways to respond to racial microaggressions. Scholars describe four of these responses as practicing self-censorship, “proving them wrong,” reframing what it means to be an intellectual, and by challenging their oppressors. Self-censorship occurs when students do not participate as much as their peers do in class, or when they do, they choose their words carefully, they tone down their responses, or they disengage completely to minimize or prevent racist microaggressions from their peers or professors (Tuitt and Carter 2008). “Proving them wrong” involves the student taking a stereotype, for example, that students of color are intellectually inferior, and working on disproving that stereotype by excelling academically by traditional means. An example of this would be a student obtaining and maintaining a high grade point average to disprove that they indeed are not intellectually inferior. Reframing what it means to be an intellectual, enables students to reimagine what intelligence means to them and what characteristics and achievements they hold that are just as valid, if not more, than academic success as measured by traditional means of what it is to be an intellectual. It includes recognizing that an aspect of intelligence includes an individual’s own skills and expertise by pulling from their own communities. For example, this is seen with the concept of *educación*, Benavides Lopez (2016) states:

Educación is defined as, not only one’s formal education but is inclusive of the moral, cultural, and community upbringing and caring of a child... Educación includes but is not limited to lessons of right and wrong, good behavior, manners, and respect for family and community, including lessons of resistance and survival as People of Color in the U.S.

The concept of educación is helpful in understanding the educational achievement and/or experiences of Chicana/o, Latina/o students because it shifts the lens away from traditional schooling practices that may deem their cultural and educational traditions within deficit ideas (84).

The concept of educación challenges traditional modes of learning and sources of knowledge. Educación embraces community and rejects the idea that education only occurs within the walls of institutions of education. It positions communities, families, and students themselves as valuable and valid sources of knowledge and education (Benavides Lopez 2016). In doing so, educación extends the role of community and culture in education. Lastly, challenging entails directly confronting the individuals that are committing the acts of harm, marginalization, and oppression. This response positions the student in a highly vulnerable position, opening them up to receiving justice, being the target of more harm, or of retaliation (Tuitt and Carter 2008).

Sense of Belonging and Campus Climate

A student's sense of belonging is essential to their experience in institutions of higher education. Strayhorn (2012) defines belonging as "students' perceived social support on campus; a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group or others on campus" (3). Sense of belonging for college students leads to feelings of confidence, capability, validation, and pride (Vaccaro and Camba-Kelsay 2016). Scholars have found that Latinx students' sense of belonging in the college environment is critical to social cohesion and identifying with a college community (Hurtado and Carter 1997; Hurtado and Ponjuan 2005). And that Latinx students who reported positive interactions with a diverse group of peers and participated in various programs also reported a higher sense of belonging, in contrast, Latinx students who "perceived

a negative climate for diversity” reported a lower sense of belonging with their college community (Hurtado and Ponjuan 2005) often leading to psychological, physiological, and behavioral stress (Ayala and Chalupa Young 2022). Franco and Kim (2018) define campus climate as the “perceptions of discrimination, stereotypes, and prejudice on campus, including students’ beliefs about the effectiveness of institutional responses to diversity issues and interactions between and among diverse groups” (27). A hostile campus climate positions Latinx students in a detrimental position as they attempt to navigate their way through institutions of higher education. Others are pushed out of institutions of higher education whereas some students that aren’t pushed out choose to challenge these experiences and injustices through activism.

Activism

For this dissertation, I define injustice in the context of college campuses as “all challenges faced by students on college campuses (whether they be environmental, economic, or social) [that] can be seen as part of a broader pattern of societal marginalization and oppression” (Hudler, Dennis, DiNella, Ford, Mendez, and Long 2021:93). Whereas there are many reactions and responses to injustice, in this work, I focus on activism. For this dissertation, activism is defined as actively participating in efforts for the purpose of creating change related to a broad range of social, political, and economic issues, using techniques such as but not limited to protests, demonstrations, and rallies (Chambers and Phelps 1994; Kezar 2010; Manzano 2018).

The means used by individuals to engage in activism often depend on a variety of factors. While traditional forms of activism focus on achieving their goal through demonstrations or protests, online activism uses technology to create a digital space and provides a new stage for protest, organization, cooperation, and coalition building (Sivitanides and Shah 2011). Those that

engage in traditional forms of activism can engage in violent, physically obstructive, physical but non-obstructive protests, and diplomatic protests (Barnhardt 2019). Still, others that choose traditional forms of activism choose to become involved with Social Movement Organizations (SMOs) which provide opportunities to contribute money, labor, and resources that would otherwise not have vast reach. Fundraisers have been used to build relationships with people who “give money themselves, ask others to give, open doors to institutional giving, volunteer” (Klein 2016: 29). And so, scholars have suggested that “[p]olitical activists and participants in social change must learn how to raise money effectively and ethically, how to manage it carefully, and how to spend it wisely. In fact, activists who refuse to learn about money, including how to ask for it, wind up collaborating with the very system that the rest of their work is designed to change” (Klein 2016: 78). Others might engage in political activism which mainly focuses on forms of civic engagement which center the role of citizens in influencing elections, governments, and policy (Norris 2004). Some of the most common activities are voting, campaign work, and contacting elected politicians. And still, other individuals engage in conversations as their means of activism. These conversations often involve discomfort yet are necessary to understand the particularities of the issues (Keddie 2021). Engaging in difficult conversations help individuals build relationships and engage in protests that deepens solidarity and participation in other efforts for their cause (Asselin 2022).

And still, activism may not look like anything we think it will, “today’s students might not protest in the traditional sense, but that does not mean that they are indifferent to social problems within and outside their campus community” (Quaye 2007: 3). Social media allows activists to share their views in a public forum with a wide reach and it enables discussions with others. An important difference between in-person activism and online activism, however, is that

online activism does not require the need to be face-to-face at the same place and time. The lack of face-to-face aspect of online activism makes it more accessible for people who would traditionally not be able to participate in in-person activism (Corrigall-Brown 2022). Yet, at the same time the lack of face-to-face engagement may make it more difficult for the cause to maintain people over time.

Furthermore, there are critiques on how people engage in activism. Performative activism is the critique of individuals that engage in shallow or self-serving actions in support of social justice causes (Thimsen 2022). Yet, Thimsen (2022) critiques the condemnation of performative activism, because to do something that is effective in solving systemic issues is so large that not even the most passionate, active, and lifelong activists can claim to even come close to solving. And so, more activism can always be demanded from individuals, but this demand should not overshadow the vastness or limitedness of individuals' engagement in activism as it all works towards addressing the issues at hand. Similarly, for online activism, slacktivism is a word combination of "slacker" and "activism" (Moussaoui, Blonde, Phung, Tschopp, and Desrichard 2022) that refers to "people who are happy to click a "like" button about a cause and may make other nominal, supportive gestures. But they're hardly inspired with the kind of emotional fire that forces a shift in public perception" (McCafferty 2011:17-18). Slacktivism often refers to people who are described as lazy and whose work has little to no impact on the cause (Moussaoui et al. 2022). And so, one of the main arguments concerning slacktivism is that "low-cost display of support for a cause does not lead people to actively become involved in it and can even reduce subsequent commitment to acting for the same cause" (Moussaoui et al. 2022: 2). Furthermore, slacktivism has been described as an "unique desire to fulfill a need in self-esteem" (Moussaoui et al. 2022: 2) by engaging in low-cost activism, "especially in front of others,

individuals show endorsement for a good and charitable cause. This places them in a favorable light, which can in itself boost their self-worth” (Moussaoui et al. 2022: 2). In sum, the discourse surrounding slacktivism is that it is low-cost and self-fulfilling rather than beneficial for the cause. Yet, Mendes and Chang (2019) challenge the idea of a hierarchy among those that engage in activism and the idea that there are “true” activists because it serves little purpose besides a narcissistic project.

Racial Battle Fatigue

And still, not all activism leads to social change. At the end of the day, whether students respond to microaggressions or engage in activism, or not, they may still experience racial battle fatigue. Racial battle fatigue is defined as the cumulative negative effect of racial microaggressions on the psychological, behavioral, and physiological outcomes for these students. The psychological outcomes of racial battle fatigue include frustration, anger, resentment, and fear. The physiological outcomes include headaches, back pain, pounding heart rate, high blood pressure, and sleep disturbances. And lastly, the behavioral outcomes include impatience, eating changes, procrastination, and the negligence of responsibilities (Franklin 2019). For Latinx students, racial microaggressions were linked with racial battle fatigue related stress responses which appeared in the form of frustration, irritability, mood changes, shock, disappointment, and agitation (Franklin, Smith, and Hung 2014). In short, racial battle fatigue shapes the experiences of BIPOC in institutions of higher education, not only do BIPOC students experience academic stress but they also experience stress that is associated with racism (Franklin, Smith, and Hung 2014). Consequently, it is imperative for university administrators to make more direct efforts to address and eliminate the experiences for BIPOC students especially

as these racial battle fatigue stresses negatively impact retention and graduation (Franklin, Smith, and Hung 2014).

Critical Hope

Scholars have found many causes that drive students to participate in activism, for some a hostile campus climate and for others simply belonging to a marginalized group has led them to engage in activism in a variety of ways (Linder et al. 2020; Logan, Lightfoot, and Contreras 2021). And still, scholars recognize that a political event or issue can also be a catalyst for student activism, as the campus climate usually reflects the sociopolitical climate on and off campus (Altbach 1989; Davis 2019). However, what requires more attention is what drives students to continue their activism.

Quaye (2007) describes the concept of critical hope as the students' belief that although inequalities and other forms of oppression cannot be quickly dismantled, their ability to challenge them is essential to create a better present and future. Critical hope combines their ability to recognize injustices and their desire to act and it also engages their ability to connect injustices near and far to their experiences on campus. Critical hope rejects the despair of hopelessness and demands a committed and active struggle against inequality (Duncan-Andrade 2009). Critical hope enables student activists to simultaneously avoid cynicism and naïve idealism when challenging systems of oppression (Quaye 2007).

The concept of critical hope can also be seen in Urrieta's work when he interviewed Chicana activist educators. Urrieta (2009) states that, "the gain for the participants was not in social or economic gain, but in the spirit of giving back to the community. Playing the game involved a conscious awareness and understanding of activist agency (with its potential and limits) in working within whiteman schools with the motivation to ultimately change these

schools (even minimally)” (116). Here we see that those involved in activism do not necessarily believe that they will dismantle systems of oppression that have existed for centuries, yet they can work towards a better future for their communities through their activism.

The concept of critical hope engages the *commitment to social justice* and *experiential knowledges* tenets. The experiential knowledge of Latina undergraduate students shares their understandings of race, racism, and injustice and connect it to their commitment to social justice through their own perspectives and understandings of justice. Consequently, critical hope sheds light on understanding Latina’s broad experiences with activism. And so, when taking all these various lived experiences of Latina students in particular into account, the question of why Latina undergraduate students continue to engage in activism remains understudied. And it leads us to answering the following questions:

1. How do Latina undergraduate students engage in activism to address injustices?
 - a) How do Latina undergraduates’ positionalities factor into their engagement in activism?
 - b) How do Latina undergraduate students engage in critical hope?
2. How do Latina undergraduate students engage with injustices from members within the Latinx community?

Student Activism

Student activism is defined as the involvement in demonstrations with a strong commitment to social justice and in recent years by its use and impact of technology (Gismondi and Osteen 2017). Student activism is “as much about educating and organizing as about engaging in actions such as participating in rallies and marches” (Omatsu 2002: 3). And student activism is not only about changing institutions of higher education, but society at large (Omatsu

2002). The Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Diverse Learning Environments 2021 report states that in 2020, “roughly two out of five students (41.2%) participated in ongoing campus-organized discussions on racial/ethnic issues (e.g., intergroup dialogue), and more than one-third (35.7%) demonstrated for a cause in the past (e.g., boycott, rally, protest)” (Cooperative Institutional Research Program 2021). Additionally, the EAB states that from 2015 to 2020, racial justice was the top driver for activism on university campuses (EAB 2020).

Race-based student activism reached a record high in the 1960s during the Civil Rights Movement as the students participated in marches and sit-ins not only to address national issues such as segregation, voting rights, and access to housing and education, but issues central to higher education in the form of advocating for a more inclusive curriculum, representative faculty demographic, and less hostile campus environment (Linder, Quayle, Lange, Evans, and Stewart 2020). And still, student activists today are advocating for similar demands from the 1960s. Today’s demands include an increase of faculty and staff of color, including a diversity-focused course requirement and anti-racism curriculum, the removal of symbols of hate and oppression on campus, and defunding the campus police or investing in alternative campus safety initiatives (Linder et al. 2020).

A university’s response to activism can be shaped by how they responded to previous incidents on campus, the current political climate, the university’s resource dependencies, the university’s missions and values, and the individual university leaders’ personal bias of activism, the students, the students’ position on the issues, and power and authority (Manning 2018; Barnhardt 2019). Consequently, the university’s response is to “eliminate, appease, or dissolve activism, or to achieve a partnership with the student opposition” (Barnhardt 2019: 12). Universities have responded to student activism by using policy enforcement, small concessions,

an abstention from taking a position, and lastly creating an organizational structure such as a review committee to assess and make recommendations on the issues brought forth by the students' activism (Barnhardt 2019).

Latina Students

And still, previous literature is missing the nuanced investigations into intragroup diversity among Latinx communities and even more so within Latinas. Given the scope of this dissertation, this section focuses on the experiences of Latina undergraduate students with activism. As such, we see that women have continuously been marginalized even within efforts that strive to challenge systems of oppression. Gendered oppression is reproduced and maintained through social movements, we see that “inequities in the sexual division of labor lead to a differential evaluation of leadership and organizing activities” (Stall and Stoecker 1998: 730).

Additionally, women's movements have primarily focused on issues centering middle-class, white women (Broadhurst and Velez 2019) and scholars have found that women of color have often been referred to as “sellouts,” dismissed, or endured sexism when they have attempted to address gender issues in spaces that prioritize race issues (Broadhurst and Velez 2019). These sexist diminishments and dismissals further marginalize women of color and their intersecting gender analysis within racial justice movements (Broadhurst and Velez 2019). Consequently, women of color have found it difficult to find appropriate spaces to advocate for all the issues that are significant to them and their communities. Their vast positionalities have pushed them to be “translators and bridge builders between movements, they have developed insights and practices for working across difference and addressing the multiple and interlocking forms of oppression that impact their communities” (Montoya and Seminario 2020: 171).

Latinas' intersections of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation position them to participate in a range of social justice movements and causes. However, Montoya and Seminario (2020) argue that "while positionality matters, it does not automatically translate into intersectional praxis⁶" (174). While Latinas may hold multiple marginalized identities that does not stop them from reproducing, maintaining, or failing to recognize or address other marginalizations.

Latina students experience a unique marginalization at the intersections of race, gender, class, immigration status, language, and sexuality. They are often perceived as foreigners and less intelligent than their peers (Jimeno-Ingrum, Berdahl, Lucero-Wagoner 2009; Lopez 2013; Liang, Knauer-Turner, Molenaar, and Price 2017). Accordingly, scholars have noted that Latina undergraduates have had to make their own space and efforts to address issues of sexism, homophobia, abuse, and patriarchy because they have not received reciprocal support by their Latino counterparts (Tijerina Revilla 2004; Urrieta 2009). And even as Latinas have been pushed out of various spaces, their critical role in social justice movements in the United States, one that remains underrecognized (Montoya and Seminario 2020).

Lozano's (2015) work emphasizes community, collaboration, and empowerment when investigating Latinx student leadership. Unfortunately, similar scholarship often ignores gendered experiences, leaving Latinas out. Moreover, when Latinas' experiences are included, they have reinforced sexist gender roles and familism⁷ essentialism. In Latina college student leadership literature, gender role expectations shape Latinas' leadership and engagement in activism (Onorato and Musoba 2015; Haber-Curran and Tapia-Fuselier 2020). For example, Onorato and Musoba (2015) found that Latina students were expected to be a "good Hispanic

⁶ Intersectional praxis is intersectional theory put into practice (Montoya and Seminario 2020).

⁷ Familism is defined by the "centrality of and loyalty to the family and to the prioritizing of family unit and needs over individual members' interests and needs" (Alcalde 2010: 51).

woman” but had conflicting thoughts with the idea of “rely[ing] upon yourself, not a man” (Onorato and Musoba 2015: 25). Other scholars found that Latina activists view their activism as “an extension of taking care of the family” (Torres Nájera 2018:249). And the view of taking care of their family served as their prominent need to be involved in social change and be civically engaged as a means to serve as a protective factor for Latinx college students (Kornbluh, Bell, Vierra, and Herrnsstadt 2022). Additionally, Latinas in leadership positions have experienced disrespect, the questioning of their merits, and shame from Latino men (Torres Nájera 2018). Latinas have also been questioned for their authenticity in advocating for Latina rights by Latino men due to their place of birth, ability to speak English or Spanish, citizenship, and skin color (Torres Nájera 2018). All of these experiences in institutions of higher education, leadership, and with the Latinx community shape the ways in which Latina undergraduate students engage in activism.

Historical Moment

And still, the current historical moment has disrupted what little we did know about Latina student activism. The historical context of this dissertation was heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, police brutality and Black Lives Matter movement, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, ongoing gun violence throughout the country, and everyday social and political injustices. The COVID-19 pandemic changed the participants’ experiences on-campus not only through Midwest University’s decision to cancel in-person instruction for over a year but also by their decision to limit in-person classes and activities after restarting in-person instruction. And so, for this dissertation, I found that the participants’ experience with activism also heavily existed outside of the perimeters of the MU campus. Moreover, the participants’ experiences at MU and with MU faculty, students, and staff impacted their activism. The murder of George

Floyd and the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests also heavily shaped the participants' perceptions and engagements with activism. The Black Lives Matter movement started in 2013 with the murder of Trayvon Martin becoming the catalyst for the creation of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement (Hordge-Freeman and Loblack 2021). The BLM movement has made visible the systemic and intentional violence that has resulted from police brutality on the Black community. And so, despite the historical injustices which defined the experiences of the Latina undergraduate students' participating in this dissertation, their continued engagement in activism emphasizes the importance of critical hope.

Summary

This chapter focused on setting the foundational knowledge needed to understand the context of the lived experiences of Latina undergraduate students. By exploring concepts of belonging and campus climate I shared how merely existing in a racially hostile campus climate can lead students to feeling that they do not belong. And by delving into microaggressions, coping strategies, and racial battle fatigue I highlight the inescapable nature of systems of oppression that are experienced by marginalized students of color. These experiences provide context as to why Latina undergraduate students then engage in activism. The section on activism shares the various ways that activism can look. I focus on Latinas because their experiences with activism are vast, yet the literature is limited and framed in and reinforces deficit narratives. I then explore the concept of critical hope as it serves as a tool to further explore what drives students to continue to challenge systems of oppression which they recognize cannot be quickly changed. And ultimately, I discuss how my use of Critical Race Theory, LatCrit, and Chicana Feminist Epistemology lenses impact the various aspects of this dissertation.

The following chapter, Chapter Three Methodology, shares the details of the qualitative approach used for this dissertation. It includes the recruitment of participants, data collection, demographic breakdown of the participant's data, and analysis of the data. Additionally, it also includes a section on reflexivity and research positionality which ties into the Chicana Feminist lens used for this dissertation.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This dissertation examines the experiences of Latina undergraduate student activists at a predominantly white institution (PWI) of higher education in the Midwest to understand how Latina undergraduate students define activism, and how they understand their own experiences with injustice. In this chapter, I describe the methodology I adopted. Beginning with a description of the epistemological approach, the methods used in the dissertation, and outlining the analysis process. The recruitment flier, consent form, demographic questionnaire, interview letter, and participant profiles are listed in the appendices section at the end of this dissertation.

The research questions guiding this dissertation call for a qualitative approach as it is characterized by a focus on meanings and understandings (Merriam 2016). And so, this qualitative dissertation focuses on “how people interpret their experience, how they construct their worlds, what meanings they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam 2009: 14). Lastly, I chose to take a qualitative approach for this dissertation because it would “invite participants to share their own stories and definitions of activism” (Manzano 2018: 12).

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of Latina undergraduate students’ experiences with activism. Specifically, I explore:

1. How do Latina undergraduate students engage in activism to address injustices?
 - a. How do Latina undergraduates’ positionalities factor into their engagement in activism?
 - b. How do Latina undergraduate students engage in critical hope?

2. How do Latina undergraduate students engage with injustices from members within the Latinx community?

Epistemology

In this dissertation, I adopt both a Critical Race Theory and LatCrit methodological lenses. These lenses are used to center justice while challenging ideas of objectivity, meritocracy, race-neutrality and colorblindness especially as they are rampant in institutions of education (Smith-Maddox and Solórzano 2002; Delgado and Stefancic 2012).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) draws from literature in critical theory in law, sociology, history, ethnic studies, and women studies to “examine and transform the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Garcia et al. 2017:151; Delgado and Stefancic 2012). CRT highlights the pervasiveness of racism in our everyday lives. The claims of neutrality, objectivity, and colorblindness are often used to invalidate and minimize the power and privileges that are dominant and oppressive in institutions of higher education. Thus, CRT is used to acknowledge and examine the ways that race and racism are deeply embedded in our everyday lives and how they exist within institutions of higher education.

Additionally, CRT expands to include various branches that address the gaps that came as a result of critical race theorists recognizing that there was a vast history of racism and intersecting forms of oppression experienced by a multitude of racial and ethnic marginalized people. LatCrit scholars explore issues concerned with the Latinx community, specifically issues of “language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, identity, phenotype, and sexuality” (Delgado Bernal 2002:108) which will be explored as they apply specifically and uniquely to the Latina undergraduate student population. In addition, LatCrit enables scholars to explore the various

and intersecting forms of oppression experienced by the Latinx community (Benavides Lopez 2016).

Furthermore, I employ a Chicana Feminist lens to challenge knowledges that are seen as legitimate, valid, and foundational (Calderon, Delgado Bernal, Perez Huber, Malagon, and Velez 2012: 515). The history of Latinxs in the United States has shaped the Latinx community in a deficit way, so Chicana Feminist theorists have countered these narratives by centering the lived experiences of women of color specifically (Nuñez 2022). Moreover, Chicana Feminist Epistemology (CFE) is essential to this dissertation because it is “grounded in the rich historical legacy of Chicanas’ resistance and translates into a pursuit of social justice in both research and scholarship” (Delgado Bernal 1998: 56). CFE locates Chicanas within their research and positions them in a way where they are able to tackle issues of race, class, and sexuality in a way that patriarchal, white, and white feminist scholarship cannot (Delgado Bernal 1998).

I used a qualitative research design to capture meanings and understandings (Merriam 2009). Qualitative research focuses on “how people interpret their experience, how they construct their worlds, what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam 2009: 14), and thus, it is appropriate for this dissertation as I explore how Latina undergraduate students identify injustices and consequently engage in activism. Clark and Creswell (2010) define qualitative research as “a type of research in which the researcher studies a problem that calls for an explanation; relies on the views of participants; asks broad, general questions; collects data consisting largely of words (or text) from participants; describes and analyzes these words for themes; and conducts the inquiry in a subjective and reflexive manner” (66). As such, the adoption of a qualitative approach for this dissertation is necessary as I intend to gain a better understanding of the people and their understandings of their lived experiences as they relate to

my research questions (Flick 2014; Smith 2018). Furthermore, a qualitative research approach also centers the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis (Merriam 2009; Manzano 2018). I explore this more at length in the reflexivity and positionality sections in this chapter.

Human Participants and Ethics in Research

Relying on the use of human participants when conducting research involves additional attention to care and respect for those involved. The additional care includes, obtaining informed consent, minimizing harm, ensuring privacy and confidentiality, protecting vulnerable populations, and lastly, equitability selecting participants for the study (Yin 2014). For this study, potential participants were provided with an informed consent slide when they accessed the questionnaire through Qualtrics. The consent form is detailed in Appendix A below. At the end of the slide potential participants were asked, “Please select an option below to indicate your participation in this study.” The two options were, (1) “I consent, begin the study,” and (2) “I do not consent, I do not wish to participate.” Those that selected option one were then prompted to a following slide which detailed the study eligibility requirements. The slide stated the following: “To participate in this study, you must: 1. Self-identify as Latina 2. Be currently enrolled as an undergraduate student at MU 3. Have participated in activism on campus 4. Be at least 18 years old.” Below that, there were two options for potential participants to choose from, (1) stated “By selecting this, I confirm that I meet all the eligibility requirements and can begin the study” and (2) stated “I do not meet the eligibility requirements.” Those that selected option one were then taken to the demographic questionnaire questions seen in Appendix B. Those that selected option two for this eligibility question or option two for the consent question were taken to a slide that

ended the study and stated “We thank you for your time spent taking this survey. Your response has been recorded.”

To minimize harm to participants, I included various details in the Consent Form which detailed the purpose of the study, what the participants would be asked to do as part of their participation in the study, potential benefits and potential risks, their rights, compensation, and contact information. The contact information provided not only included my information, but also that of IRB and MU’s Counseling and Psychiatric Services. In addition, during the interview I reiterated that information to the participants and asked them if they needed any additional information or clarification before beginning the interview. To promote the privacy and confidentiality of my participants, I used pseudonyms for people, places, organizations, and events. All data with identifying information for participants from the online Qualtrics demographic questionnaire, transcripts, additional notes, and analytic memos were stored in a password protected external hard drive. Furthermore, all physical documents were stored in a locked filing cabinet which only the researcher had access to. For this dissertation, I did not include vulnerable populations⁸. And lastly, to promote the equitable selection of participants, I ensured that I recruited potential participants in a variety of ways which were detailed in the recruitment section.

Additionally, conducting ethical research involves two distinct components, the first is “procedural ethics, which usually involves seeking approval from a relevant ethics committee to undertake research involving humans” (Guillemin and Gillman 2004: 263). Procedural ethics relays to a committee that the researchers are competent and experienced enough to conduct the

⁸ Vulnerable populations are defined as individuals who have limited freedom and capability to protect themselves from harm, this includes, but is not limited to, children, minors, pregnant individuals, prisoners, elderly individuals, and refugees (Shivayogi 2013).

study. However, the committee also ensures that the researcher has accounted for risks and possible unintended outcomes that could result from their research study. And so, to fulfill this component of conducting ethical research, I requested Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for this dissertation research. The Michigan State University IRB approved the dissertation study on March 22, 2022 and the approval number is STUDY00007447. The second component is ethics in practice, “everyday ethical issues that arise in the doing of research” (Guillemin and Gillman 2004: 263). These ethical issues can take various forms and do not have one set response that the researcher has to make. Guillemin and Gillman (2004) list the following as examples of ethical moments in which the research has to make a decision,

“[W]hen participants indicate discomfort with their answer, or reveal a vulnerability; when a research participant states that he or she does not want to be assigned a pseudonym in the writing up of the research but wants to have his or her real name reported” (265).

And so, when I have come across some ethical situations, I have made the following choices. For example, when a participant indicated some discomfort in their answer or gave a short answer to a question, I assessed the situation and at times when I recognize that it was a topic that they did not wish to delve into, I moved on. I do not ask follow-up questions or spend more time on topics that brought the participants discomfort. When participants have asked to use their name instead of a pseudonym, I allowed that, however, I do not make note of which participants have used their real names or have been assigned a pseudonym.

Research Site

This dissertation was conducted at a Research I, PWI, large public university located in the Midwest region of the United States which I assigned the pseudonym of Midwest University

(MU). I intentionally selected a predominantly white institution of higher education because they are sites where students of color experience a heightened awareness of racial tension (Hurtado 1992; Wong 2021). Experiences of heightened awareness of racial tensions are a result of the historical legacies and maintenance of racism in the curriculum, policies, and general context of predominantly white institutions of higher education (Wong 2021). Thus, MU was the ideal site for this dissertation because I could focus on the lived experiences of Latina undergraduate students who navigated racial tensions. While this study is not solely focused on racial- and ethnic-centered activism it was something that this research site could provide.

Midwest University's Demographic Makeup

In 2020, there was an approximate total population of 50,000 students with 40,000 of those being undergraduate students. Among the undergraduate student population, approximately fifty percent were women and fifty percent men. MU's student population demographic data did not account for students who did not identify with either woman or man identities. About ninety percent of the undergraduate student population was enrolled as full-time, with the remaining ten percent enrolled as part-time students. The racial and ethnic breakup of the undergraduate population was 0.1% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 0.3% American Indian/Alaska Native, 2.3% were listed as other/race unknown, 4.3% two or more races/ethnicities, 6.4% Hispanic/Latinx, 7.0% African American/Black, 8.3% Asian, and 71.3% white (see *Table 1. MU Student Racial and Ethnic Group Demographics 2020 and 2022*). I included data on the MU student racial and ethnic group demographics for both 2020 and 2022, as 2020 data takes into account the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and 2022 covers the year in which the data was collected for this dissertation. When comparing the student racial and ethnic group demographic data from 2020 and 2022, I found that there were slight increases for students identifying as Hawaiian/Pacific

Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, Other/Unknown/Blank, Two or More Races/Ethnicities, Hispanic/Latinx (of any race), and Asian. And there were slight declines in both the African American/Black and white demographic groups from 2020 to 2022.

Table 1. MU Student Racial and Ethnic Group Demographics 2020 and 2022

Racial & Ethnic Group	2020		2022	
	Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage
Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	19	0.1%	26	0.1%
American Indian/ Alaska Native	75	0.2%	93	0.3%
Other/ Unknown/ Blank	479	1.3%	857	2.3%
Two or More Races/Ethnicities	1,393	3.9%	1,593	4.3%
Hispanic/Latinx (of any race)	2,166	6.0%	2,358	6.4%%
Asian	2,577	7.2%	3,044	8.3%
African American/ Black	2,947	8.2%	2,590	7.0%
white	26,179	73.1%	26,300	71.3%
Total	35,835	100%	36,861	100%

Midwest University's History of Activism

Racialized and gendered injustices do not occur in a vacuum. There is often a long and complex history of oppression within institutions of higher education which often catapult students into activism. MU is no different, MU has a rich history of student activism on its campus, and relevant to this dissertation, a long history of Chicanx and Latinx student activism. Chicanx and Latinx student activist efforts range from advocating for more recruitment of Latinx

students, faculty, and staff, establishing an ethnic studies program and multicultural center, a library catalog with literature that included Latinx authors and did not depict Latinx and Chicana people in deficit ways, support for the undocumented and immigrant community, and lastly, against racism and violence faced by students and community members in and outside of the MU campus.

Participants

The richness of the data came from the lived experiences shared by the thirty participants during the Zoom interviews. The participants of this dissertation all identified as Latina. This decision to focus solely on Latinas, instead of the Latinx community as a whole, was done because Latinas' experiences with activism are vast yet they are often not given appropriate credit for their contributions, relegated to gendered work, or pushed out of decision-making roles in activist spaces entirely (Correa 2010; Lopez Zamudio 2019). However, while all the participants identified as Latinas, which is an ethnic identity, there was a variety of racial identification which is seen in *Table 2. Participant Demographics: Racial Identification* below. The racial break-up of the Latina participants included the majority of the participants identifying as white or other. The eight participants that selected "other" were given the opportunity to provide a response that better described their racial identity. And so, two did not write a response, one wrote "unsure," two "Mexican," one "Mexican American," one "Hispanic," and the last one wrote "Hispanic Middle Eastern." Five participants identified as Two or More Races, this included individuals identifying with two of the following identities: Asian, white, Mexican, Palestinian, and Chilean. Three participants did not provide a racial identification, and so they are classified under the "Not Available" category. And the remaining participants identified one as Asian, one as Black, and one as Native American.

The student classification for the participants were broken into the following categories, 40% identified as sophomores, 27% as juniors, 30% as seniors, and 3% identified as “other.” The student that identified as other was completing a joint Bachelor and Master of Arts program and at the time of their interview were in their final year of their undergraduate degree. There were no freshmen in the participant pool which could have been a result of the eligibility requirements detailed later in this chapter. The demographic data on the participants’ age also suggests that most participants were traditional students, as non-traditional students are defined by not having followed a continuous educational path into college (Forbus, Newbold, and Mehta 2011). And so, the age break-up is as follows: 27% were 19 years old, 23% were 20 years old, 27% were 21 years old, 17% were 22 years old, 3% were 28 years old, and 3% did not disclose their age. And in terms of first-generation college students, 63% identified as first-generation college students and the remaining 37% identified that they were not first-generation college students. The generational status (e.g., first-generation American, second-generation American, etc.) of the participants break-up is as follows: 14% were first-generation, 50% were second-generation, 20% were third-generation, 3% were fourth-generation, 3% were fifth-generation, and lastly, 10% selected the option “I don’t know which generation best describes me.” The demographic data also gave insights to the participants’ time commitments. For example, for employment, 10% worked full-time jobs, 60% worked part-time jobs, and 30% did not have jobs. And for school enrollment status, 90% were full-time students and 10% were part-time students. *Table 4. Participant Profiles* in Appendix E includes the data above and additional information for the corresponding participant.

Table 2. Participant Demographics: Racial Identification

Race	Percentage
Native American	3%
Black	3%
Asian	3%
Not Available	10%
Two or More Races	17%
Other	27%
white	37%

Data Collection

The data collection involved two methods: (1) demographic questionnaires and (2) open-ended interviews to explore Latina undergraduate student activism. The data collected by both these methods provide opportunities to better address the research questions. For example, the demographic questionnaire served as a tool to explore demographic data on the participants' history as it connects to their families and lived experiences before their participation in the dissertation. And so, these data informed additional avenues to be explored during the interview as it related to the participants' families, education, and experiences with injustice and activism. *Table 3. Data Collection Methods* delineates the timeframe for each data collection method and relevant additional details.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through purposeful and snowball sampling with a criterion-based approach to obtain rich data (Quinn Patton 1990). Purposeful sampling is used to gain in-depth understanding and insights and so a specific sample must be involved to reach that rich

data (Merriam 2009). Participants were recruited using the following criteria: (1) self-identify as Latina; (2) current undergraduate student at MU; (3) participated in activism on campus; and (4) at least 18 years old. I included the “current undergraduate student at MU” criterion to specifically focus on current students as they experience activism and not recently graduated or former students that might have additional experiences with activism post-graduation. I included the “participated in activism on campus” criterion to ensure participants had some experience with activism on the MU campus. I also intentionally did not define activism to leave it open to be defined in a variety of ways by potential participants. Additionally, snowball sampling was also employed. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe snowball sampling as starting with a set of participants that meet the eligibility criteria and then asking them to reach out to their networks for potential participants to also participate in the study. As such, at the end of interviews, participants were given the recruitment flier, seen in *Figure 1. Recruitment Flier*, and asked to share with their networks to reach more potential participants that met the criterion. Snowball sampling was included to reach a wide breadth of participants. Thus, recruitment occurred in four avenues: recruitment fliers, recruitment emails to MU student organizations and programs, registrar’s office mass email, and word-of-mouth.

Recruitment fliers were posted around the MU campus. Physical copies of the recruitment flier were posted on open bulletin boards in the MU Student Union, cafeterias, residential buildings, and academic buildings across campus. These spaces were identified as locations that (1) had available space to post the fliers, (2) would see a good amount of student traffic, and (3) had a large Latinx student population concentration. The fliers included the participant eligibility recruitments, contact information, compensation, IRB information, and a QR code which linked to the demographic questionnaire.

Figure 1. Recruitment Flier



Recruitment emails were sent to access brokers⁹ which included faculty, student organization advisors, graduate student mentors, executive board members or official emails of MU student organizations. The recruitment list included undergraduate student organizations including Latinx, Black, LGBTQ+, political, Indigenous, and women-centered self-identified organizations. I also included Latinx sororities and fraternities, ethnic studies programs, Latinx, undergraduate student programs, and women-centered offices and programs on the MU campus.

⁹ Access brokers are individuals that give access to knowledge, networks, and support; not gatekeepers (Sanchez and Ek 2013: 26).

These organizations and programs were identified through my previous engagement on the MU campus. I then identified a Latinx undergraduate student organization which serves as an umbrella organization, and thus included their affiliated organizations to the list. And then expanded the list through the use of MU's website of undergraduate student organizations. Once on the site, I filtered the organization by searching for organizations that were labeled (1) Diversity and Inclusion, (2) Political, (3) Service, and (4) Women's Interests. In total, thirty-eight student organizations, offices, programs, sororities, and fraternities were identified and emailed recruitment information for this dissertation.

Lastly, in an attempt to reach more students that might not have been reached via the student organizations or through physical fliers, I reached out to the registrar's office at the MU campus. The registrar's office sent the recruitment flier and email, seen in Appendix C, to undergraduate students who identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino/a/x on school records.

I encountered an unforeseen problem during the recruitment process. I emailed my recruitment information to a woman's organization at MU, they shared it with their members and posted it on their social media pages. However, at this time the demographic questionnaire which also served as an initial screening for participation in the dissertation, did not require students to include a school email address. The choice to not require a school email address was purposeful to establish trust that the participants did not have to disclose their full names and other information affiliated with their school email. But due to this decision and the recruitment information being publicly available, I received an influx in responses through the questionnaire and emails inquiring about my study. These responses and email inquiries were not of potential participants. I discarded most of the responses received at this time as they included responses to statements such as "Please list the top three issues driving your activism" and answered

“motivation,” or “high tutor fee.” Or they answered questions about their major with answers such as “the computer” or “activist.” In sum, on the day the flier was posted on the woman’s organization’s social media accounts and the days that followed, I received data via the questionnaire and requests via email by forty-seven individuals, none of which were eligible, appropriately filled out the questionnaire, nor followed up for an interview. Consequently, to prevent this from continuing, I changed the questionnaire to only accept responses from those that included MU school email addresses.

Demographic Questionnaire

Of the one hundred and thirty-four people that accessed the questionnaire, sixty-three questionnaires were completed, and about a dozen reached out via email to schedule an interview. And of those that reached out to schedule an interview, thirty completed both the demographic questionnaire and interview.

The demographic questionnaire, seen in Appendix B, includes questions regarding their gender identity, age, race, student classification, enrollment status, and information regarding the participants’ engagement in activism. The demographic questionnaire includes the consent form for this dissertation, which is detailed in Appendix A. The demographic questionnaire includes the dissertation description, eligibility requirements, the voluntary nature of the study and the participants’ ability to terminate their participation at any moment, IRB details, and contact information for prospective participants to review. Once participants consented to participate in this study, they were taken to a second page where they had to confirm that they were eligible to participate. Once both consent and eligibility were confirmed, participants were asked twenty questions which were estimated to take fifteen minutes to complete. At the end of the demographic questionnaire, participants provided their contact information, first name and

preferred email address, which was kept confidential. I then used that information to email them (see in Appendix C) to set up their Zoom interview. The demographic questionnaire data was obtained using the Qualtrics online platform which was accessible to participants via a QR Code on recruitment fliers or link in recruitment emails.

Interviews

The interview protocol, seen in Appendix D, includes twenty-two main questions about the participants' general experiences on campus, experiences with racism and sexism, their involvement in activism, and their engagement with the concept of critical hope. The follow-up questions and probes varied by participant. I used a semi-structured approach to the interviews and used the interview protocol as a guide to “suggest a natural flow for discussion” (Merriam 2009:99), yet simultaneously did not restrict myself nor the participant as we responded to emerging topics (Merriam 2009). The semi-structured interview approach enabled me to “respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam 2009: 90). I also engaged in grounded theory techniques while revising my interview guide as emerging themes from initial interviews arose which will further allow the participants and I to explore topics as they emerge (Charmaz 2014). And as a result of using grounded theory techniques, the final interview protocol ended up with a total of twenty-nine main questions. These additional questions were included in the interview protocol (see Appendix D).

The in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom¹⁰ for accessibility purposes and as a precaution to decrease the probability of contracting or spreading illness as

¹⁰ Zoom is a video conferencing program. Like other video conferencing software, Zoom, allows two or more people in different locations to communicate using audio and video imaging in real time (Gough and Rosenfeld 2006; Gray, Wong-Wylie, Rempel, and Cook 2020).

they occurred during the on-going COVID-19 pandemic. As such, the participants were required to provide their own computer and internet access to participate in the Zoom interviews. At the beginning of the interview, I provided a brief description of my dissertation, confidentiality, consent, and compensation for the participants. Next, I asked the participants to choose their own pseudonym and those that did not select a pseudonym were assigned one. The interviews lasted approximately fifty-five minutes long and they were audio recorded.

At the end of the Zoom interview, I shared my screen with the participants with a website, tangocard.com/reward-catalog, which had an extensive list of electronic gift cards for the participant to choose from. The list included clothing, makeup, food, and electronics companies. In addition, it also included various organizations like the American Red Cross, Clean Water Fund, Direct Relief, and Equal Justice Initiative as well. I scrolled through the list of options and helped the participants find companies that they were interested in. If the participants wanted more time to think about their electronic gift card selection, I had them email me their selection when they were ready. Overall, my participants selected a gift card from the following companies: Amazon, Target, Ulta Beauty, Starbucks, Dunkin', Chipotle, Buffalo Wild Wings, Barnes & Noble, T.J. Maxx, American Eagle, and Hope for Ukraine, Inc.

Once the participant selected their electronic gift card, I provided a closing statement that included a statement of appreciation for the participants' time and participation, an inquiry if they had any remaining questions at that time, the sharing of the various contacts, and a notice that I would send a follow-up email. Once I ended the Zoom call, I uploaded the audio files to a separate computer file in a locked external hard drive immediately. I then purchased the participants a fifteen-dollar electronic gift card of their choice as compensation for their participation. Next, I sent a follow-up email to each participant which included a statement of

appreciation, an update that their electronic gift card had been purchased, a statement informing them that if they have any questions or concerns that they could contact me, the Principal Investigator, or the IRB, and the recruitment flier and link to the demographic questionnaire for them to share with their networks. If the participant had not selected their electronic gift card at this point, I sent a separate email with the notification that the gift card was purchased.

Table 3. Data Collection Methods

	Demographic Questionnaire	Interview
Platform	Qualtrics Survey Software	Zoom
Questions	20	29
Time Duration	15 Minutes	55 Minutes
Start Date	April 4, 2022	April 19, 2022
End Date	November 14, 2022	November 21, 2022

Limitations

Qualitative research is not meant to be generalizable. Yet, the findings present themes that may be useful to further understandings of student activism, Latina undergraduate students, and Latina undergraduate students engaging in activism. One of the elements of this dissertation that needs to be highlighted is the participant population. While using various means to recruit a wide breadth of Latina students, detailed in Chapter Three, there were limitations. While the participants all attended a Midwest University not all participants were from the Midwest. Eight participants were from Michigan, five from California, three from Illinois, two from Ohio, two from Texas, one from Florida, one from New York, one from Mexico City, and one from Jalisco Mexico. Additionally, when reviewing the place of birth for the participants' parents I found that of those that were born in the United States, thirteen were from Michigan, three were from Texas, one from Ohio, one from New Jersey, one from Oregon, one from New York, one from

Rhode Island, one from California, one from Pennsylvania, and one was from Florida. Of the parents born in Mexico, five were from Michoacán, two from Chiapas, two from Guanajuato, two from Veracruz, two from Nuevo Leon, two from Mexico City, two from Nayarit, one from Durango, one from Tabasco, one from Quintana Roo, one from Guadalajara, one from Zacatecas, one from Aguascalientes and one listed from Mexico in general. There were also parents from Central America, there were three from Guatemala City, Guatemala, one from Huehuetenango, Guatemala, two from Santa Ana, El Salvador, and two from Managua, Nicaragua. And lastly, there were parents from across the world, one from Bangkok, Thailand, one from Beirut, Lebanon, and two from China in general. Thus, while there was vast representation from Mexico, there was limited representation from Central America, none from South America, and less representation from mixed race participants. As a result, the lived experiences and family histories of the participants impacted the ways in which they view, engage, receive support, and understand activism. It is also important to note that migration patterns to the Midwest impact the ways in which certain groups are represented or overrepresented in the sample.

At the time of designing the dissertation, COVID-19 was still a concern for administrators and students in institutions of higher education. There were limitations for face-to-face instruction on campus and IRB had limitations for in-person research. However, at the time of data collection, in March 2022, there were fewer limitations for face-to-face contact. Still, I made the decision to conduct the interviews via Zoom as a precaution, accessibility, and to not put my participants nor myself in a situation where we could become ill. This decision resulted in relying on an internet connection on both the participants' and my end. Consequently, there were some internet connectivity issues in various interviews. Internet connectivity issues caused delays or cuts to the audio and at times interrupted the flow of conversation. I then had

participants repeat themselves or lost the exact words of the first time they shared their responses.

Additionally, I also noted that although the participants had experience with activism, however they defined it, many spoke about very limited experiences with on-campus activism. Many participants explained their limited experiences with on-campus activism to their limited time on the MU campus due to COVID-19 as the campus was shut down for about a year with remote online courses before they started to slowly reintegrate in-person courses. Therefore, many participants had limited time on campus before the COVID-19 pandemic and restricted in-person experiences once they returned to campus.

Lastly, although this dissertation focused on students identified as Latinas, this dissertation only included one non-binary individual who participated as they identified themselves as non-binary but still as both Latina and woman. They state, “I’m speaking as a non-binary Latina, gay, woman, which I do identify. It’s like weird cause on top of being non-binary, I do identify as a woman cause that’s how I’ve been presented to other people my whole life and so my identities [are] impacted by people perceiving me as a woman.” This dissertation did not explore their lived experience as how this identity of woman placed upon them shaped their experiences in the Latinx community. I also did not explore sexuality at length in this dissertation, however, it did arise in various interviews, specifically in the ways that they are marginalized in general and within the Latinx community.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity was used in this dissertation to employ an “ongoing examination of what I know and how I know it” (Quinn Patton 2015: 70) and a “critical reflection both on the kind of knowledge produced from research and how that knowledge is generated” (Guillemin and

Gillman 2004: 274). Reflexivity is critical for how an individual develops their research design, access communities, negotiates their relationship as a researcher, and how they disseminate their work (Marrun 2015). Furthermore, reflexivity is also a process of “[n]ot only about investigating power embedded in one’s research but also about doing research differently” (Pillow 2003: 178). Mason (2002) states that reflectivity is “thinking critically about what you are doing and why, confronting and often challenging your own assumptions, and recognizing the extent to which your thoughts, actions, and decisions shape how you research and what you see” (5). Engaging in reflexivity allowed me to acknowledge and address my own gaps in knowledge, assumptions, and biases as they arose at various points in the dissertation process.

Chicana feminists center reflexivity by suggesting that researchers pull from their own lived experiences and tie them to the lived experiences of the participants (Marrun 2015). Marrun (2015) states, “[a] Chicana/Latina feminist methodology emphasizes the importance of experiential knowledge that draws from one’s insider/outsider status... by challenging claims to objectivity and links research to social change” (78). Consequently, I drew from my personal and academic experiences when I began designing the questions that would be centered in this dissertation. During the data collection and analysis processes, I also drew from my personal experiences as a first-generation college student, second-generation Latina, and student activist. For example, throughout the interviews, multiple participants shared that they were unsure if their answers were good enough for the questions they were asked. I emphasized that they were. I did this by sharing my own lived experiences and by letting them know that their answers were good answers. These actions enabled me to position them as valid creators of knowledge. By embracing Chicana feminist methodology, I shared personal experiences with my participants to

establish trust and rapport. Still, reflexivity enabled me to continue to challenge my own assumptions that I brought into my research and that of my participants along the process.

Recognizing reflexivity is a process, I also developed analytic memos throughout the research process as an additional means to engage in reflexivity. Saldaña (2016) describes analytic memos as a reflective piece of writing to “dump your brain about the participants, phenomenon, or process under investigation by thinking and thus writing even more about them” (44). He goes on to say that memos are avenues in which we can have conversations with ourselves about our data (Saldaña 2016; Clarke 2005). And once the memos are written, they become data (Rogers 2018). Specifically, I wrote pre-interview and post-interview memos, along with additional memos at various points of the dissertation process. The pre-interview memos were written after I reviewed participants’ demographic questionnaire responses and I jotted initial thoughts, questions, assumptions, and made note of anything that they wanted to follow up with during the interview with the participants. The post-interview memos included any notes from the pre-interview memos, interesting themes that arose during the interview, and any connections to previous interviews. Moreover, I reflected on my researcher positionality to further understand why, I asked certain questions, framed my questions in particular ways, the timing of my questions, my research site, participant selection, epistemology and so on.

Researcher Positionality

In this dissertation, I broadly explore Latina undergraduate students’ complex experiences with racism, sexism, and activism on the MU campus. And so, I find it necessary to include a research positionality statement, to address the “relationship between the researcher and his or her participants and the researcher and his or her topic” (Jones, Torres, Arminio 2014: 26). Like my participants, I found myself engaged in activism on my campus during my

undergraduate education. I attended a predominantly white institution of higher education in Texas where I experienced racism, sexism, and xenophobia, as well as witnessing anti-Blackness and homophobia. These experiences propelled me to participate in various forms of activism – protests, teach-ins, occupying buildings, and meeting with university administration. My experiences with activism enabled me to witness the complex realities of organizing with other undergraduate students, the clashes of the lengths some students were willing to go to for their causes, the fears, the repercussions, and the hope that our actions would create the change we strove for. As a graduate student, I have continued to participate in activism, yet it does not look the same as it did as when I was an undergraduate student. My experiences as an activist, student, and researcher have positioned me in a way that has enabled me to build rapport and explore the experiences of my participants in a unique way. I am at times assumed to be an insider and do not readily experience distrust and hostility which an outsider may experience (Baca Zinn 1979; Delgado Bernal 1998). It is a result of my own experiences as an activist that I have been able to pick up on subtle meanings and draw insights shared from my participants' experiences.

Analysis

For the analysis, I relied on a demographic questionnaire and semi-structured, open-ended individual interviews as my methods of collecting data for this dissertation. The data collected consisted of demographic questionnaire files, interview transcripts, and analytic memos. A key component of qualitative research is inductive and deductive analysis in which the researcher generates themes by assessing patterns and connections from the collected data (Creswell and Creswell 2018; Wong 2021). I coded the interview transcripts and memos using

NVivo qualitative software. I analyzed the data paying specific attention to the emerging themes as the participants discussed the main questions that guided this dissertation.

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure the reliability of the findings. The majority of the interviews were entirely in English while some included a couple of phrases or words in Spanish. The transcripts were cleaned multiple times to ensure that the audio and transcripts matched, and that any identifying information was removed. The cleaning of the transcripts included assigning pseudonyms for individuals, organizations, and universities mentioned by the interviewees. I also ensured that the pseudonyms matched if there was any overlap in the interviews.

For the first cycle of coding, I used In Vivo coding which refers to using a word from the actual text used by participants in the qualitative data as the code. In using In Vivo coding, and the participants' own words, it honors the participant's voice (Saldaña 2016). Saldaña (2016) states that In Vivo coding is particularly important when working with marginalized groups as "coding with their actual words" enhances our understanding of their worldviews (106). Codes such as "constantly on my mind," "changed my life," "for them, for us," "not going to happen overnight," "one step closer," "parents didn't like it at all," and "standing up for what you believe in" highlighted the intricacies of the participants' drive for activism, challenges, causes, and their broad experiences on the MU campus and off-campus.

The second cycle of coding entailed inductive coding (Boyatzis 1998) which involved identifying themes and concepts within each of the interview transcripts. During inductive coding, themes emerged across the participants' interviews, including the following codes: allyship, boundaries, burnout, comfort, danger, guilt, hatred, healing, independence, legacy, love, passionate, pride, representation, standing up, struggle, trendy, and voice. These codes

specifically focused on the feelings the participants were experiencing as they navigated higher education and activism, but also the connectedness or disconnect they had with other people around them.

The third cycle of coding focused on deductive coding where I centered themes related to Critical Race Theory, LatCrit, and Chicana Feminist Epistemology. The deductive coding included codes such as anti-Blackness, belonging, colorism, community, discrimination, exclusion, exhaustion, identity, machismo, microaggressions, privilege, racism, stereotype, tokenism, translation, and vulnerability. The deductive codes gave insights to the Latina undergraduate students' lived experiences as Latinas in higher education, in the Midwest, and at times across the United States or even beyond the boundaries of the United States. The deductive codes specifically gave insights to lived experiences of certain participants as women of color, racialized experiences, and also experiences of privileges in a variety of ways.

Summary

This chapter described the methodology I adopted to explore Latina undergraduate students' experiences with activism. I adopted Critical Race Theory, LatCrit, and Chicana Feminist lenses which shaped the ways in which the study was designed, data were collected, and how the data were then analyzed. Through the coding process of the data, themes of privilege, marginalization, drive, obstacles, and hope arose. The findings address the questions and sub-questions mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.

In the following chapter, Chapter Four: Findings, I present the findings from the analysis of the data. However, I begin with a brief background of the participants specifically focusing on the participants' definition of activism and the catalyst for their activism. I then provide contextualization of the historic time period in which the data were collected. I highlight the role

COVID-19 and the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement had on the participants' lives. The remainder of the chapter is broken up into three sections: (1) Latina's Causes, (2) Critical Hope, and (3) Considerations. These sections answer the following concepts (1) means to activism, (2) positionalities and activism, (3) critical hope in activism, and (4) injustice within community.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The purpose of this dissertation is to understand the lived experiences of Latina undergraduate students that engaged in activism. Consequently, the questions that guided this study are (1) How do Latina undergraduate students engage in activism to address injustices? (2) How do Latina undergraduates' positionalities factor into their engagement in activism? (3) How do Latina undergraduate students engage in critical hope? and (4) How do Latina undergraduate students engage with injustices from members within the Latinx community?

Background

This chapter presents the findings from thirty participants' interviews and demographic questionnaires whose information are detailed in Appendix E. In an effort to begin to understand the Latina undergraduates' experiences with activism, I first asked them how they defined activism. Natalia is a nineteen-year-old, sophomore, marketing major and transfer student. And she has a long history of activism as well, stemming from her childhood and going into her various institutions of higher education. And so, when I asked Natalia to define activism, she stated that for her, activism is "getting out there, you know, going against norm and like trying to prove your point, yeah. Even though everybody might think it's wrong, but you think it's right. Like you just go out there and you say what you feel, you say what you feel is right and wrong you know." For Natalia, activism is supporting your cause and opinion despite not having supporters. In fact, Natalia oftentimes not only did not have supporters but had to face opponents for the causes that were important to her. In her experience, she had to navigate opponents for her causes while engaging in protests and rallies, but also lost friends that had opposing standpoints on those causes.

On a similar note, Alaina defined activism as “making your voice heard, like standing up for what you believe in. So, like, not just, even if you believe in something you just, activism for me is not just being there and quiet, you have to vocalize it, like actively get behind it, actively educate yourself on it and like get yourself involved. Not matter if it’s like you know not like physically but it can be like mentally educating other people too.” Alaina is a nineteen-year-old, sophomore advertising creative major. She was born and raised in the Dominican Republic to Chinese parents. And she credits her understanding and involvement in activism to her upbringing and lived experiences. Educating other people is a significant part to her understanding of activism because she recognizes that everyone has lived a very unique life.

Nati, is a twenty-one-year-old, junior environmental studies and sustainability major. She finds that activism can take many forms, when asked to define activism she stated, “[a]ctivism can be broad, cause when you’re an ally, you’re an activist cause you’re standing up for people you believe are being marginalized, mistreated or whatever it is that you’re saying is that’s being wrong. But also, I guess whenever you actually do something about it, when you take action, that’s also activism... when you post something on social media, when you share something, when you record something, when you actually go to something. Activism can have different forms of being done.” For Nati, the ways in which someone engages in activism does not matter as much as aligning yourself with the causes and communities that need support and providing that support in any way that is necessary.

And lastly, for Cristina, a twenty-two-year-old, senior political theory and constitutional democracy major, activism is “anything to help a cause that you believe in. So, it could be like maybe just resharing some information that you have with what’s going on around...But sometimes it can also be like you know like actually physically partaking in it, that’s putting up

fliers, or like doing a fundraiser for a cause, or going to like a march, or a rally.” Cristina has engaged in rallies, signing petitions, working on political campaigns, and creating art to draw attention to the issues that are important to her. Again, similar to Nati, for Cristina it is not the means of activism that is important, but that people do what they can for the causes that they believe in.

And so, these excerpts begin to give insights to the wide range of what activism is and what it could entail among the different participants. However, what is seen in most of the responses to this question, how do you define activism, is participating in some way for the purpose of creating change whether that is change within a person, several people, an entire community, a government, or beyond.

Tradition

For some participants, engaging in activism was a family tradition. This was seen when participants had family members engage in activism and either served as an example to follow or inspiration for them to engage in activism in their own way. For example, Consuelo comes from a family of women activists. She shares, “I come from a very activist family like my grandma started a chapter of like LULAC, the League of United Latin American Citizens like in, when she immigrated to the United States. And so, she was really involved in that. And then my mom was super involved in that too. She was part of City Council back home and stuff. And I feel like I just kind of carried the torch and like now I’m studying to become a civil rights lawyer.” For participants like Consuelo, they not only have the role models in their family but can also feel a sense of expectation to continue their legacy of working towards justice in a variety of capacities.

And still, others like Kelsey also followed the footsteps of the women in their families. Kelsey was raised by her grandmother in New York City as her parents pursued their dental school education and residencies in California and Michigan separately. When asked about when she first engaged in activism Kelsey stated: “I became involved with activism specifically, probably more so when I was younger. I used to do a lot of things with my grandma. She lives in New York City so she’s a part of the big Puerto Rican community that lives there. So, we would actually go to a lot of things when I was little and then I kinda learned from her that these are the kinds of things we need to be doing, we need to be speaking out, acting out essentially to make sure voices are heard.” Kelsey shared her experience attending rallies with her grandma and how inspired she always was of her grandma and the Puerto Rican community in New York City as they fought the job discrimination across the city. These experiences led her to co-found and lead an organization that fights for various social justice issues, but it also pushed her to be a leader in her college and extracurricular activities. Kelsey details her involvement in a Hispanic Heritage event through her department where she was selected to be on a panel to present on a Hispanic individual in STEM. She states,

“I chose a scientist who ended up figuring out a lot about, her name was Helen Rodrigues-Trias and she was able to figure out a lot about neonatal care specifically for Puerto Rican women and other minorities, Dominican women in New York. And basically, how to give them care because they were basically very underserved during her time. She passed away quite a while ago, but she found a lot of ways to give them care and to give them equal healthcare access. So, I got to present about her and watch everyone in the audience really engage with me. Especially when I had my questions

during all of that. It was really nice to hear all of the other people present about their Hispanic individual as well.”

This was one of the most rewarding experiences at MU for Kelsey as she describes her department not necessarily a site of racial discrimination but a site that lacks representation. Kelsey shares, “in my time at MU all four years, all the science classes I’ve ever taken I’ve only had one Hispanic professor.” And so, the Hispanic Heritage event served as a space for Kelsey to take up space and discuss the contributions of Hispanic individuals in her field.

Personal

However, for others, it is a very personal experience that served as a catalyst for their activism. This was often an experience with injustice that the participant themselves or someone close to them experienced. This was seen with Natalia. When Natalia was asked when she first became involved in activism, she detailed the following:

“I started really young actually. I don’t know, I think it might have been my upbringing to be honest. My dad, he was undocumented at the time when I was about elementary age...My dad was deported... So, then like the fact of not having a dad, but having a dad like that really affected my way of thinking from a young age. So, I mean activism like where I would go out and about would probably have been in elementary... I competed in MLK contests, I would speak, like public speaking, and I was also a spokesperson for The Migrant Council.”

Natalia’s father’s deportation served as a catalyst for her activism. At a very young age she became involved with immigrant rights groups advocating for the undocumented community. And this was just the beginning of Natalia’s activism. And so, for people like Natalia, even if they were not fighting for themselves or their loved ones directly, they still engage in activism

for the communities that they are a part of or the issues that have impacted them. In Natalia's case her dad was deported and completed his ten-year ban from re-entering the United States, yet during that time and beyond, she continued to fight for the families of deportees and immigrant rights.

Social Issues

Other participants found the catalyst to their journey with activism in social issues, in particular in 2020 with both COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter movement re-shaping activism. Participants witnessed the momentum the BLM movement was experiencing and the inequities that were being exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. For Valeria, she attended BLM protests in 2020 at the peak of the pandemic in her hometown. She shared how her hometown does not have a large Black community, yet there was a large turnout for the protests. And so, when Valeria was asked why she engaged in activism, she stated:

“I guess like I wanna try to make change like in the past in history like for example the Civil Rights Movement they were able to get rid of the Jim Crow Laws cause all these people protested. All these people got together and said hey we don't support this, this is wrong so like you know so like being part of like change. If you want change you have to like you have to do something about it.”

Valeria is also a first-generation immigrant, sharing that her and her family's experience coming to the United States was smooth and they were never undocumented, however, she recognizes the privilege in that experience. And so, upon reflecting on her own experiences with immigration and BLM, she establishes a responsibility she feels to use her privilege to show up for causes even if they are not impacting her or her family directly. Valeria looks to the Civil Rights Movement for example to understand the magnitude of push and support that is needed

for real change. She specifically shares her disappointment for people that do not show up for causes, especially those that have privilege, citizens, and residents for example, showing up when they are advocating for the undocumented community as she recognizes the risks undocumented individuals may face in attending such events.

And still, there is no clear divide nor limitation to the drivers of my participants' activism. There are large social issues that are important, like gun control, which are enough to drive individuals to fight for the cause. And still, it becomes personal when the issue is indiscriminate and widely impacting so many people nationwide. For Sophie, for example, gun control is something that she is extremely passionate about and very engaged in. She shared that she is keeping up with the Parkland shooting trials, yet it also hits closer to home for her. She shared her own experience with how closely it impacts her and her family, she states:

“I do feel like you know growing up in high school and having to do lockdown drills in terms of gun violence it's horrible to think about and you know being away from my sisters and then going to middle school and high school scares me. And you know it shouldn't have to be something that we go through when a lot of other countries like Australia and whatnot had gun shootings and then they were able to get rid of their guns as much as possible or just have strict gun restrictions and then with us you know having more school shootings than we've had days in twenty-twenty-two like that's just should not be happening. And so, that's made me really passionate just like all these life experiences that I've had.”

Sophie shares the fear many people in the United States share with gun control and school shootings. And so, for Sophie, gun control is about seeking justice for the victims of gun violence but also to protect her sisters as they enter middle and high school from potential harm.

Historical Context

As mentioned above, there were two foundational events that shaped the experiences of the participants in this dissertation. The first was the COVID-19 pandemic which dramatically transformed how institutions of higher education engaged in educational instruction as they changed from face-to-face instruction to online learning systems (Rashid and Singh Yadav 2020). However, the COVID-19 pandemic not only highlighted existing inequities experienced by marginalized communities in the United States, but exacerbated them (Perry, Aronson, and Pescosolido 2021). And so, the participants of this dissertation not only were navigating institutions of higher education but also a global pandemic and its various consequences on their lives in higher education and beyond. The second event that shaped participants' experiences with activism specifically was the murder of George Floyd and the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. The Black Lives Matter movement started in 2013 and so, in 2020, it was not a new movement (Hordge-Freeman and Loblack 2021). Scholars Heckler and Mackey (2022) discuss this surge in BLM support in 2020 by arguing that the murder of George Floyd served as a point of interest convergence¹¹ which “accelerated the BLM movement because of its overlap with the need for white U.S. to develop moral authority in the face of racism exposed by COVID” (364). And as previously mentioned, the BLM protests were discussed by a majority of the participants. Their participation ranged from attending protests, raising funds, and sharing information online. They also shared the challenges they faced when discussing BLM with their families and not being able to attend because of unsupportive family members, fear of violence, and COVID-19.

¹¹ Interest convergence is the Critical Race Theory concept that is defined by the “apparent, but superficial alignment of white purposes with those of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) leading to symbolic, but mostly insubstantial change (Heckler and Mackey 2022: 364).

Latinas' Causes

The participants engaged in acts of activism such as protests, rallies, boycotts, difficult conversations and listening, raising funds and providing resources, political activism, and online activism. These acts of activism have been used by a variety of individuals in an array of manners (Norris 2004; Klein 2016; Barnhardt 2019; Asselin 2022). The Latina undergraduate student participants were asked to list three causes that drove their activism in the demographic questionnaire. The causes that were listed the most among the thirty participants were immigration, racism, women's rights, climate change or environmental issues, and Black Lives Matter. The other causes ranged from very broad topics such as inequality, injustice, poverty, and human rights, to specific causes such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women (MMIW), and Michigan Proposal 3 Right to Reproductive Freedom Initiative. And although gun control was only listed once as one of the three main causes that drive a participant's activism and only five listed Black Lives Matter as theirs, these were the two driving forces in getting the majority of the participants involved in activism. Many noted the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests as their first time not only attending a protest but as the first cause to push them towards action. And others mentioned gun control walkouts and protests in their high schools were their first cause. And still, despite initial causes or listed causes, the Latina undergraduate student participants shared the causes that were significant to them.

And so, through excerpts from the participants' interviews, I share the Latina undergraduate students' lived experiences with activism. I present findings exploring the various ways they engage in activism, how their positionalities impact their activism, how they engage in

critical hope, and lastly, I explore any challenges they experience within the Latinx community in general, but in particular any challenges with their Latino counterparts.

Racism & Discrimination

The Latina undergraduate students listed Black Lives Matter as a cause they supported, and racism and discrimination as issues they were fighting against in their demographic questionnaires. Yet, as previously mentioned, whether or not the participants listed BLM on their demographic questionnaires, the participants worked on supporting the Black Lives Matter movement in a variety of ways either by attending protests or rallies in-person or posting on social media and helping raise funds through online campaigns.

Isa is a nineteen years old, non-binary¹², and a sophomore international relations major. They are involved in extracurricular activities at MU, but their activism mostly exists outside of the boundaries of the MU campus. They shared that capitalism, environmental degradation, and general injustice are three causes that drive their activism. Yet, Isa specifically recalls attending an off-campus Black Lives Matter protest in 2020 where they felt safe even as they were engaged in a physically obstructive protest¹³. However, this experience rapidly changed as they realized that they were no longer safe, Isa stated:

“I remember, honestly, it was kinda scary cause there was a lot of police presence and like we were blocking traffic and there was a lot of cars that were being very aggressive and honking or starting to move, revving their engines. So, that was a little scary. And then there was a moment in time where rubber bullets were fired into the crowd where I was around and just like a lot of shoving and just like a lot of fear I would say. And that

¹² I use the pronouns they and them when discussing Isa’s experiences.

¹³ A physically obstructive protest is defined as a non-violent protest which includes instances where individuals are held against their will, access to buildings are denied, and other disruptions to day-to-day operations (Page 2010).

was like, I will say, I hadn't really felt genuinely scared, but it was very much a wake-up call of, I just couldn't believe how they were treating people who were showing up for this protest and how much they wanted to defend, in my opinion, a corrupt police system that they would go to these extents and harm people in this way."

Isa's initial sense of safety came from describing those that were around her at the time, which she describes as "a lot of people were there just to... like people who really didn't care about the cause, like people who were just there to put it on social media." And so, Isa's sense of safety could have emerged from their belief that since those around them were posting on social media counter protesters and police would not harm them or that since they were surrounded by people who were insincere about their support for the cause that they wouldn't be seen as a threat to counter protesters or police. However, neither situation protected them or others around Isa.

They further reflect on this experience when asked about their support system. Isa recalled that their family was not supportive of them attending the Black Lives Matter protest, and so they share:

"I didn't tell them where I was going or what I was doing. And so, it was kinda weird cause I left, and I just said I was getting dinner with a friend and I came back, and I was like... I had just been shot at with rubber bullets and had honestly like, I wouldn't say traumatic, but it was a very jarring experience. And when I came home and like sat in my room. I just kinda decompressed."

Not only was attending this protest a threat to Isa's physical safety but they also did not have the support of their family when they returned home to help them process this event.

Raquel is a twenty-one-year-old, fourth-generation Latina, and senior zoology major, who discussed her drive to work on women's issues and be an ally to the Black Lives Matter

movement. She shares how she used social media to engage in conversations with her family members and share information on the issues that were important to her. She details these experiences below:

“I was constantly posting about Black Lives Matter and what it actually means compared to oh it’s a riot, no it’s not. It’s not. And it did get me into multiple arguments with multiple family members, but it’s something I believe in, so I stood up for it.... When I was a little more ignorant about the Black Lives Matter stuff, I will say I did post one of those black squares on Instagram. And after I learned more, I was like, wow, that wasn’t doing what I thought it was doing. There was no, so I try to do more information type stuff than I do like performative stuff. So, if I’m going to post about something I will do like an informative slide or whatever. Or I’ll be like go to this link where you can learn more. This is where I learned what I’m learning. Because to me the stuff on social media that’s performative it’s not helpful. I like the stuff where you’re actually learning.”

Raquel shares that the information she posted about Black Lives Matter led to arguments with her family members, specifically her white family members that were against the movement. Scholars have argued that engaging in difficult conversations on social justice issues are acts of activism and that although they can be uncomfortable, they are necessary to understand particularities of issues and they can establish and deepen solidarity, and participation in other acts of activism (Keddie 2021; Asselin 2022). And so, Raquel went on to share that although she has limited in-person contact with these family members, social media enables her to engage in difficult conversations and disrupt her family’s information intake on social issues and challenge them on their views.

Additionally, Raquel was also honest in her participation, like other interviewees, in a performative act of posting a black square on Instagram. Where initially she might have thought that she was holding space and bringing attention to Black Lives Matter, she quickly found that she preferred to be more direct in her use on social media. And so, she opts to share educational material when being an ally. The concepts of authentic and performative activism will be discussed more in-depth later in the chapter.

Still, in other interviews I saw how COVID-19 directly impacted the ways in which participants engaged in their causes. For example, Michelle, a twenty-two-year-old, junior zoology major, she shared:

“I’ve had COVID five times. Yeah. And the first two times was during quarantine, Black Out, Black Lives Matter movement was happening. And it kind of put a halt, like a stop at going anywhere, you know. I was in my room for like three weeks, they didn’t know the regulation for how long you needed to be quarantined after you have COVID, so I was in my room for a whole month just listening to those podcasts that had like fundraisers attached to them, the Black Lives Matter movement. I was listening to them over and over just trying to help in any way I could...it [COVID] really taught me how to, like if you can’t actually go there, there’s other ways to help. There’s links you can send, there’s other things you can talk to friends about [it] who don’t know.”

Here Michelle shares the lived reality many people were experiencing at the time. Those that were sick with COVID-19 could not participate in ways that were possible pre-pandemic, especially at the beginning of the pandemic when information about recovery and contamination prevention were limited. And so, Michelle and others found ways to remain engaged and

supportive of the BLM cause while recovering from COVID-19 and being cautious with not spreading COVID-19 further.

And still, once participants were able to go back to MU and classes resumed in-person after they were moved online for COVID-19, they encountered other issues on campus.

Consuelo, a nineteen-year-old, third-generation Latina, sophomore arts and humanities and political science pre-law double major listed her main three causes as immigration, pro-democracy, and abortion rights. And when discussing her experiences with activism, Consuelo shared that she attended an on-campus protest against a right-wing political spokesperson who was invited to speak at MU through an invitation by a right-wing undergraduate student organization. She states that she attended the protest because she did not agree with the right-wing political spokesperson being on campus. Consuelo goes on to state the following details about the experience below:

“There was a lot of people on both sides. We were, I feel like, like the side protesting against her being here was a lot more organized and professional to be honest than the other side because we were just yelling our chants. Not yelling, but saying our chants, and we weren’t engaging with the other side. But then the other side would come and try to provoke us, like they would call us names, call us derogatory terms, like all kinds of things and would say even insults and things like that.”

Consuelo shares that the protesters were not allowed inside the building and that the right-wing speaker went on to have her event. However, the protesters stayed throughout the event, and although Consuelo found it empowering to be surrounded by like-minded individuals, she felt unsafe. She details that the protest ended at about ten o’clock at night, and the potential threat of violence against them was on the minds of many. Consuelo states,

“When everyone was dispersing like the leader of the protest was like, yeah, don’t walk home alone. Make sure you go in numbers; we don’t want anything happening. It’s like kinda scary. It’s kinda unreal.”

While Consuelo found herself surrounded by protesters which she described as professional and disengaged with the counter protesters, that was not enough to create a safe environment for her and others attending the protest. Yet, the leader of the protest recognized that and ensured that protesters took precautionary measures to maximize their safety.

Lastly, since this event occurred on campus, I asked Consuelo about her experience passing by the building where the right-wing political spokesperson and the protest took place. She reflected on it for a bit and stated the following:

“I don’t really have class in there, but [when] I pass by or whenever I see it, I get reminded of what happened but at the same time these people that facilitated her speech, they brought her on campus, they paid for it, and how it reminds me that there are people on campus who have not the best views on things. And how they’re willing to show those views and despite the danger it poses to minority and things.”

The event with the right-wing political spokesperson was not simply an event which provided temporary feelings of being unsafe and non-belonging for Consuelo. The event is one example of the people that see Consuelo and other marginalized communities as less than and pose a threat to them daily on the MU campus. And again, while Consuelo felt empowered to be surrounded by like-minded individuals during the protest, the reality is that once she left that space the threat of violence and harm that the supporters could do to her and the knowledge that they exist on campus remained while the empowerment faded.

Moreover, many participants also found that there were other ways to fight for their causes. Engaging in voting became a means of activism but also a personal responsibility for many participants. Carla, who is nineteen years old, second-generation Latina, and a sophomore criminal justice major, shares that she is dedicated to working for equality, and against racism and discrimination. And one of the ways that she does this is by exercising her right to vote; however, she also shares how it is both a source of stress and responsibility. When asked how she manages school, work, and activism she went on to state:

“Like today is elections, and like bro, if I don’t vote something wrong is going to happen or something. So, like later today I’m supposed to go with my friends to go vote on the ballot which is really stressing me out. Like if I don’t do something then, what if this happens? Cause like for me it’s like if my opinion does matter to, like for everyone, like your opinion matters, their opinion matters, my opinion matters, cause what we say does have some kind of effect.”

Carla shares her feelings of responsibility for ensuring that she exercises her right to vote as it can have a very real impact on her and her communities. Yet, it is also a source of stress as she is worried that if she does not vote, the outcome can be negative. For Carla, activism is personal but also attached to others, in this case politicians, that she believes will support and fight for the causes that are important to her.

Immigration & Deportation

For other participants, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), immigrant rights, and farmworker rights were listed on the demographic questionnaire as causes that were driving their activism. In my interviews, deportation and living mixed-status families¹⁴ was a

¹⁴ Mixed status families are “families that have at least one member who is undocumented and at least one member who is a resident or citizen” (Pallares 2014: 64).

source of pain and drive for activism. The Latina undergraduate students engaged in advocating for sanctuary campus and city status and supporting DACA students through scholarships.

I found that participants like Natalia, who detailed that immigration, Latinx, and women's rights are three of her top issues that she's involved in activism, not only engaged in protests and rallies, but they also worked on addressing the gaps in resources that were left there due to issues like immigration and deportation. Natalia recalls hearing about a nearby immigration raid twenty minutes from her hometown, and even though she did not know anyone that was impacted from that raid personally, she decided that she needed to connect with the families that were impacted by it. Natalia emphasized that oftentimes in the case of deportation specifically there are a lot of efforts that go to help individuals that experienced the deportation, but less attention and help goes to those that are family members of deported individuals. Natalia goes on to share her experience with connecting with the families, she states:

"I would go to ground zero... I went to the trailer park that I knew that a lot of Mexicans there were affected by it. So, I would go door to door, door to door and knock on the doors and ask them like, hey, I know this is a rough time but like what is it that you need now? Like what resources do you need? And so I would make a list of each family and I would, it's called Familia de Corazon, it was a grassroots that I created. And you know like whatever resources they couldn't find at the time or they couldn't afford, I would put it up online on Facebook and people would like in a way adopt families. And they would provide those resources. Or if it was like something like huge, like bigger like mental health or dentist, just things like that I would connect them to other organizations... they didn't want to talk to the organizations because they felt like they were going to exploit them. And they trusted me... And I would tell them my story. I would be like, no, like

I've been through what you guys have been through. This is why I'm doing what I'm doing, it's like I would want somebody to help me out if I was in your situation."

Here Natalia details how her personal experience with the deportation of her father enabled her to connect with families of deported individuals in a way certain larger organizations could not. This allowed Natalia to build trust with the families and get the access to the various resources that they needed. Natalia found herself as a leader because she recognized the gap that was missed by many and knew that she could close that gap by going directly to the impacted families. This wasn't something that she was necessarily seeking but more as a sense of responsibility to the families experiencing hardship like her family did.

For Cristina, belonging to a Mexican and mixed citizenship status family also drove her to activism. This also specifically impacted the three issues that were most important to her which were women's rights, education, and immigration. Cristina shared the injustices the women in her life experienced, not only with challenges to women's reproductive rights in the United States but she also shared those of the women she knows in Mexico, she stated, "I can kinda see the disparity when I go back to Mexico where like my cousins don't, the women don't get a secondary education, they don't know how to drive a car." And so, this has shaped her view on education, she views education as "a great equalizer, it's a great way to actually be able to then accomplish and change those other issues." However, when asked specifically on the issue of immigration, Cristina responded:

"Yeah, well immigration like my dad and my brothers weren't here legally like when I was younger, now they are. So, that was definitely a concern of mine when I was younger, and it was very stressful. And then right after realizing a lot of other people in our community are, also faced that same issue, and so it's always been a very near and

dear and personal thing to me. And I also feel very lucky that my brothers and our dad are now here legally and like we can travel back and see our family whenever we want. So, I also feel like I should give back, and try to help because I've been blessed in that way."

All of the experiences of Cristina's family have shaped the ways that she shows up for her causes. This is seen as Cristina not only signs petitions, attended an *I Stand with Immigrant* rallies, and hosted a DACA renewal scholarship campaign, but specifically in her major in Political Theory and Constitutional Democracy and her engagement in political campaigns. She is a member of MU Future Latinxs in Policy (MUFLP), an undergraduate student organization, which is a "great way to get involved with other people who are also passionate about policy" which offers them opportunities to meet with Hispanic Representatives and explore their options in policy. However, this student organization also highlights Cristina's drive to uplift and help others, she shares that the Future Latinxs in Policy:

"[Is] also a good way to spread information about how like you can be involved in policy. Cause I know like about half of us are senior, juniors, and so we've kind of like learned about this and about half of us are like, or half of them, are like sophomores, freshmen. And so, they're like I don't know what's going on. And I'm at this PWI and so, it's also kind of give back to them and kind of mentor them and hopefully they'll have an easier time adjusting. And then they can get the really good stuff sooner."

Cristina's experience with the Future Latinxs in Policy is to mentor other Latinx students as they navigate a predominantly white institution of higher education, but also help them become involved in policy. For Cristina, being involved in policy is about being connected to the issues

that are important to her and being a part of the work that is done through the political system to create the changes that she sought.

Education Justice

Education justice looked different for each participant that spoke about it. For some, it was about building a more inclusive curriculum, addressing the poor conditions of schools in their hometown communities, while for others it was about becoming the type of instructors that were aware of the challenges students with disabilities face and providing them with the best education possible.

Rosy, a twenty-year-old student, sophomore, special education major, is a student with disabilities. And when she was asked to describe how she is involved in activism she noted that her experiences are different from others' experiences. She states the following:

“I am a student with disabilities so I have to like sometimes I can't do as much as other students just cause of the fact that I have other things that I gotta attend to. Even though I have schoolwork and stuff I also too got to take into consideration that I have to go to my doctors' appointments so sometimes when it's like a specific event that I'm free and I have nothing else to do I would bring a friend over and we would go there, just to see what they can do.”

For Rosy, attending in-person events like protests and rallies are not always possible because as a student with disabilities she needs to prioritize her health. However, this does not mean that she cares less about issues or is not as dedicated to equity. In fact, Rosy says

“Being a Latina as well as being a student with disabilities, being from a family that comes from a low-income area, you know, I have to have this mindset of openness of being understanding as well. Because just like I stated before, you can't just be ignorant

in your own beliefs and also you can't just be like you know trying to push those beliefs to one individual, to a different individual who may have a different mindset of thinking as well.”

Rosy discussed women's rights, immigrant rights, and education justice as some of the main issues that she's invested in. However, education justice is of specific interest to her not only because she is majoring in special education, participated in a research project on urban education, but she also served as a teaching assistant at a school over the summer. There she worked with students with learning disabilities. And so, Rosy states that she tries to find different avenues which are accessible to her and just finding ways to help. However, she also recognizes the grandness of educational inequities that exist and states, “of course I know that I may not change the system but at least starting out and realizing that there is a problem is like the start of it.” For Rosy as a student with disabilities with her own lived experiences of the challenges and inequities in education, it is important for her to be a part of changing teacher demographics.

And while for Rosy education justice was about preparing for the future, for others it was about their continued support of the communities from where they came from. For other participants like Yesenia, who is a twenty-year-old second-generation Latina, education justice continued back in her hometown at her old high school. Yesenia was very active addressing the various issues at her high school while she was a student there, however, once she graduated it was difficult for her to stop working on the issues still occurring there. She shared, “I remember some of the students reached out saying that there was no water in the school, so they were giving out water bottles to students.” Current high school students saw Yesenia as a leader, and she continued to be pulled in to work on the school's issues. However, upon reflecting on her complicated role, Yesenia stated:

“[It] was really hard for me because I was trying to listen to the students and try to like help them and try [to] help them organize which was good, but I had to realize that I needed to let go and trust the new people. That they were gonna be okay, and that was hard because I feel like it also came with a lot of guilt. Like I didn’t want to be like, no, I can’t help you. But I wanted to just, I needed to learn to be like, how can I support you? While not taking over work just because that’s what I did my four years like I would, you know, talk at press conferences. So, I think that was the main issue for me was just like always feeling like I was, I had to stay committed to [hometown] and if I wasn’t committed to [hometown], I was turning my back on my people. But then I realized that there was issues at MU happening. I’m here like I could basically do the same thing I did in high school just do it in college. And then also feel that impact or see that impact, so I think that’s the reason why I got so involved here, was just to like make me feel like myself again. Cause I felt bad, I was helping high schoolers, but I wasn’t really aware of the issues cause I’m not in high school anymore so I think just getting involved here at MU made me very comfortable.”

For Yesenia, education justice is an issue that she has been heavily involved in, yet her role for her hometown community needed to change. Yesenia recognized that there needed to be a shift from leader to mentor which would better help current students address the needs of their community as new issues arose which they would be more familiar with. And so, for Yesenia, reaching education justice was about making that shift from leader to mentor, being okay with letting others take over, and working through her feelings of responsibility and commitment to her hometown community.

Women's & Menstruating People's Rights

The Latina undergraduate student participants listed women's rights, systemic sexism, gender inequality, women's safety, abortion, and menstrual rights as some of the drivers for their activism. This section includes issues that impact women generally, but it also includes issues that impact people who can get pregnant and people who menstruate, not all of which identify as women.

Natalia worked on issues of immigration, Latinx rights, and women's rights and she was often invited to speak at events for these causes. Natalia shares that she had been invited to speak at women's rights events for three continuous years. She shares that she used this platform to talk about reproductive rights, but also to specifically center Latina women. She shares the following details about those experiences:

"I would also give the perspective of the Latina woman, I would make it a point to talk about Latina women but, within my speech, it was about immigration but also the fact that women, Latinx women were underlooked, are underlooked a lot and they're the main foundation. And the fact that we don't pay attention to them it's something that needs to change."

Natalia used a space that is often used to center white, middle-class women, to talk about Latinas and immigration and how those are also issues that women's rights advocates should be invested in. However, similarly to Consuelo, attending in-person events also came with the threat of violence for Natalia. When discussing challenges Natalia had encountered as she spoke at events like the ones discussed above, Natalia shared that she is often met with the following:

"I mean I think particularly with white men it was annoying because they would say things to me that they wouldn't say to white women so the way they would treat me and

go about me sometimes would make me upset. I don't know, people that didn't agree with me with what I was doing sometimes would threaten me. I've even gotten death threats before. And I was just like, why would you do that? I'm a kid. I'm not doing anything though to affect you drastically in any type of way. Just disagreeing with you, you know."

Here Natalia makes an interesting point, that even at a women's rights event, she as a Latina woman was harassed in a way that white women there were not. Although she was given a platform to center Latinas her power and voice were challenged.

And still, the experiences of the Latina undergraduate students varied immensely. For example, Alaina, a nineteen-year-old Dominican Asian woman, details how she grew up in an Asian household but was raised in Latinx culture, customs, and traditions. Although Alaina did not list any issues on her demographic questionnaire, throughout her interview she mentioned issues such as immigration, violence against women, and women's rights in general. She states, "I don't have much [experience with] discrimination with immigration or anything like that because of how I look which is a huge advantage, a huge privilege for me, and I definitely don't take it for granted." And so, for Alaina immigration was not a dominating issue for her. But when asked about violence against women and women's rights, she stated:

"Women in my country are very overlooked and they're seen as very like weak, they're seen more like they're very objectified and very like pushed over you know. But I was thankful, I was lucky enough to have grown up in the part of the country where I don't see too much of it. Or I don't live any of it, thank God. But seeing it from my country and also having a few experiences myself and like my peers around me, I can definitely say

that here I haven't really experienced that which I'm very grateful for although sometimes it's hard to tell if it is, if it's machismo or discrimination or not."

The excerpt above highlights the complexity of understanding and naming experiences of discrimination or oppression. Alaina not only mentions the lived realities of women in the Dominican Republic, which are often defined by their marginalized status. Alaina shares that she found herself in a privileged position to not experience many of those experiences that are common for women in the Dominican Republic. Yet, she then goes back on that statement by saying she had few experiences that were not easily identifiable as instances of machismo or discrimination for her. And so, the experiences that Alaina had in the Dominican Republic shape how she builds community with other individuals who may also experience marginalization in her institution of higher education. Alaina describes how she blends community solidarity with activism below:

"Here [in the United States] within my friends they're largely international students or Latin Hispanic students... and I feel that this is very like wholesome, is that whenever one of us like has like a negative experience or something that might have been a little like not okay, we always like go to each other. And oh, you won't believe what happened to me. This happened, like can you believe this person did this? And like we drive that conversation ourselves... And I really appreciate that, I'm very grateful for that because you know they understand me because they're here. They're living it, they're experiencing it, they're going through it as well as me. So, I, we do have a lot of those conversations where we're like, and let's say that we're interacting with a person, we're together and if that person says something out of pocket, we will actively try to correct them even if they did it like, if they weren't aware that they did it or they didn't know

that it would affect us this way. Like we will always still try to like correct them, like educate them in any way that we can so I feel like yeah. We drive that conversation within our own friendships so yeah.”

For Alaina, sharing injustices she experienced went hand-in-hand with building a community of support. Yet, this community is also strong enough to hold each other accountable when needed as well. She states that members of this community will correct and educate each other through conversations. And Alaina concludes by stating that in these experiences, “I learn a lot not only about myself but like my experiences, my peers’ experiences and just like the community’s experience is what I’m getting at. I feel like in being involved in this type of activism I learn a lot about myself as a person, like what I’m okay with, what I’m not okay with, what I think is fair, why I think it’s fair or unfair, and just the general, I feel like it’s making me more aware.” And so, we see that the sometimes-difficult conversations that Alaina engages in with her community at MU enables her to continue to engage in personal growth and learn more about others’ experiences that she does not experience herself in her at times privileged position.

For participants like Alaina activism was at times not very public, but more personal. Other participants also experienced a more personal and private way of engaging in activism. Yesenia, for example, who is a twenty-year-old second-generation Latina, shares, “I do really like to have those difficult conversations with people or like, point it out. I know I’m so good at pointing it out to my guy friends like, your machismo is showing.” She goes on to share how important having these difficult conversations are in spaces like her student organization specifically because they were having problems with machismo coming from the Latino student leaders. She states,

“And I remember there was a lot of intervention that needed to come in because there were times where we would say stuff, like the women of the Latinx Undergraduate Organization would say things and like nobody would care. And then, or like I would say something and then the vice president would repeat it and suddenly it was a good idea...[And] I feel like activism is always seen as a woman’s job or something. Like, oh, y’all [women] care more. Like y’all can get sentimental over there.”

Yesenia goes on to share that because of the machismo and other issues many e-board members began to drop from the organization, with women being the majority of those that left. It was at this point that an intervention was triggered when Yesenia reached out to their student organization advisor. Yesenia shares that the intervention went well overall but details the actual experience of having the difficult conversation of the impacts of machismo had had on e-board members and the organization as follows:

“I feel like a lot of times like when you try to call males out on their masculinity and stuff like that it just became like we were victimized-, they were so victimized, and they were so upset that we would think that way. So, I just feel like sometimes people just don’t accept that it’s okay, we’re not saying you’re a terrible person because you made us feel like this but just like it’s okay, like we’re Latinos, like that’s probably a learned behavior. Like my dad sometimes can be machista, don’t take it personally. So, it was like, I feel like we talked about it but no one really grew from that conversation and of course I wasn’t expecting people to grow overnight but I was just expecting a, oh wow, I’m sorry. Or not even an apology, just realize that it’s okay it happens sometimes... and that’s just because it’s just embedded in you, it’s just stuff that you grew up with or that you’ve

seen. So, I just wish that there was that oh, I'm so sorry. There wasn't that realization that they were wrong."

At the end of the intervention, Yesenia left feeling that the conversation did not bring the e-board members to a shared understanding of accountability and how to move forward together. There was no resolution met where the Latino e-board members could be held accountable for their behavior, not even at the hands of their organization advisor. And still, Yesenia found herself making excuses for and giving second chances to the Latino e-board members. While recognizing that the Latinx community is entrenched in machismo, which does shape the upbringing of Latinx youth, it does not excuse Latinx individuals from being held accountable for their actions.

And still, for other participants, their activism was public and tied to various aspects of their lives. For some participants, their activism was tied to the MU campus and more specifically their student organizations. For example, Alma, a twenty-one-year-old, junior kinesiology major, second-generation Asian Latina, worked on addressing women's safety on campus. Alma did this work through her role as philanthropy¹⁵ chair for her sorority and worked on various events raising awareness on violence against women. She details her work below:

"One of the things I did was I held a sexual assault and domestic violence workshop and it was also a raffle collaboration with [fraternity] which is another Asian Greek organization and then also [local company] Designs which is Asian-owned West Michigan business. And they helped us create Greek apparel, Greek stickers... we actually ended up raising \$547 and it was a lot of like, it was a really good turnout... And

¹⁵ Philanthropy is described by Klein (2016) as "goodwill or humanitarianism [that] is often expressed in donations of money or volunteer time or property to causes that are important to the person doing the giving (4). Here, Alma works as the primary individual for her sorority to organize philanthropic activities.

just to give our thanks to like the MU community we held a raffle that would get more engagement of the MU students so if they donated or raffled this money, then they had a possibility of winning an incentive back because I feel like some students just aren't interested into going into a zoom call unless there is an incentive. That was one thing I thought was pretty good. The response from the community was really, it was well taken, and we donated the money to the Women's Center of [college town] to support."

In Alma's experience, she not only worked on creating an educational event for MU students, but integrated the raffle to get students engaged, while also raising money for the Women's Center of [college town]. She goes on to say, "So, for me I like to raise a lot of money and donate it cause I like to know that they can use this money for something good." For Alma, raising and donating money is a tangible goal that she can achieve to support the causes that are important to her. Scholars have found that fundraising for a cause can build positive relationships for people to give more money and resources, volunteer, and build positive perspectives of the organizations hosting the fundraisers all while providing necessary timely support for the cause (Klein 2016; Bin-Nashwan, Al-Daihani, Abdul-Jabbar, Al-Ttaffi 2022).

And still, in these experiences Alma found herself being limited by men. As philanthropy chair of her sorority Alma partnered with other student organizations at MU. However, these partnerships were one-sided. When Alma was asked about the support she received from her partnered organizations, specifically those with fraternities, she mentioned the following:

"I feel like I was really frustrated working when I had to work with other organizations cause I felt like for the most part it was me who did most of the work or me who had to do the designs and kinda figure out what's gonna happen at the event, talking to other people coming. A lot of the times I didn't know the people I was actually reaching out to

and so trying to figure out their contact, how to address them, and how to keep in contact cause it's kinda awkward to talk to a random person. It was just hard because I didn't feel like I could be pushy and tell someone to do something. And it felt like I kinda cared more about what I wanted to do than they actually did. It was more like, it felt like they just had to fulfill their requirements rather than I kinda wanted to do something more."

Alma describes not being strict with the demands of an equal partnership because she didn't want to be "pushy," and she not only felt that they were not doing an equal part for their joint event but that they actually didn't even care for the cause. She explained that the workshop they were working on was something the fraternity members could use to fulfill their requirements. Sorority and fraternities have required philanthropy hours to fulfill and co-organizing and attending this event would serve that requirement for them. And so, Alma grappled with not being demanding because as a woman she believed being seen as pushy, and so, to prevent that, she engaged in additional labor to make up for the lack of labor from the men in the fraternity. Alma also did not enlist the support from her sorority, local, or online community, and instead bears the additional labor, uncomfortableness because she believes in the cause and will do anything she can to ensure that her event spreads awareness, builds support, and maximizes the funds raised for the women's shelter.

For other students, there were larger social issues that were tackled through student organizations for the benefit of members of those organizations. For example, the Midwest University Student Empower Body Acceptance (MUSEBA) was established at MU. The goal of this organization was to empower body acceptance, create positive relationships with food, and discuss eating disorders. And while none of those mentioned previously are limited for women-identifying people, MUSEBA was an organization of women through failed efforts of recruiting

men, non-binary, and other individuals to their organization. Maya, a twenty-two-year-old, senior environmental economics and management major, Middle Eastern Latina, engaged in on-campus activism and difficult conversations. Maya is an e-board member of the MUSEBA student organization at MU and shared the following when they hosted a National Eating Disorder Awareness (NEDA) Walk:

“We all made signs about eating disorder awareness and just had really cute slo-gos and made pins and such. And we walked around and just spread across our message.

Anybody that would come up and ask, we would just share with them about it, which was really great. We had people that weren’t necessarily participants of the club come and join us which felt amazing. And at the end we kind of all just got together and had some snacks and just talked about our experiences and the NEDA Walk, so it was really nice.”

Ultimately for Maya, the conversations that were had with MUSEBA were more transformative for her. Maya later shared that her family often perpetuated harm towards her and her siblings by commenting on their bodies in deficit ways. And so, Maya found it necessary to find a community outside of her family to have discussions on healthy relationships with food, eating disorders, and past harmful experiences. MUSEBA was that space for Maya. Not only did these conversations with other MUSEBA members build space for Maya to build solidarity and support with other women with similar experiences, but Maya also speaks about the other takeaways:

“My favorite part is probably just like seeing these girls in our group just actually taking the advice we’re giving. And that we go through the time to create all these PowerPoints and stuff. We had a really big presentation about how social media could be affecting the way that we view our bodies. And with advertisements and following models and

celebrities and such and we just remind girls like, hey, if there are certain things making you feel not great about your body or you keep finding yourself comparing someone specifically on social media like it's okay to unfollow them. It's okay not to look at social media as much. And it's okay to like eat when you're hungry and stuff. Just like seeing some of these girls take our advice and listen to what we have to share and just share their own experiences is probably really rewarding. Yeah, specifically also it felt really good involving my cousin who is in college also just because I know she has similar experiences with my family. And it just feels rewarding to talk to her outside of the club and kind of see what she gained cause she's very comfortable talking to me."

Having the MUSEBA community not only allowed Maya to have conversations about body acceptance and eating disorders she couldn't have with her family, but she was able to build a supportive community with other women to do the same. For Maya, this space served as a healing space which she was able to then share with her cousin when Maya prompted her to join MUSEBA.

Another example of participants working in public means and with student organizations is seen through Sophie's experiences at MU. Yet, her efforts were not limited to the MU campus community, she worked on addressing the needs of the MU campus, the local college town, and nationwide needs. Sophie is a nineteen-year-old, sophomore psychology major, who works with two menstrual equity MU organizations and specifically works on efforts of redistributing menstrual supplies. Sophie is an e-board member of the Midwest University Council for Menstruation Equity (MUCME) and oftentimes personally works on receiving and redistributing the menstrual supplies to the on- and off-campus community in need of menstrual products. She describes the group as, "an organization that provides free menstrual products to MU students,

faculty, and staff on campus. We have desk locations, we have free dispensers on, inside a lot of bathrooms around campus.” Sophie goes on to describe the work that they do, and states “We do like packing parties so we, from the school we get like a grant and we’re able to purchase menstrual products and then donate it to either women’s shelters in [college town] or just donate it in [Michigan] in general.” For Sophie, the best she could do to work on addressing the gaps in access to menstrual products was to work with her MU campus organization, get access to funds, purchase the menstrual products with those funds, and distribute the products to women’s shelters and other locations they have identified. Scholars have discussed the limitations of Social Movement Organizations (SMOs) is that they provide opportunities for people to contribute money, labor, and resources, but unless there is coordination and vast effort, getting the needed supplies to those that need it can be difficult (Edwards and McCarthy 2004). And so, here we see that Sophie and MUCME members have illustrated that they were able to establish a well-working coordination effort to meet the gaps in their local and statewide needs.

Latinx Identity

There is no one all-inclusive Latinx identity that fits every member of the Latinx community. However, that does not prevent members of the Latinx community from feeling like they do not belong. At times not being fluent in Spanish, being phenotypically lighter or white, being born in the United States, generational migration status, or not having other Latinx friends can lead people to feel that they do not belong to the Latinx community or that members of the Latinx community will not see them as legitimate members. Many Latina undergraduate student participants of this dissertation noted that they did not have or had limited contact with the larger Latinx community at MU.

For some participants, this lack of community with the Latinx undergraduate population at MU led to problems as they addressed injustices impacting the Latinx community at large. Lucia, for example, is a nineteen-year-old, sophomore psychology major, third-generation Latina and shared that racism, inequality, and legal rights are three issues that are important for her in her activism. However, when asked about the urgency of her involvement for these causes, she mentioned the following:

“I would say that sometimes I feel like it’s not as urgent for me to get involved because I do kind of have the naïve view on it like me as an individual person isn’t going to make a big enough impact on it right away. And that it kinda needs more people to make an impact. So, sometimes I do feel like oh, if I don’t get involved in this one it’s not gonna make a huge impact, like I’m just one person. But I feel like that is kind of a naïve view cause it, it does kind of take everybody feeling like they are going to make an impact as an individual for it to really help people in general. And if everybody kind of had that view then nothing would ever get awareness or be solved or even have an attempt at change for it. So, I, I could be, I could have more urgency I would say.”

Lucia does not feel a sense of urgency for the issues that she had mentioned. And when she was asked to further detail what those causes meant to her, she shared them in relation to her Mexican father. The racism he experienced, the economic inequalities his family experienced, and nothing for legal rights. Lucia herself did not see herself being impacted by those issues directly or enough to elicit immediate action.

For Lucia her Mexican and white background have made her feel excluded from the Mexican and Latinx communities on- and off-campus. She shares that she physically looks more like her white mother than her Mexican father and has a “mixed” experience which is different

from most Latinx students. This pushes her away from recognizing that in her own words, she is probably not the best person to speak on certain issues that are prevalent in the Latinx community. And that she has the privilege to then decide to remove herself completely from these conversations rather than to position herself as an ally and use her privilege. However, she does recognize that sometimes she would be a better advocate for issues that she has lived experiences for, like having a mixed racial and ethnic identity. She states:

“So, even though in some cases I feel like I can’t advocate as strongly because I don’t feel like I have a right to as much as other people in some ways, in specific you know the struggle I face with being mixed and stuff like that I feel like I can advocate for those because I know where I fit in that group and I know what struggles I have with that. And I know that other people have the same struggles, so I could be a strong advocate for that.”

However, she finds it to be a slight at her identity when she and her opinions are not centered on other issues. When discussing her experiences on campus and specifically detailing her experiences as a Latina that is often not immediately recognized as such. Lucia discusses not be a part of groups that might discredit her Latina identity and consequently avoids topics that might be of concern in the Latinx community, she goes on to state:

“People are going to assume that I don’t have as many struggles as other people. And so, I feel like that might take away from some of my right to talk about different struggles and stuff so then it makes me not want to engage in as many. It makes me want to sit back and not want to, just pretend like I don’t even need to engage in those conversations just because then I need to bring up the topic of it and kind of justify, I have a right to say

something about it. And then I have to, it almost feels like people are gonna think I'm just asking for attention by getting engaged in those [discussions], if that makes sense.” And so, Lucia’s privileged positionality does not assist in her use of privilege for the causes she listed, but rather prevents her from acknowledging her positionality and becoming an ally.

Critical Hope

Critical hope highlights the understanding that individuals do not engage in activism to solve the issues they are fighting for or against, but that there is nevertheless a drive to be a part of the change. The following excerpts detail the ways in which the Latina undergraduate student participants find hope when faced with the grandness of the causes they are working on and the little victories they achieve along the way. Many participants shared their acknowledgement of the grandness of the causes they were fighting for or against throughout this chapter. Yet, none of the participants claimed to have resolved the injustices however large or small they were. This section on critical hope will delve into the ways in which the Latina undergraduate students grasped onto hope throughout their journeys.

For many participants, community was a source of support and regeneration. Eliza, a twenty-year-old second-generation Latina, shared that her Indigenous identity shaped her lived experiences and her passion for advocating for Indigenous rights and raising awareness for the Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women movement. She also shared how everyday experiences impacted her passions. When Eliza was asked about immigrants’ rights, she stated, “I think a lot about my dad, just everything he had to face or still faces just being a resident and I had some friends who are undocumented, so just like hearing their stories that’s what really

pushed me towards that.” And so, when asked about her advocacy for the issues that are important to her, she shared the following:

“I do sometimes think like I sometimes need to be like re-centered around my community and just kinda like remember why, cause I am a very emotional person so sometimes I feel like my emotions get the best of me. And I’m just like, oh my gosh, like I can’t do this. This is too much. But then I feel like when I go back to my community I’m just like okay, like I got this. We got this. So, yeah sometimes it is kinda hard to advocate but I think when you’re reminded of why you’re doing this work it gives you the little push to keep going.”

Here, Eliza reflects on her struggles with challenging an unjust immigration system, and even more so, fighting for Indigenous rights and raising awareness for Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women. And so, Eliza reconnects with her communities to not only regain drive but also to remember why she engages in activism. She continues her activism for her dad, for the undocumented community, for the Indigenous community, for all the murdered and missing Indigenous women, because others have done the work and Eliza can do her own part for these causes.

Other participants, like Cristina, found that there are systemic issues that cannot be dismantled as quickly as she'd like. However, for Cristina, she found that even making small strides towards challenging them is something that she can do. Cristina found strength as a Latina woman at this time because she has privileges that many others in her or similar position did not have historically, she details it further below:

“I always think about how lucky I am to be born how I was both in my ethnicity and being a woman and having these opportunities that have historically we did not have.

And it was, and we hear all about all these great historical figures who fought for that which they definitely deserve that, but it was also a lot of people that history doesn't remember that were also fighting to just push the needle a little bit forward. And so, I am very thankful to all of them and I kinda keep that in mind where like I am not trying to fix everything because a lot of these are systemic issues that you can't just fix overnight or even in my lifetime, but I think as long as I try to do my part that makes it a little bit easier for the next person to do theirs."

And so, for Cristiana she finds strength in recognizing that others have been able to achieve so much and that she can do the same. Another important note from Cristina's excerpt is that she highlights that this is not an individual commitment. Her work and her commitment to the causes that are important to her are tied to others. She sees her efforts as tied to those that come after her. And so, even if she does not make the monumental changes towards the systems of inequities and injustices that she would like to see in her lifetime, as long as she can do enough for those that come after her to continue, it will be worth it. Her hope takes the form of raising funds for undocumented students to renew their DACA applications, but also in the way that she is involved in policy on- and off-campus. Her role in providing information, mentorship, and opportunities for Latinx peers is how she enables herself and others to navigate an unjust system.

Small strides towards justice are a recurring aspect in the participants' hope. This is also seen in Olivia's experience who is a twenty-year-old, junior social work and social relations and policy double major. She listed women's issues and racism as the two driving factors for her activism. Upon reflecting on the urgency of her activism and why she continues her work, Olivia stated:

“I feel like in the larger scheme we’re not going to see results in the near future, it’s more touch and go. Especially with racism cause it’s been a thing forever, but I think that I like seeing what I can do for the generation below us. Like I said before, I just really like seeing when dads bring their daughters to women’s marches and everything like that. To make sure that they’re being involved. To see what they’re doing, you know, to create a better future for them.”

For Olivia, her activism is about making small strides for change but also about the people she is doing it for. She again, like other participants, recognizes the grandness of the issues she is challenging, but that does not deter her from continuing. In fact, it is being in those spaces, like at women’s marches, and seeing the commitment of those around her that inspires her to continue her work. And she continues to engage critical hope not only in the ways that she shares information through door-to-door campaigning and social media, but through the people that show up to events because they were given the opportunity and information to do so.

Similarly, Raquel finds small strides and centering the communities she advocates for as drivers of her hope. Raquel was asked to reflect on why she engaged and continued her activism, she found that there are limitations, but stated the following:

“Obviously there probably might never in my lifetime be equality, but until we get that, that’s what’s going to keep me going. Until more women, women of color, people of color are in office all over the country, all over the world, it’s still going to be important.”

Raquel views holding political office as a major stride toward addressing the inequities and injustices marginalized communities face in the United States. And so, for her, seeing a significant increase in women, people of color, and women of color in offices would be a

monumental step for these communities. She goes on to say, “There’s always going to be issues. Until we get more people of color, more women in power it’s always going to be an issue. Even then, it will still be an issue. So, I feel like it will always be something urgent to me. Like I’m never going to stop advocating for women’s rights, for the rights of Black people, for Hispanic people.” For Raquel, it is not about making little changes in her lifetime, but an ongoing commitment to continue to work for these communities because there will never be enough justice in her lifetime to cease her work.

Lastly, in a separate instance, we also see that small strides drive hope and activism. Yet, in some cases that does not eliminate the self-doubt and instances of hopelessness. We see this in Jenifer’s experience. She is a twenty-year-old, senior political science major who listed reproductive rights, human rights, and the climate crisis as her three driving causes for activism. When she was asked if she thought her activism made a difference, she stated the following:

“Yeah, so I really like to think so. Some days are obviously harder than others and there are some days where I’m like question whether or not it does. And I think it’s really easy to slip back into the mindset that’s like I’m one person and there’s seven million people on this Earth. Like it’s so easy to downplay the work, downplay the impact but every time I do get somebody signed up for an event or I have a really good conversation with someone, or I help someone get registered to vote or somebody reaches out to me and asks me questions like I realize I am making an impact and a difference. So, I guess the short answer is not always, but I think I am in small ways that make big differences.”

In this excerpt Jenifer recognizes that there may be limits to the impact she can make, but even a small difference can make the work worthwhile. She goes on to further reflect that maybe she could be doing more and therefore have a larger impact that she seeks, but quickly states, “but

the truth is that like at this point it's like the bar is on the floor, right. Unfortunately, that's where we're at right now in society." Jenifer goes back to her original reflection that even a small difference is worthwhile because many others aren't even doing that. And so, not even the grandness of systemic issues, the instances of hopelessness or the questioning of the impact of one's actions, can prevent critical hope from prevailing.

Considerations

The previous sections left out important considerations that will be discussed below. These considerations include intragroup inequities, risks and challenges in activism, engagement in the political system, leadership and activism, and value assessment.

Intragroup Inequities

The Latina undergraduate student participant community is diverse in nationality, race, generational migration status, language fluency, age, and a variety of lived experiences. And so, there is not one single Latinx lived experience that covers the entirety of the Latinx community and often leads to conflict and the reproduction of inequities, yet it also leads to allyship and solidarity. The section below details these experiences for Latina undergraduate students as they engaged with members of the Latinx community.

The men that the Latina undergraduate student participants interacted with have extracted power, respect, and basic humanity from the participants. Valeria, who is a Mexican-born, sophomore applied engineering sciences major, interested in immigration, Black Lives Matter, and women's rights, was the president of her student organization, Midwest University Future Latinx Engineers (MUFLE). Yet, she encountered issues with men as they attempted to challenge or disregard her authority. She emphasized the fact that she is the only woman on their

e-board, and describes her experience as president of her organization specifically with the e-board as follows:

“Well, the way I’m trying to run meetings, I try to be a facilitator but sometimes those guys can be really immature and get off track and start talking about soccer, and I’m like okay we’re here for a meeting you guys can talk about that after. But it’s kinda hard because they can be kinda immature which kinda sucks sometimes too. Sometimes there’s a couple specific individuals that I think they tend to listen more when it’s the guy, the vice president, he’s a guy, saying it.”

Valeria shares her frustrations with the men on her e-board not respecting their meeting time, but also that they would listen if it was a man demanding their attention. She shares that her vice president is a man, and that the rest of the e-board often does listen to him over her despite their titles. She goes on to share an example of this. Valeria shares that members of MUFLE were preparing to attend a conference and that she was worried about their drinking at that event. And so, even in addressing an issue of this magnitude Valeria had to be careful in how she shared her concerns, she went on to state:

“Because actually the idea of the no drinking rule, I knew some people would be against it because some people on the e-board they like to party, so I knew they would be against it. And I was thinking about it, but I didn’t want to be the one to say it. Luckily the vice president, he mentioned it without me telling him or anything. Which I was really about and the other people, they were still against it, but I knew if I said it, they wouldn’t have agreed to it. Which kinda sucks but yeah, I mean it’s kinda, I’ve had some experiences where I am the only girl in the group. For example, my engineering class this semester, I’m the only girl, I’ve never had issues with that.”

Valeria goes on to share that she often defaults to her vice president when she needs the rest of the men on her e-board to listen or not attempt to challenge her. She formed an allyship with her vice president who recognized the way in which the rest of the e-board treated her, yet, instead of confronting them and holding them accountable, the vice president would present the issues or make the decisions Valeria could not. And still, Valeria ends her statement with her experiences of being the only woman in other spaces. She shares that she usually does not have issues, but she does in this space with fellow Latino men. And so, Valeria does not attempt to change this dynamic and rather use her vice president as a proxy to get the other men to follow her lead.

Unfortunately, Latino men were not the only individuals creating conflict within the Latinx community. Eliza describes her experiences with racism and colorism at MU. She goes on to share how even her roommate her freshman year created an unsafe environment in their shared living space, “[s]he was like, oh my god, you’re like really dark for a Latinx person.” And still, this was not the only moment she experienced this at MU, Eliza goes on to say that she had limited her interactions with other Latinx students on campus because of previous bad interactions. She goes on to describe the following:

“[T]here was like this girl from Honduras who like literally said to me... Angela esta diciendo que your skin color is ugly. And I was like, we’re the same skin color, like what are you talking about? Yeah, we’re the same skin color and I just think that comments like that or tu eres india? You know, I can’t speak for the whole Latino community here but from the people that I know, being brown or like being more brown, right, being like darker that’s seen as being more indigenous which is from people that I know they have the mentality that they’re uneducated, son del campo, right. Which like yeah, we are but that doesn’t mean anything, so you know.”

Eliza highlights an experience of colorism with other Latina students at Latinx student organization at MU. They made comments on her skin and she connects it to other deficit narratives surrounding skin tone and indigeneity. However, Eliza's Indigenous identity is very important to her and she did not let those comments and other deficit narratives deter her from working on Indigenous issues. In fact, Eliza founded the MU Indigenous Latinx Student Organization (MUILSO) for Latinx students to explore their histories and reconnect with their indigenous identities. When describing the impact her work on building this organization and thus having on the community she states:

“I just don't think we really have that much impact. But like, if a student, if somebody, you know, a lot of my friends who didn't know anything about indigenous culture or history or anything, you know, now they can like they can tell me some facts and stuff. And like the students who are joining and who are reaching out to that part, parts, identities.”

The MU Indigenous Latinx Student Organization is still small in numbers, and thus, Eliza does not believe that she has made a large contribution. However, like other students when discussing their activism, Eliza sees her work as important even if it only impacted one person. And upon further reflection, she states, “[s]o, like when I was a freshman, I would have loved to have this...Now we're here and we exist for anybody who does want to join and feels like we represent them.” Eliza made a change by filling the gap she wished existed when she was searching for community as a freshman. Her activism is centered on continuously building space for Indigenous people and disrupting deficit narratives through her student organization.

Risks & Challenges

Nonetheless, there were additional challenges that the Latina undergraduate students confronted as they engaged in activism. Some of these challenges and risks that they faced included threats to their physical safety, risk of getting COVID-19, threats to their wellbeing, and disruptions and confrontations with family members.

As detailed earlier in the chapter, attending protests and rallies in person brings the threat of physical safety into question. And so, when discussing Michelle's experiences with activism, I asked Michelle if safety ever played a role in her decision to attend in-person protests. Michelle stated,

“[A]fter I saw a bunch of those videos from the Black Lives Matter protests, that really scared me. Because you never know when some guy is gonna be like oh, no, like that's not right and shoot us down or run us over, do something. You never know if the cops are gonna be like oh, let's help the protesters or let's help the people that you know, you never really know...I think just for the Black Lives Matter one I think it really prevented me too. Not just COVID but like all the bad stuff that was surrounding that.”

Michelle shared that the threat of catching COVID-19 made her hesitant in participating in in-person BLM protests, but what solidified her decision to not attend was the threat of physical violence at the hands of counter protesters. Additionally, Michelle also feared that apathy from police officers would create an additional layer of threat to her safety. And so, this threat of violence prevented Michelle from attending.

However, harm from others was not the only harm the Latina undergraduate students needed to worry about. When the participants were asked how they balanced their commitments with school, work, organizations, family, friends, activism and so many other responsibilities,

many shared how their school suffered, and others shared how their physical and mental health took a toll. Yet, in discussing commitment to the causes they engage in activism for, I found that the physical and mental health of the participants was never prioritized. For example, Jenifer shared how sacrifice played a role when describing the urgency in which she needs to show up for her causes, she stated, “I’m also just the type of person who if I feel like I really need to do something like this, yeah I’ll put everything on the backburner. Whether that’s like school or even like my health or like wellbeing like I know I’ll sacrifice sleep, right, to like stay up and do something. So yeah, that’s not a very healthy thing to say but, but yeah.” This excerpt begins to illustrate the lack of prioritizing one’s full wellbeing, yet it is not unique to Jenifer. She goes on to share how the urgency on working on the campaign can overpower the basic necessities, Jenifer states:

“[M]y friends who are also in like activism or like campaign work, they’ll often talk about yes, especially like staying up late or being so focused that they forgot to eat.

Again, it’s not a healthy thing to say, so I don’t say it with any sense of pride or anything, but I think it says a lot also that, how passionate we are about the work and how much we recognize that it’s important.”

The urgency in their work shows passion, dedication, and an understanding of the importance their work is for their cause; however, it is also an indication that their work is not feasible in the long-term as it is incredibly detrimental to their health and wellbeing. And still, Jenifer goes on to further reflect on future sacrifices that she would be willing to make for the benefit of the causes that are important to her. Jenifer discusses her future plans to run for office despite the threats of violence she may encounter, she states, “And ultimately, I was like, yes, it is worth it because I am fighting for something I am so passionate about that is so needed. But seriously

every single time I do something I have to ask myself is this worth risking my physical safety, and it is.” And so, for Jenifer and others, the sacrifice they engage in for their causes often entails harm to their physical and mental wellbeing.

Furthermore, a challenge that arose throughout some interviews were challenges that the participants had with their families regarding the participants’ engagement in activism. Some participants like Natalia, even though her family’s personal experience with injustice led her to be engaged in activism it did not lead to support from all of her family members. In particular, Natalia details the mixed support she received from her father, she stated:

“[M]y dad disliked all the work I did but at the end he was really proud. But he doesn’t tell me that. My dad and I would argue all the time, like, look at your mom, you’re making her drive you places when she has other kids to prioritize. Like you’re not the only kid. Me and my dad would argue every other night when I would come back from doing whatever I had to do. My dad was very against it.”

Natalia shares that her mother and grandmother supported her by driving her to events, networking at conferences, helping pass out supplies, and supporting her whenever she gave her speeches. However, her father did not, and saw Natalia’s work as taking away from her mom’s commitments to her other children. Although Natalia’s father’s lack of support did not deter her from continuing her activism, it did create conflict for her family. And so, recalling from Natalia’s experience detailed earlier in the chapter, she not only had to deal with white men threatening her safety at the events she would speak at but then go home and also get into arguments with her father, thus expanding the emotional labor and toll on Natalia.

This lack of support and source of defiance was not unique to Natalia’s experience. Raquel is a fourth generation Latina, has a Latina mother, and a white father. And in 2020, at the

height of COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter protests across the country Raquel wanted to join the protests. However, her parents refused to allow her to attend since she was living in their house. Raquel's mother is a nurse and told her it was not safe due to COVID-19 and right-wing extremists. Raquel's parents went so far as to not let her use her car. However, when asked to reflect on her parents' decision, Raquel shared the following:

“For her [Raquel's mother], the stuff with me not going to the Black Lives Matter protest was mostly about safety. And she was seeing how radical right-wing groups, let's say, were going into those protests and harming people. And that's why she didn't want me to go. So, I understand her reasoning. But you know, with my dad, he's a white man. Like he's very much a white man... and he's not very open-minded. And with him, it felt more, honestly, I don't know the right word, maybe heartbreaking because it really opened my eyes to see that he was never going to care about the issues happening in the communities that aren't white. And especially because he has Latinx kids, his wife is Latina, his loved ones on my mom's side of the family are Latinx. So, it was really heartbreaking to see that because I feel that moment really opened my eyes to see that he doesn't care about like the important stuff happening in our country to people of color.”

For Raquel, who is the daughter of a Latina woman and a white man, her identity as Latina and her solidarity with various marginalized communities does not align with her father's stance on the various social injustices impacting marginalized communities across the country, and specifically the BLM movement. And so, Raquel's father's stance not only shapes the support she receives from her family in attending and working on various causes that are important to her, but it also shapes the relationship she has with family and the realization that some family

members will never understand the marginalization she lives nor solidarity nor the commitment to being an ally.

Working Within the Political System

All activism is political. It seeks to provoke change and to challenge injustice and inequities. Yet, some Latina undergraduate student participants took a different approach in their activism, they found that working within the political system would help them achieve the changes they wanted to reach for the causes that were important to them. Norris (2004) describes this type of activism as political activism which entails influencing elections, governments, and the policymaking process usually through the means of voting, campaign work, and contacting elected government officials.

Multiple participants shared their engagement in voting and working on political campaigns. Jenifer is a twenty-year-old that has worked on campaigns over the years and sees herself running for office in the future. Jenifer shares that she shows up for reproductive rights, human rights, and to address the climate crisis by attending protests, rallies, and working on campaigns. For participants like Jenifer, the political candidates they work for are the vessels for the change they're fighting for. When asked how Jenifer felt about the politician she's been campaigning for, she stated, "knowing we have another voice in there [government] obviously it's really reassuring but yeah I truly do believe that she's doing everything she can to like move us forward and make [hometown] a better place." And so, while the participants in this dissertation all hope to elicit the change they're advocating for, the participants engaging in political activism are striving for that change through the election of political candidates that will fight for those issues within the political system. Jenifer believes in the political system to

achieve the results demanded by the marginalized community. She changed her major to political science and will be running for officer herself.

Other participants like Olivia also found opportunities to get involved in politics through their major. For Olivia as a social work and social relations and policy dual major she received an email to apply for an internship for a representative. This opportunity took her to Washington D.C. and shifted her future goals where she had not previously thought about her own journey of running for office, now became a possibility. However, the D.C. internship was just the beginning of her campaign work for multiple representatives. Olivia shared her experience with doing door-to-door campaigning for a political candidate on the ballot. And she shared the challenges such as being yelled at, threatened to have the police called on her, preached about women's roles, and other unwarranted experiences from the people she encounters going door-to-door campaigning. And still, at the end of the day, Olivia believes it's worth it, she states, "[w]hen I door-knock, some people didn't know anything about the candidates, and we really actually explained who they are. And some of them are like alright, I'll definitely go out, I didn't know who we were talking about before, but I'll definitely go out to vote for your candidate. Thank you so much for coming. And so that really makes a difference cause you get those good conversations every once in a while." Olivia's multiple experiences on campaigns and her internship in Washington D.C. have shaped her knowledge on working within the political system to achieve the changes she wants to see for women's rights and against racism. And so, Olivia plans to continue her activism through campaigns and eventually through her own run for political office.

Leadership & Activism

Throughout the interviews and demographic questionnaire, I found that the Latina undergraduate student participants held various leadership positions. The questionnaire findings indicate that fifteen of the participants did not hold a leadership position, but the remaining participants held the following positions: President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer, Academic Chair, Social Chair, Philanthropy Chair, Arts Coordinator, Social and Communications, and Sustainability Liaison. And three participants held multiple leadership positions. Here we see that half of the participants did not hold leadership roles, while the other half held a wide range of positions. In the interviews, I found that participants oftentimes found themselves taking leadership roles, whether it was official through an organization or not, because they saw the need to address the gaps for the various causes they were working on. And still, I found other participants already in leadership positions that used their title and power to work towards the causes that were important to them. And still, these leaders faced their own challenges, especially when it came to student leadership within MU.

Sophie is an e-board member of the MU Council for Menstruation Equity which is a student organization that relies on the university's funding and often faces additional bureaucratic challenges. Sophie details some of these challenges below:

“We [MUCME] were able to get a very nice check from them [MU student government organization] when we presented... our case. And how we see this as a very necessary thing for students but I would also say not in terms of funding but just like, I would say reaching out to like there was an occurrence with Midwest University Associated Students Organization [MUASO] like last year where it was just very difficult for them to, cause they said they were gonna provide free dispensers on campus in like a lot of

locations and from my understanding that still hasn't happened yet but they put it in written form that they were going to start doing that...But as far as I'm aware it still hasn't happened. We still don't have as many dispensers as we would like and so that's definitely a challenge just talking to higher up people because obviously you know obviously they have a lot of stuff going on but I feel like this is definitely something that they should talk about because it affects not only women, just every person who menstruates because yeah, it's a necessary thing that I think we should all take into account."

Through Sophie's role as e-board member of MUCME she is able to work with other organizations and university administration to receive both the financial support and menstrual dispensers on campus. Yet, there are still challenges. Sophie shares the struggles of getting the resources and support that they require to provide menstrual products for students on campus and the lack of accountability that occurs in the bureaucracy of the university. However, Sophie also shares that there are supporters for their cause across the university and that these supporters play a crucial role in their mission, she shares the following:

"We have like several desk locations on campus... like thirty or forty different locations on campus, so the, whether it's like at the Student Union desk or whatchamacallit or just like in like a classroom on campus they're very respondent to us, like, oh hey, like the pads or the tampons or the supply is running out. We want to make sure students have access to this because we think it's also like a very necessary thing and you guys are doing great work. So just, I think it's a very small thing, but updating us on what needs to be done I think is very important because I'm glad that they're doing that cause if it was

the opposite like we're not gonna know when the boxes can be empty for months and we wouldn't know."

Through Sophie's e-board member role, she needs to stay updated on the condition and supply availability of the various dispensers and menstrual supplies located across campus. And in establishing positive relationships with individuals working across campus, she is able to work together in ensuring that the locations always have available menstrual supplies. These small acts are crucial for Sophie and the Council for Menstrual Equity to ensure that they continue to give appropriate access to menstrual products for people that need it.

Value Assessment

As mentioned in Chapter Two Literature Review, Mendes and Chang (2019) reject the idea of "true" activists because it does not serve a cause in any way to have a hierarchy among activists. And despite all participants sharing that they engage in activism through whatever means they defined, there was a divide on who accepted the label of activist and who did not. Twenty participants stated that they do identify as activists, while five stated that they do not, and another five participants could not say that they did or did not identify as activists. For example, when asked if Yesenia identified as an activist, she stated that she did. Yesenia, shared, "I think there's that misconception that in order to be an activist you have to be on the stage with a megaphone yelling something. But there's some small portion of activism that still make a big impact that people don't see or just brush off because it's not like oh they're marching and they're protesting. So, I just think that's what activism is to me, just like being passionate and doing whatever you have to do to continue to be passionate." For Yesenia, being an activist is about doing what you can for the causes you are passionate about. It is not about being the most visible person at a protest or a specific action that you engage in.

Yet, for other participants, the activist label carried a level of commitment and earned respect that some were unsure that they had a right to claim. Mel is a twenty-eight-year-old, biology major, non-traditional transfer student at MU. Mel has attended various protests, including the Women's March and Black Lives Matter. And still when asked if she saw herself as an activist, she stated, "I feel like I'm not honored enough to be an activist. So, I'll say no, I don't see myself as an activist. Could I see myself in the future as one? Yeah. But I do feel like it does take more energy and effort to give yourself that title, and I don't want to say that yes, I'm an activist because I've done so much because honestly there's definitely people doing more. And I think you could do more, so I don't want to give myself that title just because I don't feel like I am worthy of that title yet." And so, for participants like Mel, even if they engaged in various acts of activism, they did not feel like they could call themselves activists because they saw other people doing more work, spending more time and effort, engaging in sacrifices for the causes that they did not do themselves. So, when they compared themselves to those activists, they felt that they had not earned the same title.

And still, for other participants, there was conflicting sentiments if the activist label was a permanent title or dependent on on-going efforts. When Natalia was asked if she identified as an activist she stated, "[t]hat's such a tricky question, because I'm not as intensely involved as I used to be so like it's, sometimes we'll talk about it. I think it's more of a me thing, like I need to work on it. But I know I'm an activist. I've always been an activist. But right now, I'm on the low. But I'm still an activist. So, when people ask me like, yeah, I'm an activist but it's not as intense as it used to be. But the feeling still lingers." Natalia recognizes herself as an activist, yet the idea of being less intensely involved in causes leads her, and other participants, to question if the title is still true to them.

And so, while the majority of the participants do identify as activists there was a mixture of what actually constitutes an activist and who can claim that title. And so, even when it came to who could claim the activist title there was the questioning of what activism actually is and consequently who could claim such a title. In doing so, the participants reinforce the idea of a hierarchy among activists. And so, this perception of a hierarchy among activists impacted the ways in which the participants viewed their own activism but also the activism of those around them.

This perception of an activist hierarchy is seen in Isa's experience attending a BLM protest which was explored earlier in the chapter. Isa mentioned that they questioned the genuineness of the other attendees' intention in attending the BLM protest, and stated:

“It felt like a lot of people were there just to, like people who really didn't care about the cause, like people who were just there to put it on social media or to I don't know, to do something cause everyone was so bored at that time – just to be out and do something.”

Isa goes on to say that they felt that people use social media for social issues in a performative manner. And so, because the other attendees were possibly using social media, for Isa, that meant that they were not genuinely there for the cause, and therefore less of an activist.

Additionally, Isa goes on to state that social media does not serve real activist efforts but rather just gives people social status by seeming like they care about dominating social issues. Isa comes to this conclusion because another issue that was occurring at the same time did not gather the same media attention, they went on to state the following:

“And so, I went to a protest for [deportations] which was in front of the Department of Immigration Control in [hometown]. And basically, nobody was there. And was like me and ten other people and this had been all over social media. I had posted it, I talked

about it for a while, and I guess it was just surprising to see how much people cared when it was a social media craze or something that could grant you points or whatever. Cause like it was around the same, it was right around the same time.”

Isa reflects that while social media was used as a tool to spread awareness for the deportation of students and the accompanying protest, yet when the actual day of the protest came, not many people showed up. They go on to say that in their experience, using social media was actually just a means to get “points” for caring about social issues and sharing information and not really providing the actual support that the causes need.

And still, I found that many of the participants engaged in online activism, particularly sharing that they would post on social media for a variety of causes. However, many participants were also quick to discredit that as activism. Some called it performative activism or slacktivism. For example, Valeria discussed the importance of making a difference through activism but shared that she believed that online activism does not produce the results that traditional forms of activism produce. She shared the following:

“I’ve heard about slacktivism I looked into it like, you know just posting about it is not gonna, cause most people on Instagram they’re just scrolling through they’re not, don’t really care if they see the same infographic on everyone’s page that’s kinda, it’s not really doing anything. You have to take action and it shows a lot going, I mean I really haven’t done much other than go to protests and rallies but just going and supporting the cause or especially if they’re going to the administration building like oh the administrators are seeing all these people gathered up for like this issue not those rallies and protests, they have like petitions to sign or also I vote. Like I’m a voter too.”

For Valeria, social media does not have the same impact or outcomes as protests do and so she does not see it as a tool for making the necessary changes needed for the causes that are important to her.

This idea of performative activism through social media is further discussed by Kelsey, who is a twenty-one-year-old, third-generation Latina American, and a senior global public health and epidemiology major. In addition to the work that she does on campus for what she listed as minority rights, Middle Eastern women's rights, and equal pay through her organization Midwest University Global Impact (MUGI), Kelsey shared how social media played an invaluable role in keeping people connected and informed on activism during COVID-19. She specifically states how important it was for the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020. She goes on to share the following:

"I would say during that time it was hard to be active at all [in activism]. All you could do was post things on social media and well specifically with the passing of George Floyd, that blew up, that was huge... everybody posted a black screen on the Black Out Tuesday, everybody posted George Floyd on their story, but then after that nothing. After that, radio silence. And I think that's the crazy part is that people can be so, I support this so much, let me post it on my Instagram story. But what is your Instagram story actually do? What does posting a black photo on your story actually do? What are you going to do after that? Because if you're following what everybody else is doing at that time, but doing nothing in the future, then what are you doing? You're not necessarily hurting but I wouldn't say it was helping. And I think that was the hard part, it was that everybody would say I'll just post that on my story, and I'll be fine. And they wouldn't go out and join these rallies, they wouldn't go out and join any of the marches that were going on,

well most people wouldn't at least. And it kinda gave everybody a free pass where they thought they could support things but just through their phone screen... I kind of touch on specifically for me, my family, couldn't do all of those things that we were normally doing and also, we felt like it was much harder to be heard. While there was more people paying attention, more eyes on you, more voices that could have been used, they weren't being used in the right way which made it harder to advocate for what you were advocating for."

Kelsey argued that there were limits of social media to promote change that people are seeking through activism. Kelsey also specifically discussed the black square posted on Instagram which was an instance when "millions of Instagram users shared black squares along with hashtags including #BlackOutTuesday and #BlackLivesMatter before pausing their social media content for the day" (Wellman 2022:1). However, this act was seen as an act of performative activism and allyship, which was only done to maintain and build credibility with social media followers, and at the end of the day there was no substantial change made by posting the black squares (Wellman 2020). And so, what actually ended up happening was that people posted black squares with the hashtags listed above and ended up drowning valuable information about protests, supplies, and links to non-profits for the BLM protesters and it made it harder to find the images of those at BLM protests on social media (Wellman 2022). Yet, despite acts of performative allyship happening online, Kelsey recognized that social media was still an avenue that individuals could use to remain engaged in big social issues like Black Lives Matter during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially when they needed to ensure the health of others.

Summary

This chapter discussed the findings of the four questions centered in this dissertation: (1) How do Latina undergraduate students engage in activism to address injustices? (2) How do Latina undergraduates' positionalities factor into their engagement in activism? (3) How do Latina undergraduate students engage in critical hope? And (4) How do Latina undergraduate students engage with injustices from members within the Latinx community? Accordingly, the findings for question one explored protesting, difficult conversations and listening, raising funds and providing resources, political activism, and online activism as means used by Latina undergraduates to engage in activism. To answer question two, I found that their positionalities impact the causes that are important to them, the activities they participate in as means of activism, their support systems, and their relationships and their sense of allyship to communities. And to answer question three, Latina undergraduate students engaged in critical hope in their activism by specifically relying on small, but meaningful changes and centering their communities. And lastly, there were multiple issues that Latinas encountered but they extended beyond the Latinx community. I found that Latinas experienced gendered forms of oppression from men inside and outside of the Latinx community. And so, the findings to address this last question focused on men as extractors, men as creators of additional labor, and colorism.

In the next chapter, Chapter Five Discussion, I will expand on a discussion of the findings. And I will explore my dissertation contributions to the fields as they re-center Latina narratives of activism, highlight the unique contributions of Latinas in activism by providing a nuanced look at their positionalities, and lastly, by exploring the role critical hope has on Latina undergraduate students engaging in activism.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

This chapter provides a discussion on the findings of Latina undergraduate students that engaged in activism. I will first revisit the statement problem and provide a review of the study. The review of the study will include an overview of the historical context in which this dissertation took place, the recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. It is followed by a discussion of the findings and how they relate to existing literature. I will then discuss implications for higher education. And lastly, I end this chapter with a section on final reflections.

Statement of Problem

Student activism is not new. There is a long history of resistance to racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression in institutions of higher education by students. The history of student activism in the United States ranges from the period of colonial colleges where students revolted against restrictive doctrines and substandard food and lodging conditions to the 1930s strikes against World War II to the 1960s where students advocated for civil rights and against the Vietnam War to the 1980s demonstrations against apartheid to the 1990s advocacy for multiculturalism (Broadhurst and Martin 2014; Broadhurst and Velez 2019). Moving into the twenty-first century, student activism has tackled issues of antiwar, rising tuition fees, and LGBTQ+ issues (Broadhurst and Martin 2014; Linder, Quaye, Lange, Evans, and Stewart 2020). Regardless of the drive to activism or the means used, “activism represents evidence of the engaged citizenry that stakeholders in higher education seek to foster” (Page 2010 :101).

Yet, in this existing work, the unique positionalities of Latinas and their experiences with activism remains limited, with existing research primarily focusing on the larger Latinx

community as a whole. The literature centering Latinas details the ways in which they are not only marginalized in their everyday lives, but also in their activism. Marginalization exists in a variety of ways, some examples of this are the lack of respect Latina leaders in activism receive (Lopez Zamudio 2019), the sexist diminishments and dismissals Latinas are subjected to, (Broadhurst and Velez 2019), and the way they are pushed out of activist spaces entirely (Montoya and Seminario 2020). While my findings underscore a history of marginalization faced by Latinas, it also highlighted the nuanced ways in which their positionalities shaped their experiences, for example, protests and rallies may not be accessible to certain students with disabilities. Additionally, colorism and anti-Blackness not only shaped everyday experiences for some Latinas, but it also shaped the threats of violence they faced while engaging in activism, when engaging in causes such as the Black Lives Matter movement. As well as the alliance they forged with non-Latinx peers, specifically white women.

Review of Study

The historical context of this dissertation was heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, police brutality and Black Lives Matter movement, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, ongoing gun violence throughout the country, and other social and political injustices driving students' activism. Specifically, I asked the following questions: (1) How do Latina undergraduate students engage in activism to address injustices? (2) How do Latina undergraduates' positionalities factor into their engagement in activism? (3) How do Latina undergraduate students engage in critical hope? and (4) How do Latina undergraduate students engage with injustices from members within the Latinx community? Due to the questions posed, I employed a qualitative approach to this dissertation.

Participants were recruited using a purposeful and snowball sampling with a criterion-based approach. The eligibility criterion was as follows: participants must (1) self-identify as Latina, (2) be current undergraduate students at MU, (3) have participated in activism at MU, and (4) be at least eighteen years old. Recruitment occurred using fliers, emails to student organizations and programs on the MU campus, registrar's office mass email, and word-of-mouth. Thirty Latina undergraduate students were recruited for this study. They completed a demographic questionnaire and zoom interview. More details on the data collection are explored in Chapter Three. Finally, the data were analyzed using NVivo qualitative software, where I engaged in a round of In Vivo coding, and various rounds of deductive coding. The coding process enabled me to identify themes addressing the four questions explored in this dissertation.

Discussion of Findings

The findings are detailed in Chapter Four, however, in this section I will explore the findings in-depth and how they relate to existing literature. The thirty participants for this dissertation all defined activism in their own ways with most using words such as voice, belief, spread, educate, advocate, and help in their definitions. The participants also had a wide range of reasons, catalysts, and causes for their activism. And so, the findings explore the various ways Latina undergraduate students in my dissertation engage in activism, how their positionalities impact their activism, how participants engage in critical hope, and lastly, challenges they experience within the Latinx community and other communities they are a part of.

Latinas' Causes

In this section I focus on (1) Latinas' engagement in activism, (2) Latinas' positionalities and activism, and (3) injustices from within Latinas' own communities. It is important to note

that the boundaries across these themes are more fluid than originally anticipated. Latina participants had a variety of lived experiences and positionalities, as shown in the ways that they not only navigated their institution of higher education but shaped the causes that drove their activism. The Latina undergraduate student participants of this dissertation had a variety of racial and ethnic identities, places of birth, generational migration statuses, first-generation college student statuses, and mixed citizenship family statuses. And while the participants' causes in which they engaged in activism ranged from specific causes such as support for the Michigan Proposal 3 Right to Reproductive Freedom Initiative to very broad causes such as fighting against inequity, the causes that are highlighted in this dissertation were broken up into the following groups: (1) racism and discrimination, (2) immigration and deportation, (3) education justice, (4) women's and menstruating people's rights, and (5) Latinx identity.

The racism and discrimination section highlighted the ways in which the Latina undergraduate students' positionalities solidified solidarity with other racial or ethnic marginalized groups and created drifts with white family members. This section emphasized that regardless of the closeness white individuals were to the Latina undergraduate students, the participants felt that the white family members would never truly understand the issues of race and discrimination they and BIPOC communities face. Yet, this did not stop the participants from continuing to support their causes. While some participants found themselves openly challenging white family members, specifically on BLM, others felt the need to hide their support due to unsupportive parents. Regardless of how the participants showed their support for BLM, I found my participants were innovative, especially during COVID-19, they found online platforms as an avenue to not only share information, but also to help raise funds, and to challenge deficit narratives.

Next, in the immigration and deportation section, I found that my dissertation involved individuals engaging in activism to address deportations, sanctuary campus status recognition, and supporting DACA students. While my participants were all U.S. citizens, some lived in mixed status households. And so, my findings mainly support research suggesting that individuals with U.S. citizenship status living in mixed status households often feel a responsibility to engage in activism not only for their families but other undocumented community members as well. My findings highlight the use of privilege by U.S. citizen participants to engage in activism, usually going to sites of deportation raids, affected communities, or publicly demonstrating support which can be risky for individuals that are not U.S. citizens. And while individuals without U.S. citizenship status often do engage in activism that may be risky, my participants found that they too had an obligation to support the undocumented, DACAmented, and immigrant communities in various ways that would minimize further risks while still centering the impacted communities.

Furthermore, in the education justice section my findings highlighted two avenues of challenging traditional means of activism. First, this section engaged research on students with disabilities. While my demographic questionnaire revealed that attending protests and rallies was a common experience for the Latina undergraduate students in this dissertation, attending these in-person events were not accessible to all participants. The findings support research on students with disabilities participating in activism in ways that don't typically look like activism. Such as teaching, role-modeling, and practicing self-advocacy. In another case, fighting for education justice was about mentoring other students and letting them take over the organizing. These are two examples of the connectedness of activism, it is a community struggle and not an individual one. And so, my Latina undergraduate student participants found various ways in which they

could engage in activism in a way that was significant to them and the communities they cared for.

The women's and menstruating people's rights section showcased the ways in which the Latina undergraduate students' positionalities positioned them to use their privileges in personal and very public ways. Yet, this section also highlighted the ways in which men, both as peers and family members, continued to show up as barriers to the participants. The interactions with men led my participants to exhaust additional labor seen through emotional labor but also in physical labor as they organized for their causes.

Lastly, the section on Latinx identity focuses on the ways in which the Latinx community is incredibly diverse and emphasizes that there is no one individual that can understand the complex lived realities of all members of the Latinx community. My findings support Montoya and Seminario's argument that Latinas' marginal identities don't lead them to engage in intersectional praxis. I found that for my Latina participants, existing at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities at times pushed them to be bridge builders and allies for multiple communities and causes. Yet, I also found that Latinas that were white oftentimes could not be allies to communities they were not a part of. They found it difficult to center the members of those marginalized identities and thus did not engage in intersectional praxis.

Critical Hope in Activism

In this dissertation, the third question explored the ways in which Latina undergraduate students in my sample engaged in critical hope by describing their drivers of hope. I borrow Quaye's (2007) definition of critical hope as he uses it in the context of activism. And so, my findings add to the understanding of critical hope in activism and for students in institutions of higher education. This is seen when Latina undergraduate student participants described not

being able to dismantle systemic oppression overnight, but they do their part to move the issue closer to finding justice. And they often do this by raising funds and awareness, engaging in political activism where they inform communities and provide opportunities for others, and engage in online activism to share information and ensure that others have access to engage in their own forms of activism. I also highlight that Latina undergraduate students engaged in sacrifice for the causes that were important to them. Some participants found that the urgency of the causes meant that they had to put their education lower on their list of priorities. And still others found that they had to put their health and wellbeing on the backburner, in some cases forgetting to eat or not sleeping. And still these Latina undergraduate students recognize that the work that they do might not be as impactful as they would like but it is important to them to continue because they do see the small changes their work makes. And those small differences are enough for them to continue. And lastly, through past or current struggles with injustice of their own my participants find strength in working through overwhelming disillusionment and pain for their communities and causes. My participants recognize that they might not be able to live through the change they are fighting for, but that does not deter them from continuing to do the work that they do. Yet, they also find encouragement through little changes they are able to see through their work. In sum, there are vast ways in which the Latina participants engage in critical hope through their activism. This is seen through their recognition that they will probably not dismantle systems of oppression overnight or even in their lifetime, yet it does not deter them from their activism. And so, my findings support Quayle's (2007) conceptualization of critical hope in the context of activism.

Considerations

Amid answering the guiding questions of this dissertation, I found ample considerations to include in my findings. My dissertation also explored the injustices Latina undergraduate students experienced within the Latinx community. In this section I explore some of those injustices and how they relate to the literature. However, one of the limitations of this dissertation, as discussed in Chapter Three Methodology, was that a large portion of the Latina undergraduate students that I interviewed had very limited or no experience with the Latinx community on the MU campus due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent university COVID-19 safety protocols. Consequently, in this section I also explored injustices the participants experienced from within any communities they belonged to which included both additional ethnic communities and student organizations. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Latina students have faced a variety of marginalization through their engagement in activism. I argue that Latino and non-Latino men in community with Latina students have served as extractors of power, respect, and basic humanity from my participants. And so, my participants found various avenues to engage in activism despite the various forms of marginalization and oppression from men. My findings support literature that states that Latinas seek and build spaces to address causes that are important to them because they do not receive support from Latinos (Tijerina Revilla 2004).

For example, one of the forms of extraction from men the Latina undergraduate students experienced in this dissertation was the burden of additional labor to make up for the lack of labor from the men in the communities Latinas are members of. This dissertation expands on literature emphasizing that women have endured gendered labor, instead of specific labor being assigned to the Latina undergraduate students.

Technology, although everchanging, remained a vital component to everyday life, and the COVID-19 pandemic cemented this by positioning technology in a way to remain connected with the world. And so, my dissertation supports literature on online activism as it shows up for the participants as they use social media as a means to share views and information on a public forum and reach a wide audience. I also found that social media is used as an accessible avenue for people who cannot engage in activism in traditional ways like attending a protest. However, I argue that social media activism can be used as an alternative to in-person activism in a way that is not only more accessible to people without transportation and for students with disabilities, but also as an alternative option in unprecedented times like those of COVID-19. From 2020 onward, participants of this dissertation describe their use of social media as not only maintaining themselves informed on critical social issues, sharing information, bringing awareness, and staying connected to impacted communities but specifically as engaging in activism in a way that would keep them and by default their loved ones they had contact with healthy during a pandemic.

Implications for Higher Education

The findings of this dissertation, although not generalizable, offer insights and thus better understanding of the lived experiences of Latina undergraduate students in institutions of higher education as they engage in activism on- and off-campus. I highlight the various lived experiences that the Latina undergraduate students face in addition to their commitments as students at MU. This includes challenging experiences with family, such as having family members deported, full-time employment, leadership roles in student organizations, and specifically the various engagements in activism. And so, I recommend that university policies take into consideration the vast, and oftentimes, invisible, and additional labor which students

endure. University policies should recognize the immense contributions to their university, local community, state, and nation that their students partake in as they engage in activism for their various causes.

There are efforts by universities across the United States that have attempted to recognize the contributions of BIPOC, and also the various harms BIPOC and specifically the Black community has endured in recent years. In 2020, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion statements were published among student organizations, academic departments, colleges, and universities across the United States (Ballard, Allen, Ashcraft, Ganesh, McLeod, and Zoller 2020). In these statements there were calls for holding institutions to higher standards in ensuring that they were creating and maintaining diverse, equitable, and inclusive environments. And while those are initial steps to addressing the unjust experiences maintained by institutions of higher education, there is more that can be done. It is my recommendation that university administrators place policies, programs, and other avenues of support to ensure that Latina undergraduate students are supported in their own efforts in making their institutions and surrounding communities more diverse, equitable, and inclusive. One avenue can be changing the ways in which institutions operate by not operating in a way that places the burden of change upon students and not reproducing oppressive and inequitable institutional policies (Agua and Pendakur 2019). University administrations cannot add the burden of labor for change onto marginalized students. They must be proactive in establishing change and quickly addressing the harms and injustices faced by their students. Another avenue that can be taken by institutions of higher education is changing the punitive reactions to student activists. Scholars have found that the ways in which institutions of higher education respond to student activism can also deteriorate or enhance their relationships with those students. And so, Lockard and colleagues (2019) suggest “institutions

take proactive steps to establish spaces for communication and community learning, as well as establish structures for appropriate, responsive, and supportive reaction to student concerns” (198). And so, university administrators can listen and take the recommendations and demands from the student activists rather than position them as agitators. Making the shift in the ways that student activists are framed can work on maintaining a healthy line of communication for the needs of students directly from the students.

Nonetheless, the various issues of concern of the thirty participants in this dissertation will continue to be raised not only to the MU campus community and administration, but also the local, statewide, and national audiences. And so, more research is needed to not only understand the experiences of these students, but also the ways in which their institutions of education and surrounding communities can better support them.

Future Research

Scholars have studied student activism and Latinas in institutions of higher education vastly, yet there is less work that contextualizes the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement. And even less research has investigated Latina undergraduate students that engage in activism on- and off-campus. Research on student activism has focused on the campus environment and administration responses to student activism, future work should explore the extent, if any, in which institutions of higher education complicate students’ engagement and involvement in activism. Still, future research should not be limited to the institutions in which these students are members of since less research has focused on students’ positionalities and lived experiences outside of institutions of higher education and how it has impacted how they engage in activism now that they are attending these institutions. While the findings of this dissertation explore the various means that Latina undergraduate students use to

engage in activism, explore the impact of their positionalities on their activism, engagement with critical hope, and injustices within the communities they belong to, there is ample room for future research to expand on these findings.

My participants while attending an institution of higher education in the Midwest, did not all have vast experiences living in the Midwest before attending MU. Consequently, future work should investigate the ways in which regional areas also factor into the lived experience of Latinas and the ways in which it shapes their activism.

And due to my participants' lack of experiences on campus and at times non-existent ties to the Latinx student community on campus, my exploration of gendered injustices occurring within the Latinx community was limited. Future research should explore the ways in which Latina undergraduate students organize with Latino undergraduate students on- and off-campus. My findings did find an instance that indicated that there are conflicts with Latino students when Latina students hold leadership positions. Additional research should explore this more in-depth. Furthermore, as briefly mentioned in my limitations section, future research can also further delve into the ways in which sexuality plays a vital role. I briefly engaged the ways in which sexuality marginalized Latinas from the larger Latinx community and how it positions them in a vulnerable way as well. And so, future work can further explore the ways that sexuality pushes Latinas into different spaces for them to engage in activism, the causes that are important to them, and how they show up for those causes.

Additionally, future research should also explore the support networks of student activists as they navigate various experiences with deciding how to choose to engage in activism, which causes they show up for, and how they view injustice and allyship. My findings illustrate disapproval from various parents when the participants discussed attending Black Lives Matter

protests. Some participants dismissed their parents' disapproval as a matter of preventing COVID-19 infection since many BLM protests were occurring in 2020. However, other participants were transparent with their parents' ignorance or misinformed view on the group and cause or blatant anti-Blackness which prompted their disapproval. For some students their parents' disapproval prevented them from attending BLM protests and for others it prevented them from sharing their experiences at the protests. Future research should explore parental and other support as student activists engage in causes that are met with disapproval or support from people in their support networks.

Lastly, another area for future research is investigating the violence women, and Latinas specifically, face on a daily basis and how these experiences shape the way they engage threats of violence as they engage in activism. As noted throughout Chapter Four Findings, in my interviews many Latina undergraduate students experienced fears of violence or threats of violence as they engaged in activism. One participant, Ximena, when asked about her experiences with in-person activism and if she had a safety plan stated that she did not have a safety plan. However, she mentioned, "I had that pepper spray, I have an alarm on me, that kind of thing. Like a lot of my friends and family have my location." These are safety measures women often take simply to protect themselves in everyday situations. Future research should investigate the ways in which women are prepared for violence in the context of activism due to being prepared for gendered violence in their everyday lives.

Final Reflections

This dissertation is connected to my lived experiences as a Latina activist and my previous research with Latinx students in a predominantly white institution of higher education. My activism reached its highest point during my undergraduate career at Texas A&M University

while I worked with the Council for Minority Student Affairs. Our work centered around the undocumented and immigrant community on- and off-campus. However, we often found ourselves fighting for many marginalized communities as these systems of oppression transcended communities. And my research with Latinx students highlighted an aspect of my own lived experience which I had not further explored, which was the forms of oppression which existed within the Latinx and other activist communities.

Consequently, the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Latina undergraduate students which I feel connected to but recognize that a lot has changed since I was a Latina undergraduate student. By embracing a Chicana Feminist Epistemological lens, I found value in how my lived experiences are tied to my dissertation, yet I also recognize that my dissertation explored tensions within my own lived experiences. Throughout my dissertation, I recognized the similarities between my own experiences and those of the Latina undergraduate student participants. I connected to them not only in their activism, but the struggles with their families, identities, and lived experiences in higher education.

My future work will continue to be influenced by my own lived experiences but also by those experiences that are shared with me. The thirty Latina undergraduate students of this dissertation shared snapshots of their lives with me and I am so honored and grateful to them for trusting them to me. My future work will explore family history more in-depth as it served as a catalyst for some and a hindrance for others in my dissertation. Additionally, I would also like to explore the experiences of Latina undergraduate students that do not engage in activism. Whether it is a decision that was made to protect themselves as they see activism as risky for their or their community's safety or those that do not see activism as a means for social change.

In conclusion, I hope that the lived experiences of the participants shared in this dissertation shed light on the lived realities of Latina undergraduate students engaging in activism while living through the COVID-19 pandemic, Black Lives Matter movement, the overturning of Roe v. Wade, continuing gun violence, and consistent social and political injustices in the United States. Their interviews reveal that activism exists in many ways, they experience life and injustice in a multitude of means, they recognize the grandness of systems of oppression, yet still work on challenging them, and lastly, they continue to fight for their goals, dreams, and just to live another day as their authentic selves despite the injustices they encounter from people within their own communities. In sum, Latina undergraduate students' activism, and their ways of existing, do not look one way but they find multiple ways to live the lives they want for themselves and for those that come after them.

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APPENDIX A

CONSENT FORM

Study Title: Latina Undergraduate Students' Engagement in Activism on a Predominantly White Campus

Researcher and Title: Angelica Ruvalcaba, Doctoral Candidate

Department and Institution: Department of Sociology and Chicano/Latino Studies Program at MSU

Contact Information: ruvalca1@msu.edu

Sponsor: Michigan State University Department of Sociology

PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

The purpose of this research study is to investigate the experiences of Latina undergraduate students with activism in predominantly white institutions of higher education.

WHAT YOU WILL BE ASKED TO DO

Your participation in this study will take about a total of seventy-five minutes, fifteen minutes to complete the demographic questionnaire and sixty minutes for the interview. You will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire via the online platform of Qualtrics and an interview via the online conferencing software of Zoom.

The demographic questionnaire will be comprised of eighteen questions concerning identities (e.g., gender, age, etc.), school experiences, and participation in activism. You will complete this on Qualtrics which you will access through the QR code, the recruitment flier, or email. You are able to skip any question that you prefer not to answer. The demographic questionnaire is estimated to take fifteen minutes from start to finish.

The Zoom interview will occur after you complete the demographic questionnaire. It will include questions on your general experiences on campus, experiences with racism and sexism, their involvement in activism, and engagement with the concept of critical hope. These in-depth, semi-structured interviews will be conducted via Zoom to adhere to COVID-19 safety regulations. As such, the participants will be required to provide their own computer and internet access. And they will need to find their own space where they feel the most comfortable to be interviewed. The Zoom interview is estimated to last about sixty minutes.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS

You may not benefit personally from being in this study, there is no classroom credit for participation nor other alternative credit. However, there is potential benefit to future individuals due to the information you and other participants share.

POTENTIAL RISKS

The most likely risks of participating in this study are being stigmatized as participating in acts of activism which will be addressed by using pseudonyms for all participants involved. Another risk is the possible experience of emotional turmoil as participants recollect and share their experiences. I have provided some resources below:

████ Counseling & Psychiatric Services:

Phone: ██████████

Address: ██████████
██████████
██████████

YOUR RIGHTS TO PARTICIPATE, SAY NO, OR WITHDRAW

You have the right to say no to participate in the research. You can stop at any time after it has already started. There will be no consequences if you stop, and you will not be criticized. You will not lose any benefits that you normally receive.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION FOR BEING IN THE STUDY

There are no costs to participate in the study. However, you will be compensated with a ten-dollar gift card at the completion of both the demographic questionnaire and Zoom interview. The Department of Sociology at MSU has provided the funds for the compensation.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have concerns or questions about this study, such as scientific issues, how to do any part of it, or to report an injury, please contact the researcher (Angelica Ruvalcaba at ruvalcal@msu.edu).

If you have questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about the study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at 517-355-2180, Fax 517-432-4503, or email irb@msu.edu or regular mail at 4000 Collins Rd, Suite 136, Lansing, MI 48910.

DOCUMENTATION OF INFORMED CONSENT

You must be 18 or older to participate. Your signature below means that you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

Signature

Date

I agree to allow audiotaping/videotaping of the interview:

Yes

No

Initials _____

APPENDIX B

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Gender: Woman __ Man __ Non-binary __ Not Listed (comment) __ Prefer not to say__
2. Age: ____
3. Race: White __ Black or African American ____ American Indian and Alaska Native ____ Asian __ Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander ____ Two or More Races ____
4. Do you speak Spanish? Yes ____ No ____
 - a. Do you write Spanish? Yes ____ No ____
 - b. Do you understand Spanish? Yes ____ No ____
5. What is the primary language spoken in your home? _____
6. Place of Birth (State, Country) _____
7. Parent 1 Place of Birth (State, Country) _____
 - a. Parent 2 Place of Birth (State, Country) _____
8. Generational Migration Status:
 - a. First-Generation: Individual born outside of the U.S. ____
 - b. Second-Generation: Individual born in the U.S. with at least one foreign-born parent ____
 - c. Third Generation: Individual and both parents born in the U.S. with at least one foreign- born grandparent ____
 - d. I do not know what generation best describes me ____
 - e. Other ____
9. Employment Status: Full Time ____ Part Time ____ Not Employed ____
10. Student Classification: Senior __ Junior __ Sophomore __ Freshman __ Other ____
11. Enrollment Status: Full Time ____ Part Time ____
12. Degree Major: _____
 - a. Degree Minor: _____
13. Are you a first-generation college student? Yes ____ No ____
14. Are you a member of a student organization? Yes ____ No ____
 - a. What is the name of the student organization? _____

15. Have you held a leadership position within this organization? Yes ____ No ____
- a. If so, what was the role? President ____ Vice President ____ Secretary ____
Treasurer ____ Other ____
16. What were your main tasks under this role? _____
17. In which of the following activist activities have you participated in during your time at MU? Protest ____ Rally ____ Sit-In ____ Boycott ____ Other: _____
18. What are three issues that drive your activism? 1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____
19. How informed do you feel you are on this/these issues? (1 being the lowest, 5 being the highest) 1 ____ 2 ____ 3 ____ 4 ____ 5 ____
20. Has COVID-19 impacted the way that you engage in these activities? Yes ____ No ____
- a. If so, how? _____

APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW LETTER

Dear [participant],

My name is Angelica Ruvalcaba, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology and the Chicano/Latino Studies Program at Michigan State University. You have completed the first part of the study by completing the demographic questionnaire. I am reaching out to schedule the second part of the study – the Zoom interview. Please let me know your date and time preference.

The Zoom interview is expected to last approximately ninety minutes from start to finish. At the end, you will receive a ten-dollar gift card as compensation for your participation in the study.

Please let me or my Principal Investigator (PI) know if you have any questions or concerns at this moment. You can contact me at ruvalcal@msu.edu or my PI at ayalam@msu.edu. I look forward to hearing from you.

Best,
Angelica Ruvalcaba

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Understanding your experience at MU

1. What has been your most rewarding experience at MU?
2. What has been your most challenging experience at MU?
3. In what ways do you feel that your Latina identity has shaped your experience at MU?
4. Have you experienced discrimination of any kind at MU?
 - a. If so, please describe.

Mechanics of Activism at MU

5. *How do you define activism?*
6. How did you become involved with activism at MU?
 - a. Why did you become involved with activism at MU?
7. How long have you participated in activism as a college student at MU?
 - a. How many hours did/do you spend on activism weekly?
8. Describe your experience with activism at MU:
 - a. In the questionnaire, you mentioned participating in _____, can you elaborate on these experiences?
9. How would you describe the urgency of your involvement in the activism in which you participate in at MU?
10. You stated that you are a member of _____; can you elaborate on your involvement in activism with them at MU?
11. *You stated that you held a leadership position in the questionnaire, can you elaborate on that experience?*
 - a. *Why did you take that leadership position?*
 - b. *What was your relationship with other e-board members?*
 - c. *What was your relationship with members?*
12. Have you engaged in activism outside of student organizations at MU? a. If so, what was that experience like?
 - b. What are some examples of your participation in activism?

Challenges in Activism

13. Did you experience any challenges as you became involved in activism?
 - a. If yes, what were they?
14. Have you experienced pushback during your activist work?
 - a. If so, who was it from?
 - b. Please describe this/these experience(s).
15. *Did you experience any support as you became involved with activism?*

16. *How did you balance your various commitments (e.g., school, work, organizations) and your commitment to activism?*
17. *How would you describe your relationship with the Latinx community at MU?*
18. Do you engage in activism against injustices from within the Latinx community at MU?
 - a. If so, what are they?
 - b. What has that experience been like?
19. *How has COVID-19 impacted your experience with activism?*

Issues of Interest in Activism

20. What issues drive your involvement in activism at MU?
 - a. How do you balance your involvement for the/these issue(s)?
 - b. If you participate in multiple issues, do they overlap?
 - c. Do you work with separate groups of people for the various issues?
21. Do the issues you engage in activist work for align with your identities?
22. How closely do the issues you work to address affect you personally?
23. Do you feel that you can strongly advocate for the issues that are important to you?
24. *What keeps you engaged in activism?*

Identity as an Activist

25. What is the best part of your involvement with activism?
26. In what ways do you find your voice as a Latina in your activist work?
27. Do you believe that your activism makes a difference?
 - a. Why or why not?
28. Do you see yourself as an activist?
 - a. Why or why not?
29. Is there anything you would like to share about your experience with activism that I did not already ask you about?

APPENDIX E

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Table 3. Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Generational Migration Status	Place of Birth	Student Classification	Major	Minor	First-Generation College Student Status
Eliza	20	American Indian and Alaska Native	Second-Generation	CA, USA	Junior	Linguistics	None	Yes
Yesenia	22	Other	Second-Generation	MI, USA	Senior	Communication	None	Yes
Valeria	N/A	American Indian and Alaska Native	First-Generation	JAL, MX	Sophomore	Applied Engineering Sciences	None	No
Rosy	20	White	First-Generation	MI, USA	Sophomore	Special Education	Spanish and Elementary Education	Yes
Amali	20	White	Don't Know	IL, USA	Sophomore	Human Biology	None	Yes
Jenifer	20	Other: Mexican American	Second-Generation	MI, USA	Senior	Political Science	Law Justice and Public Policy	Yes
Alma	21	Two or More Race	Second-Generation	MI, USA	Junior	Kinesiology	Health Promotion	Yes

Table 3. (cont'd)

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Generational Migration Status	Place of Birth	Student Classification	Major	Minor	First-Generation College Student Status
Natalia	19	White	Don't Know	OH, USA	Sophomore	Marketing	None	Yes
Karina	21	Other: Mexican American	Second-Generation	MI, USA	Senior	Human Capital and Society	Organizational Leadership	Yes
Sophie	19	Two or More Races	Third-Generation	CA, USA	Sophomore	Psychology	None	No
Alaina	19	Asian	Second-Generation	PR	Sophomore	Advertising Creative	None	No
Kelsey	21	White	Third-Generation	NY, USA	Senior	Human Biology	Global Public Health and Epidemiology	No
Lucia	19	Two or More Races	Third-Generation	MI, USA	Sophomore	Psychology	None	Yes
Maya	22	Other: Hispanic Middle Eastern	Second-Generation	MI, USA	Senior	Environmental Economics and Management	Spanish	Yes

Table 3. (cont'd)

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Generational Migration Status	Place of Birth	Student Classification	Major	Minor	First-Generation College Student Status
Consuelo	19	White	Third-Generation	TX, USA	Sophomore	Arts and Humanities and Political Science and Pre-Law	Chicano/Latino Studies	Yes
Mia	20	White	Fifth-Generation	MI, USA	Sophomore	Kinesiology	Spanish	No
Salina	21	Two or More Races	Third-Generation	CA, USA	Junior	International Relations	Italian; European Studies	No
Daniela	20	Other: Hispanic	First-Generation	CA, USA	Junior	Interdisciplinary Studies in Social Science	Law, Justice and Public Policy	No
Olivia	20	White	Second-Generation	MI, USA	Junior	Social Work and Social Relations and Policy	Human Behavior and Social Services	Yes
Mel	28	White	Second-Generation	CA, USA	Other: Undergrad and Medical School Combination Program	Human Biology	None	Yes

Table 3. (cont'd)

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Generational Migration Status	Place of Birth	Student Classification	Major	Minor	First-Generation College Student Status
Alondra	21	Black	Third-Generation	MI, USA	Junior	Information Science	Real Estate	Yes
Nati	21	N/A	Second-Generation	TX, USA	Junior	Environmental Studies and Sustainability	Agronomy	Yes
Carla	19	Other: Unsure	Second-Generation	MI, USA	Sophomore	Criminal Justice	Data Analytics and Security Management	Yes
Isa	19	White	Second-Generation	OH, USA	Sophomore	International Relations	Science, Technology and Environmental Public Policy	Yes
Raquel	21	White	Fourth-Generation	FL, USA	Senior	Zoology	None	Yes
Vanessa	19	N/A	Second-Generation	IL, USA	Sophomore	Urban and Regional Planning	None	Yes
Michelle	22	White	Don't Know	MI, USA	Junior	Zoology	None	Yes
Ximena	22	Other: Mexican	First-Generation	CDMX, MX	Senior	Environmental Studies and Sustainability	Sustainable Agriculture	No

Table 3. (cont'd)

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Generational Migration Status	Place of Birth	Student Classification	Major	Minor	First-Generation College Student Status
Alexandra	21	Two or More Races	Second-Generation	IL, USA	Senior	Social Relations Policy and Spanish	Science, Technology, and Environmental Public Policy and Peace and Justice Studies	No
Cristina	22	Other	Second-Generation	MI, USA	Senior	Political Theory and Constitutional Democracy	Chicano/Latino Studies	Yes