

EXITING POVERTY: EXPERIENCES OF RESILIENT
MEXICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

by

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A THESIS

IN

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY STUDIES

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of Texas Tech University in
Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for
the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

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December, 2006

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere appreciation and gratitude to all the people who have been present and offered their support and advice throughout this experience. Without them this would not have been possible.

I would like to thank my chair, Dr. Yvonne Caldera for most importantly encouraging me to obtain a Master's degree. Without her encouragement and belief in my ability I would not have pursued this educational goal. I am thankful for her guidance and instruction throughout the research process.

I would like to thank my committee members Dr. Miriam Mulsow and Dr. Elizabeth Sharp for giving their time and input. I am very thankful for their expertise, and patience throughout the process as well as their much needed encouragement.

I cannot express my gratitude and appreciation enough to the women in the study for their participation. Their openness, time, and feedback did not go unnoticed. I am truly honored I had the opportunity to speak with them and hear their stories. My life was touched by each one. I am amazed by the strength and courage they possess.

I wish to thank my family and friends for all their support. Their never-ending love is amazing. I am tremendously blessed to have them in my life. Most importantly, I am eternally grateful and amazed by the greatest love, my God. This was only done through His daily guidance, instruction, and inspiration. May this paper be a living testimony to what He has done in my life and the lives of these women.

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ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Mexican American women who self-identified that as children they grew up in poverty and as adults transitioned to the middle class. Through semi-structured interviews, the phenomenological experience of this transition was addressed. Not much is known about individuals who exit poverty and even less is known about Mexican American women who do so. This study thus expands the literature on resilience, ethnic minority groups, and Mexican American women. The present study explores individual, familial, and societal factors, operating and embedded, in the process of exiting poverty.

Six Mexican American women between the ages of thirty six and fifty one were interviewed about their experiences and interpretations of their exit from poverty into middle class life. The women were asked to respond to the question, “What was your experience getting out of poverty?”

The women’s experiences of exiting poverty were interpreted using an interpretive phenomenological analysis. Several themes emerged: the importance of education in making this transition, belief and reliance on God and faith, and teachings from parents/family. Additionally, the women talked about being determined, going against the norm, and making conscious decisions to change their lives. This study therefore illustrates that the women, despite hardships, made the journey from poverty into the middle class.

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The social phenomenon of poverty is a continued concern for the United States. Programs such as Medicaid, Head Start, and Food Stamps cost the government tax dollars every year. Unfortunately however, poverty is not merely facts and figures. Poverty affects the lives of humans, young and old, everyday. Children and families living in poverty are subject to a greater likelihood of abuse, poor health, exposure to violence, and lack of opportunities for the future (Seccombe, 2002). Census figures indicate certain ethnic groups are more likely to live in poverty than others. Among all Hispanic/Latinos (who may be of any race) in the United States, 23% live in poverty; African Americans, 25%; American Indians, 26%, all of which are twice the national average of 12% (U.S. Census Brief, 2003). This means those ethnic minority children and their families, and Hispanics specifically, are at greater risk than their mainstream counterparts. In spite of this increased risk, however, Hispanic individuals are exiting poverty. A book on the topical history of Mexican-origin people in the United States by Martinez (2001) highlights a quote that depicts the struggle through the eyes of a Mexican American:

Hard work on the northern frontier and deep within Mexico prepared us for back-breaking labor in the United States. But we did not anticipate the long and hard struggle for basic rights, for fair wages, and for just treatment. In the United States of America? In the land of justice and equality?
By jumping hoops, scaling walls, skirting barriers, embracing luck, seizing opportunity, and working like devils, a good number of us penetrated the middle class, and achieved status and material comfort. (p. 91)

This struggle can be overwhelming to anyone who considers its undertaking. How is it individuals and notably women exit a cycle of poverty and flourish? How do they cope with adverse conditions in such a remarkable way? The question addressed in this study is: What is the experience of women who exited poverty?

Before proceeding, the term poverty used in the title and throughout this study needs a caveat. I would like to bring the reader's attention to the concept of poverty. To stay true to the qualitative nature that the participants are experts on their own lives, women were interviewed upon their volition saying they lived in poverty as children. The term poverty however, can be subjective. Because of this subjectivity, clarification is needed as to what the word poverty means in this study and to these women. Notably, when the women were asked the question did you live in poverty growing up, all the women replied affirmatively that they identified with living in poverty. However, upon further investigation and through the screening process, factors that indicated more working class status were present in the lives of some of the women.

Several women grew up in families who owned their own house and/or car, emphasized saving, and lived in two parent homes in which the mother did not work outside the home; all are indicators of possible working class status rather than poverty. According to Seccombe's (2000) review on the literature published the last decade on poverty, working poor are less likely to own either their own house or a car. While some of the women discussed not owning a car or having their own home others did possess these growing up, despite all the women's identification with "living in poverty."

Because of the subjective quality of the term poverty, rather some of the women may have identified more with the robust term of “being poor.”

Several of the women’s experiences however, did indicate that they lived in poverty. The women discussed being on a free lunch program at school, getting food stamps or WIC, not having a car, growing a garden to have food, and bartering items to get groceries or diapers. Receiving these types of governmental services is more closely related to and indicates living below the poverty line. Therefore, although all the women identified with poverty, not all lived in poverty, but rather some were working class based on the indicators provided about their lives. Others, based on indicators provided about their lives, did live in poverty for at least a majority of their childhood and adolescent years. Therefore, it is important that the reader be mindful and understand the use of the term poverty in the current study was used to describe some women who were actually more working class. Thus, I used this term to stay true to the qualitative nature of the study and with how the women self-identified as how they grew up.

The term resilience needs clarification as well because it is used to refer to the women in this study. I do recognize the controversy in the usage of this term. Resilience is often misused to suggest a fixedness or constancy. Resilience however is not a fixed attribute but a process (Massey, Cameron, Ouellette, & Fine, 1998). Conceptualizing resilience as a process is most useful when describing its meaning and understanding its usage. These women through a process transitioned into the middle class. Resilience in the area of obtaining greater financial stability is used to indicate the well-being these women achieved through the transition. This process of resilience is what is referred to when using this term and referencing it to the Mexican American women in the study.

Patterson (2002) defines resilience as “the phenomenon of doing well in the face of adversity”; while according to Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000), resilience refers to a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity. Some researchers argue everyday life constitutes adversity and families that function well are resilient, while others argue adversity refers to events such as chronic poverty, abuse, and homelessness. The concept of “doing well” is also subjective as what constitutes “well” for one individual. For the purposes of this study, poverty constitutes adversity and suggests transitioning into the middle class is success and constitutes “doing well.” Therefore, resilience for this study is conceptualized using Patterson’s definition doing well in the face of adversity. Adversity more specifically is defined as growing up in poverty and doing well denotes exiting poverty.

Self of the Researcher

As phenomenological qualitative research requires the researcher to “bracket” preconceived notions and assumptions as well as be “transparent”, some background information is needed to give the reader a better understanding of my biases as the researcher and background. Experiences that led me to study this topic and reasons for interest in this type of study, as well as my personal background will be discussed.

I sat intrigued as I listened to a husband and wife speak passionately about their experiences growing up poor, their Mexican American culture, and how they had made a better life for their two year old daughter. I thought “what if everyone knew this couple’s strength, their resilience?” This is phenomenal, their story about becoming successful and making a different life for themselves. They desired this life, not only for themselves, but for their baby girl as well. This couple made living in the upper middle class a reality,

despite the circumstances they faced growing up, despite the discrimination and barriers experienced from being a minority. Their courage, perseverance, and insight made me want to know more. This interview with the Hispanic couple sparked my interest about the experiences of Mexican American women who grew up poor, overcame negative consequences and stereotypes, and transitioned into a life of economic middle class. Since that interview, I continued being interested in the phenomenon of exiting poverty. I wanted to understand what experiences women believed helped them thrive? Knowing more about these experiences and what assisted individuals to exit poverty could help others exit poverty. Understanding others' journey to success gives a better picture of what that journey may look like for others. It could also assist practitioners, counselors, and mentors of young children who live in poverty, by giving them a better understanding of this phenomenon. A better understanding translates into more effective, useful, and appropriate social service programs and resources to help children in poverty.

Throughout my graduate studies, especially in family theories, Glen Elder's Life Course Perspective seemed to support my conceptualization of individuals and families. Thinking about the phenomenon from a cultural lens and combining the Life Course Perspective, which also recognizes culture, resonated with me and with my personal experiences as well. Because I am half Mexican American, I am tied to the importance of culture as culture has influenced my life. I am drawn to this study, not only because I am Mexican American and share some similar cultural experiences, but also because I have seen this upward income mobility in my own family. In her first year of working, my sister has earned a higher yearly income than my mother who has been working for over 20 years. My mother raised three girls on a salary that was much less than sufficient and

struggled financially to meet our needs. I have seen both my sisters make this transition. These personal experiences, therefore, have made this study especially interesting to me.

These personal experiences have sculpted who I am as a researcher through creating an increased sensitivity to cultural components and the role they play in everyday lives, experiences, and perceptions. They have also fostered an awareness of the complexity in studying a phenomenon such as this. Furthermore, my personal experiences have driven the desire to explore this phenomenon qualitatively because of the depth and meaning I have witnessed during previous interviews with Mexican American families.

Purpose of the Study

Mexican Americans have experienced a history of conquest, discrimination, and economic hardship in the United States. This history of conquest and discrimination has placed Mexican Americans more at risk to live in poverty and therefore made it difficult to exit poverty. In spite of this, however, there is evidence of upward income mobility. An increasing number of Mexican Americans are entering the middle class sector (Martinez, 2001). Little is known, however, about the factors and experiences that contribute to this upward mobility. Therefore this study examined the unique experiences of Mexican American women who transitioned into the middle class from poverty.

Glen Elder's Life Course Perspective (LCP) and the research on resilience were used to understand what may aid Mexican American women in exiting poverty. LCP provides a framework to explore opportunity structures, transitions, and trajectories in the lives of Mexican American women who exited poverty and transitioned into the middle

class. Therefore, the LCP was used to guide the development of questions to be asked on the current study. Questions explored childhood/cultural experiences, meaningful support or guidance systems, and major events which occurred to aid the transition process. Specifically questions explored the areas of trajectories, and transitions in the lives of the Mexican American women.

A second approach to studying individuals exiting poverty is the process of resilience. The literature on resilience suggests there are three major factors that contribute to resilience: (1) individual characteristics (2) familial support (3) external support/resources. Most of the research on resilience, however does not take into account the “lived experiences” of the process of “resilience”. This is even more apparent when it comes to exiting poverty and transitioning into the middle class. A final factor that has been found to contribute to resilience in ethnic minorities is their strong identification with their ethnic group. Studies have found that having a strong sense of ethnic identity actually serves as a buffer for individuals experiencing hardships (Holleran & Waller 2003, Holleran & Jung 2005, Phinney & Kohatsu 1997, McCubbin, Futrell, & Thompson 1998).

Quantitative and qualitative research specifically studying Mexican Americans is lacking as well, compared to research on Non-Hispanic White groups. Even more scarce is the research examining the subjective experiences of women in this group. To examine experiences of Mexican American women a qualitative tradition has been chosen. More specifically, interpretive phenomenological analysis was used to discover the “essence” of the experience for this group. Interpretive phenomenology seeks to derive meaning from the phenomena of interest from the perspective of the participants. It also seeks to

give a voice to participants. This study therefore attempts to increase understanding about the experiences of Mexican American women when it pertains to upward income mobility.

The current study expands the literature on resilience, ethnic minority groups by examining Mexican American women's experiences of exiting poverty and transitioning into the middle class. It explores individual characteristics, familial support, and external support/resources, operating and embedded, in the process of resilience that includes opportunity structures, trajectories, and transitions.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The most widely used definition of poverty is derived from the federal government. The federal government defines poverty in terms of financial thresholds. Poverty estimates are based on the annual amount of cash income minimally required to support families of various sizes (National Poverty Center, 2004) For example, the poverty threshold as of 2004 is defined as having an income of \$19,157 or less for a family of two parents and two children, or \$9,827 or less for an individual (State of Student Aid and Higher Education in Texas, 2005).

Most of the research on poverty has focused on factors that contribute to being in poverty and consequences of living in poverty. Seccombe (2000), in a review of the literature on poverty, concludes that societal structures (including race), educational achievement, and changes in family size all affect the likelihood of an individual living in poverty. As is well known, there are negative consequences of living in poverty for families and children such as: unequal educational opportunities, fewer healthcare resources, and a greater probability of exposure to violence and abuse (Seccombe, 2002). Regardless of what places families in poverty, general findings suggest that poverty presents negative consequences for children and families throughout the life span. As mentioned previously poverty rates are higher among Hispanic/Latinos. Because of this discrepancy, this paper will focus on exits from poverty in Hispanics/Latinos¹, as they comprise the largest and fastest growing ethnic minority group in the United States.

¹ Terms will be used interchangeably

The term Hispanic, however constitutes a multitude of ethnicities. Hispanic refers to people whose origins are Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, South or Central American, or other Hispanic/Latino, regardless of race (U. S. Census Bureau, 2000). Because the term Hispanic is not monolithic, it is important that studies focus on the subgroups included in this general term. Mexican-origin individuals comprise approximately 66% of the U.S. Hispanic population (Current Population Survey, 2000). People of Mexican-origin rank lower than other Hispanic groups in several socioeconomic factors such as educational achievement and salary earnings (Current Population Survey, 2000). People of Mexican-origin are least likely of the largest Hispanic groups (Puerto Rican, Cuban) to obtain a high school diploma (51%; compared to Puerto Ricans, 64.3%; and Cubans, 73%). They are least likely to earn a Bachelor's or higher degree (7.9 %; Puerto Ricans, 13%; and Cubans, 23%). Mexican-origin people are more likely to have a lower paying job such as service occupations (24 %) and are also least likely of all Hispanic groups to have full-time, year round earnings of \$50,000 or more in 1999 (7.7%; Puerto Ricans, 13.1%; and Cubans, 17.9%). As a result, people of Mexican-origin are more likely to be in poverty, (24%) than other Hispanic groups (except for Puerto Ricans at 30% and Dominican Republic at 36%; Current Population Survey, 1998, 2000, 2004).

Hispanics are predominately found in two states, Texas and California. In Texas, Hispanics comprise 32% of the population with 77% being of Mexican-origin (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Demographic figures however, are provided for all Hispanics, not per Hispanic group. Given that Mexican Americans account for the vast majority of Hispanics that live in Texas, the figures relating to Hispanics therefore can be said to reflect primarily Mexican American statistics. In terms of poverty, 25.4 % of Hispanics in

Texas were living in poverty in 1999 compared to about 7.7 % of Non-Hispanic Whites (State of Student Aid and Higher Education in Texas, 2005). Poverty rates in Texas vary by county or region. The Texas Panhandle mirrors the state's rate with 26% of Hispanics living in poverty (State of Student Aid and Higher Education in Texas, 2005). Texas demographics and the Texas Panhandle specifically, therefore, create a unique opportunity to study Mexican Americans' experiences. This study, thus, will focus on Mexican Americans living in Lubbock, Texas, the largest city in the Panhandle. Of the Hispanic population in Lubbock County, 24% of persons live below the poverty threshold (City of Lubbock Trends Report, 2000). This geographic region therefore presents an accessible population suitable for the purposes of this study.

In spite of the high rates of Hispanics in poverty, there is evidence of a growing middle class (Martinez, 2001). It is this mobility that is underrepresented in studies of people in poverty. This study, thus will investigate upward income mobility in Mexican American women who grew up in poverty. Mexican Americans for the purpose of this study are defined as persons of Mexican descent born in the United States.

Rates of Economic Mobility Over-Time

In a topical history on Mexican-origin people Martinez, (2001) discussed this upward movement and addressed it in the context of their unique historical background:

It must be recognized that over the last few decades many upwardly mobile individuals have moved out of impoverished barrios and into mixed middle-class neighborhoods. Yet it must not be forgotten that the lingering effects of past racial discrimination continue to play a role in the segregation and marginality of minorities, including Mexicans and Mexican Americans. (p. 70)

Census data on Hispanics is not available for the years previous to 1970 because Hispanics were not being counted or included in the larger data samples. Previous to

1970, Hispanic ethnicity was determined only indirectly by examining surnames. Therefore tracking Hispanic trends by identification is a difficult task. The rates of Hispanic people living in poverty show a trend toward exiting poverty. In 1974, 23% of Hispanics lived in poverty (U.S. Census, 2006). In 1984 the poverty rate increased to 28% (U.S. Census, 2006). Ten years later, in 1994 poverty was at an all time high of 31% for Hispanics. However, between 1994 and 2000, poverty rates declined for Hispanics. In the year 2001, poverty rates for Hispanics were at a low of 21 %. In 2002 however, racial categories were redefined for the census and respondents could identify with one or more racial group; therefore, there is no way to compare current Hispanic figures with years previous to 2002.

Substantial changes have taken place for Mexican-origin peoples in the twentieth century. “In the early 1900’s most members of the group worked in low-paying jobs in agriculture, railroad maintenance, mining, construction, light manufacturing, and basic service occupations” (Martinez, 2001, p.123). “Since the 1940’s the number of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in well-paying, skilled blue-collar and professional and technical occupations has increased significantly while the proportion engaged in such dead-end occupations as farm labor has declined drastically” (Martinez, 2001, p.130). Economy influences and The Civil Rights Movement resulted in a larger portion of Mexicans obtaining better paying jobs. Affirmative Action programs from the 1960’s to the 1990’s also allowed greater opportunities for Mexican Americans. Through these programs and other movements there has been economic progress for Mexican Americans and social mobility in recent years.

Educational achievement after The Civil Rights Movement also increased.

“Between 1982 and 1993, the number of Hispanics attending institutions of higher learning increased from 519,000 to 989,000, a 91 % leap” (Martinez, 2001, p131).

Martinez (2001) also presents figures for Mexican economic progress.

The most significant development of all during the last generation has been the impressive growth of the middle class. Statistics on income distribution among Hispanics in general reflect trends in the Mexican origin community, since the group constitutes the largest cohort of that population. In 1972, 191,000 Hispanic households had an income of \$50,000 (in 1988 dollars). By 1988 that number had risen 234 percent, to \$638,000. In 1988 nearly 11 percent of all Hispanic households were classified as affluent compared to 7 percent in 1972. The proportion of affluent Hispanics still lags behind that of European Americans but surpassed the proportion for African Americans (10 percent). (p.131)

Mexican Americans

Mexican Americans have a unique history that includes experiences of conquest, immigration, and discrimination. People of Mexican-origin resided in land which was known as Mexico, and is now known as the United States. Much of the land, what is now the southwestern United States was transferred from Mexican ownership to American governed. The conquest of the land displaced many Mexican citizens and began stressed relations between the two countries. Remnants of continued discrimination from past historical events may make exiting poverty a challenge for Mexican Americans.

History

In 1848, at the end of the Mexican War, the United States gained a large piece of land once under Mexico. This area is now the Southwestern United States, and includes Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. Under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, as many as 100,000 Mexicans living in that region became residents of the U.S. territory (Baca Zinn & Pok, 2002). Unlike any other ethnic group, Mexican Americans today inhabit an area

that was once part of their native country (Marger, 2000). “By a single stroke of the pen, a large group of Mexican citizens right in their very own homes, found themselves smack in the middle of another country whose laws, political and social institutions, and fundamentally WASP traditions were alien to them” (Novas, 1998, p.78-79). This conquest began a history of displacement, discrimination, oppression as well as continued immigration from Mexico. In the last part of the 18th century and the early 19th century, after industrial development began in the United States, in the 1920’s many Mexican workers started migrating north for work at low wages on railroads and in agriculture.

The 1930’s and 40’s were difficult for Mexican Americans in the United States. During the 1930’s, a repatriation movement required Mexicans and Mexican Americans be sent to Mexico. This repatriation movement gathered great support during the Depression from Non-Hispanic Whites who considered Mexicans and Mexican Americans as foreigners and claimed they would take jobs from “real” Americans, at a time of such economic distress. Local government agencies began rounding up anyone who looked Mexican and sent them “home” (Novas, 1998, p. 95). They not only sent undocumented immigrants back “but they also sent first generation Mexican Americans to Mexico as well as those whose families had lived in the United States for centuries” (1998, p.95). Approximately half a million were deported in the 1930’s (Novas, 1998). Many of the deportees were from Texas, the state that had the largest Mexican American population.

Immigration restrictions eased when World War II created serious labor shortages. When the United States needed cheap labor, the repatriation was reversed and programs for temporary workers were created. The Braceros Program was implemented

two different times by the United States government to address this issue of worker scarcity. This program allowed immigrants from Mexico to work temporarily in the United States as seasonal laborers. Once the work was completed, they returned to Mexico. The Braceros Program was reinstated and in effect from 1942 until 1947 and then from 1948 to 1964, brought thousands of Mexican nationals to the United States as temporary workers (Novas, 1998). “However the bitter experience of being sent “home” when they were no longer needed and sent for again when cheap labor was in demand intensified the mistrust many Mexican American families had felt toward the Anglos for countless generations” (Novas, 1998, p. 96).

After the Braceros Program, between 1940’s and 50’s, the numbers of illegal immigrants is estimated to have been in the millions (Novas, 1998). About 400,000 Mexicans immigrated legally between the years of 1940 and the mid 1960’s alone (Martinez, 2001). Mexican immigration increased greatly in the 20th century. As a result of this migration, the United States grew substantially in people of Mexican-origin.

Culture

Traditional Mexican American values stem from what Greenfield (1994) calls cultures of interdependence or “collectivism”. The collectivistic culture emphasizes values such as family responsibility, respect for elders, and interdependence. A collectivistic culture is one that values mutual aid, closeness, and support among family members. Mexican Americans in general tend to adhere to the concept of *familism*, which includes a strong orientation and obligation to families (Baca Zinn & Pok, 2002). This interdependence and connection is demonstrated in living situations where grandparents live with their children and help with the care of grandchildren. The family unit includes

extended family and ties remain closely intertwined within nuclear families. Family networks include grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters, cousins and padrinos (godparents). Godparents and other family members are expected at celebrations such as birthday fiestas, communions, baptisms, and weddings. Mexican American culture consists of group orientation, strong membership with family, and a dependence on others within a hierarchical structure founded on respect and obedience.

Respect or *respeto* is highly valued and is a desirable trait in a collectivist culture. “Respect often meant that how one interacted with another should be guided by a sense of caring that is communicated through politeness” (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994, p. 65). Respect is highly desired quality in the children of Mexican-origin parents therefore they are reared with a strong sense of reverence and honor for elders. The Spanish language transmits cultural ideas and beliefs in the Mexican American culture. The importance of respect is evident throughout this language. The more formal “usted” form of the word “you” is used in the Spanish language to address adults, rather than the more informal “tu” that is used to address friends or young children. “Spanish is one of the things that fosters communication and the passing of cultural values and references” (Ramos, 2004, p.71). Therefore, the structure of the Spanish language is used to transmit the value of respect. The Spanish language provided a means to connect Mexican Americans to their culture of origin amidst a more prominent Western individualist culture. However, the Spanish language in West Texas was almost eradicated in one generation. During World War I, 20 states, Texas included, passed English only laws for school classrooms (Black, 1984). This discouraged speaking Spanish in school. Children were reprimanded by their teachers if Spanish was spoken in the classroom. Consequently, later generations of

Mexican Americans were not encouraged to speak Spanish and language transmission has decreased in subsequent generations (Skerry, 1993).

Unfortunately, however, Mexican American culture at times is in conflict with mainstream American individualistic culture, which emphasizes independence and self-reliance. Increased discrimination based on a cultural clash between “collectivism” of the Mexican people and “individualism” of Non-Hispanic Whites who live in the United States has affected the lives of Mexican Americans both historically and currently. This conflict, combined with their history, and culture may make Mexican American experiences different and unique from mainstream Non-Hispanic Whites' experiences of exiting poverty. Mexican Americans have to overcome stereotypes from not only Non-Hispanic Whites but also their own cultural groups to emerge into the middle class.

Experiences of Discrimination

Historical. The historical circumstances previously mentioned influence the discrimination Mexican Americans face living in a mostly Anglo society. Marger (2000) proposed that because of the “in between” minority status, Hispanics have not been subjected to the same prejudices as African American but neither have they been treated as European immigrant groups were. This status has made it more difficult for their discrimination to be acknowledged. Marger (2000) stated:

If there is a common theme that runs through the unique histories and experiences of several Hispanic groups in the United States, it is their intermediate ethnic status between Euro-American groups, on one hand, and African American, on the other. In several respects, Hispanics are an ethnic minority ‘in between’.” (p. 283)

Being “in between” however did not end negative stereotypes or discrimination but rather made it less noticeable. Despite the “in between” status, discrimination concerning Mexican Americans has been a part of the historical experiences of Mexican Americans.

Due to the methods in which Mexican Americans became a part of the United States, they are subject to prejudices and discrimination. Specifically in the Southwest, feelings of superiority by Non-Hispanic Whites have resulted in negative group images about Mexican Americans. In the past, there was a persistent and strong tendency for Non-Hispanic White mainstream culture to believe Mexicans were lazy, inferior, deserving of their subordinate status because they were a conquered people (Martinez, 2001). Starting in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, Hollywood portrayed negative images of Mexican Americans by depicting them as either criminals or intellectually inferior and dumb (Martinez, 2001). Racism was perpetuated by Hollywood and continued to influence Anglo- Mexican relations for years to come.

Historically, at one time, physical segregation was promoted between Non-Hispanic Whites and Mexican-origin people. The 1896 Plessy vs. Ferguson ruling by the U.S Supreme Court legalized segregation under the “separate but equal” concept. The ruling made it easier to label dark-skinned Mexicans as Indians or Blacks and therefore resulted in housing discrimination by land owners and real estate agents (Martinez, 2001). People of Mexican-origin were denied residence in Non-Hispanic White neighborhoods which often offered better housing (Martinez, 2001). Housing discrimination was commonplace and banks denied loans to those they believed to be of Mexican-origin (Martinez, 2001).

Beliefs constructed from past historical events influenced the treatment of Mexican-origin people. In the early 1900's, "Public facilities such as hotels, restaurants, theaters, and barber shops routinely banned Mexicans and Mexican Americans or channeled them to locales set aside for nonwhites, typically the least desirable sections in the buildings" (Martinez, 2001, p. 65). Public pools reserved specific times for Mexicans so after they swam, at the end of the day or week, the water in the pool could be changed. A survey conducted in the 1930's in the Southwest found that about 85% of schools were segregated either extremely or mildly (Martinez, 2001).

Black (1997) argues that in the years of 1910 and 1930 agrarian cultural values influenced schools for Mexican American children. Whites and Mexicans alike, for the purposes of survival during that time, held the agrarian value of children's labor contributions over educational achievement. However these beliefs continued to influence Mexican American schooling well after industrialization. They faced discrimination through poorer school facilities, less educated or trained teachers, extremely basic curriculum (which prohibited speaking Spanish), and less funding for their schools than White children (Black, 1997).

Discrimination in West Texas was no exception. Martinez (2001) depicted several incidences which clearly illustrate the prejudice and discrimination in the South Plains in the 1940's. "A sign in a Lubbock barber shop read, 'No Dogs Allowed, No Mexicans Allowed.' A restaurant owner in Levelland broke a bottle on the head of a young Chicano who wanted to buy cigarettes, and local officials in Big Spring and Lamesa refused to allow migrant cotton pickers the use of local toilet facilities" (p. 68). After the United States Congress passed Civil Rights legislation in the 1960's, discrimination began to

decrease (Martinez, 2001). Mexican American leaders fought for equal treatment and opportunities for Mexican Americans during the American Civil Rights Movements helped win right to fair pay and humane treatment (Novas, 1998). These historical acts of discrimination may continue to influence current dropout rates and low educational achievement for Mexican Americans which can possibly perpetuate a cycle of poverty and discrimination for this ethnic minority group.

Current Discrimination. Most of the research on discrimination of Mexican Americans falls under two themes: perceptions of discrimination and actual experienced discrimination. The perception theme is further subdivided into Mexican American's perceptions of discrimination and others' perceptions of Mexican Americans.

Mexican-origin people must overcome certain current stereotypes that are lingering effects of a history of discrimination. One myth that may perpetuate inequity despite research is the belief that low socioeconomic status Mexican Americans, do not value education. This myth, even though it has been refuted by research is used to explain why Mexican American children are performing poorly academically. Valencia and Black (2002) use three types of resources to refute this myth and disprove its validity. Through reviewing the historical evidence about Mexican Americans' fight for equal educational opportunities, examining the literature on parental involvement, and using a case study on transgenerational parental involvement Valencia and Black (2002) disprove this myth.

First, Valencia and Black (2002) presented the historical evidence that Mexican Americans have fought to close the gap in education through governmental legislation and the creation of advocacy organizations. Individual activists supported by fellow

Mexican Americans emerged to fight through political demonstrations as well. Lawsuits of various kinds pertaining to equal education for the Mexican American children and youth have been utilized as well to advocate change. Second, the literature on parental involvement in schools also suggests Latino parents have a strong desire for their children to achieve academically (Valencia & Black, 2002). In the review, Valencia and Black (2002) found several studies that support the presence of parental strategies in Latino families that support fostering education in the home. Parental behavior and practices by Mexican Americans demonstrated the emphasis and support on schooling in the home.

Third, in a case study exploring Mexican American transgenerational parental involvement, Valencia and Black (2002) interviewed both grandparents and parents in six Mexican American families. Interviews with ten adults were conducted from these families. Results indicate the importance of education was stressed in the home through expectations for school attendance and homework, as well as dialogue that included family stories about the importance of education. Interviews highlighted the value of schooling these Mexican American parents and grandparents placed on education. Although not generalizable to a larger population because of the small sample size, the study does support the concept that Mexican American families value education. This expression of value however was not necessarily evident in external support such as visiting the school or attending parental meetings but was evident through actions and verbal emphasis on education in the home setting (Valencia & Black, 2002).

Fennelly, Mulkeen, and Giusti (1995) conducted an exploratory study with young Latino adolescents to examine their views on racism and discrimination. Participants

lived in a small Pennsylvania city and were recruited from middle schools with a high percentage of Hispanics. Five focus groups were developed to interview both adolescents and parents separately. Three focus groups consisted of between five and ten middle school girls each. Two focus groups consisted of five and fifteen Puerto Rican mothers. Open-ended questions asked about their lives in general, adolescent activities and the adolescents relationships with peers and adults. Questions on discrimination and prejudice were introduced late in the interview if not previously mentioned. Four areas became evident in the discussion of their experience: (1) A perceived job ceiling for minorities, or the belief that a good education does not necessarily lead to success; (2) Unequal access to good education; (3) Lowered expectations for the academic performance of Latino youth on the part of teachers and administrators; (4) Cultural differences or communication styles which impede the educational achievement of minority youth. Youth reported experiencing discrimination by both their peers and teachers in their school experiences. Some Latino girls also talked about having to overcome negative stereotypes held by those around them.

Rodriguez, in the *Changing Race* (2000), details a personal story of a young Hispanic woman who attended a local community college. Victoria, as she is called in the story, excelled in academics and was involved in the schools' student government. Victoria "recalled the following experience that subsequently made her feel very ashamed: One day the dean patted her on the shoulder and told her, 'I am so glad you're not like the other Mexicans,' considering this a compliment" (2000, p.58). At first Victoria did not realize the extent of what this comment meant but upon later reflection found the comment angered her. Clearly the dean did not consider Mexicans to be smart

and academically orientated. Stereotypes like those of the dean's are examples of lowered expectations Hispanics must overcome to join the mainstream culture and live in middle class status.

Macias (2003) examined the experiences Mexican American professionals who were at least third generation born in the United States. Experiences in the workplace and participation in ethnic professional organizations was discussed through one to three hour face-to-face interviews with 25 individuals. The participants were from a California metro area and ranged in ages from 25 to 45. The majority of the participants had at least some college. Open ended interview questions focused on Mexican American integration and ethnicity in the workplace as well as voluntary participation in organizations at their place of employment. Results indicated Mexican American professionals sensed the social pressure to conform or assimilate into the mainstream culture. In the interviews an "ethnic consciousness" was evident and arose when the professionals noticed there was substantially less people of their own ethnic group in their working environment. This "ethnic consciousness" consisted of an increased awareness of their own ethnicity resulting from the demographic characteristics of being unique in terms of ethnicity. For some participants this unequal representation of ethnic minorities in the professional workplace seemed to be an indicator of structural inequality in society (Macias, 2003). Furthermore, ethnic professional organizations were important in providing a place for these individuals to network and meet other ethnic minorities because they were typically in a work environment with few individuals like themselves (Macias, 2003).

Mexican Americans encounter stereotypes and discrimination pertaining to not only education, but also, employment (Telles & Murguia, 1990; Espino & Franz, 2002;

Kasschau, 2001). Kasschau's (2001) found perceived discrimination in a probability sample of 398 Black, 373 Mexican American, and 373 White residents of Los Angeles County, ages 45-75 years. In each ethnic minority subsample a majority, 60% to 88%, acknowledged race and age discrimination as common today. Findings indicate that of those ethnic subsamples, 20%-45%, believed race or age discrimination were experienced by their friends and acquaintances. Finally, personal experience of race or age discrimination emerged within each group, 8%-24%. Mexican Americans (16%) were moderately more likely to report race discrimination than Whites (8%), but were less likely than Blacks (34%) to report race discrimination (Kasschau, 2001).

Actual Discrimination. Kanter and Frakiewicz (1981) explored teacher's attitudes toward Mexican American students. Teachers from several different Houston, Texas area schools and districts completed an attitude inventory measuring attitudes toward Mexican American students regarding educational opportunity and school practices. Although the teachers expressed the importance of creating a culturally sensitive learning environment and encouraging ethnic pride, pessimistic attitudes towards Mexican students emerged. Kanter and Frakiewicz suggested that teachers disbelieved that Mexican American children could achieve a level as high as the majority culture children. Kanter and Frakiewicz further stated "there seems to be apathy on the part of the teachers toward exhibiting an expectancy of achievement growth in Mexican American students" (1981, p.82). The findings demonstrate that teachers, although verbally recognize the importance of equal education and equal access admitted that some actions both overt and implied, toward Mexican American students are discriminatory. In a review of the research on Mexican American students in public schools, Calabrese and Barton (1995) discuss some

issues around low performance and acculturation practices used by teachers whose ethnicity is more frequently Non-Hispanic White. They examined one aspect of this issue, the conflict between Mexican American males and Non-Hispanic White teachers and examined discipline records of ten school districts in the southwest. Findings indicate Mexican American males are disciplined almost five times more than Mexican American females. Calabrese and Barton (1995) suggest that cultural differences and the inability to communicate through these differences may play a role in the performance of Mexican American youth in school. They also propose that teachers and administrators who run schools where there is a high percentage of Mexican American students “operate these schools as if Mexican American students are less than academically talented, prone to violence, and have limited vision as to future vocational goals” (Calabrese & Barton, 1995, p.115).

Discrimination also exists based on phenotypic differences as well. Telles and Murguía (1990) identify discrimination present in society, and proposed discrimination affects income earnings among Mexican Americans, most specifically dark-skinned Mexican Americans. They used the National Chicano Survey conducted in 1979, and found that darker skinned Mexican Americans have lower income earnings than their medium to light skinned counterparts. The sample consisted of 253 men of Mexican ancestry. Phenotypic skin tone was measured by self-reported questions about skin tone. The variable ranged from a 1-light/European to 5-dark/Native American. Self reports of a middle score such as a three were classified as medium. After controlling for human capital and other variables known to affect income, the remaining variance was due to greater labor market discrimination toward the darker skinned Mexican origin people.

Telles and Murguia (1990) concluded “dark and native American- looking individuals of Mexican descent suffer significantly greater earnings disadvantages than their lighter and more European-looking counterparts primarily because of labor marker discrimination” (p. 694).

Espino and Franz (2002) added to the work of Telles and Murguia by reexamining the issue of phenotypic discrimination against Mexican in the U.S. labor market using a newer data set collected between 1989 and 1990. The 1990 Latino National Political Survey was used and complimented with the composite Occupational Prestige Ratings by Hauser and Warren (1996). Skin tone in this study was measured by interviewer observation at a face-to-face interview with the participants using a 5 point scale with 1 as “very dark” to 5 as “very light”. Their findings validate previous studies that dark skinned Latinos continue to face more discrimination in the labor market than Latinos of lighter skin despite the advances in attempting to create a more equal working environment.

Discrimination both experienced, perceived, and societal makes the transition of exiting poverty a unique experience for Mexican Americans. Race discrimination faced by Mexican Americans has placed obstacles and barriers in exiting poverty and becoming part of the middle class in the United States. It is notable that some Mexican American women despite hardships, stereotypes, and discrimination both historically and currently, are nonetheless exiting poverty and becoming middle class.

Life Course Perspective

In order to theoretically frame this study, Mexican American women’s transition from poverty to middle class, I used Glen Elder’s Life Course Perspective (LCP). Elder

(1994) proposed, the LCP, and focused on trajectories and transitions in the life course. Specifically, Elder's LCP focused on how social change influences family structure and function and how changes in families influence the life course of individuals (Goldhaber, 2000). There are four dominant principles of the LCP: (1) the interplay of individual lives and *historical time*, (2) the *timing of lives*, (3) linked or *interdependent lives*, and (4) *human agency in choice making* (Elder, 1998).

Glen Elder's LCP includes elements of context, embeddedness, and choice making in life transitions. He further stresses societal forces that shape the life course and its developmental consequences (Elder, 1994). These central principles were developed from Elder's study on a group of men from Oakland and Berkeley, California. "These contrasting situations, deprived and non deprived, established an 'experiment in nature' with empirical findings that affirm the principle (1) *historical time* and place: that the life course of individuals is embedded in and shaped by the historical times and places they experience over their life time" (Elder, 1998, p. 3). Elder compared the experiences of the Oakland cohort to the experiences of the Berkeley cohort and found the life patterns were different for the two cohorts. The Oakland cohort born between 1908 and 1910, experienced middle class as children in the 1920's, were in their adolescence during the Great Depression, and left home after the worst years of the Depression had passed. But for the Berkeley cohort the Great Depression was experienced in their early childhood years, and in their adolescence experienced going home alone because their parents worked during World War II. Elder found the Berkeley men were more adversely affected by the Great Depression than the Oakland cohort. The Berkeley cohort experienced the economic hardship as young children, a critical time in their development. Due to the

differences in the cohort experiences, Elder concluded that historical time is critical when describing development through the life span.

Making a transition into middle class life in the 1930's is different from that transition in the 21st century. In addition, transitioning out of poverty in one area of the country might be different in another area of the country. Being of Mexican-origin in the 1930's and living during times that included repatriation, various changes in immigration laws, and increased discrimination would likely make it more difficult to make a transition out of poverty into the middle class. Specifically for a woman when gender and household roles were more traditional and defined, a Mexican American woman living in the United States would have little chance of making the transition out of poverty on her own. Roles of housewife and mother were the norm for woman in the early 1900's. In contrast being a Mexican American woman in today's society is different and has less traditional roles tied to it since the years of both the Civil Rights Movements and the feminist movement. This evolution in societal expectations and norms has opened up opportunities for women in more recent years. The less traditional role for women to be able to go to college, have a career, and have children has broadened opportunities for women to obtain the resources to make a higher income and exit poverty in ways other than getting married. What would not have been commonplace in the years previous to the feminist and civil rights movements is now possible and as a result traditional female roles have changed as society has changed (McGoldrick, 1999). Therefore, not only has women's roles in society changed but discrimination and the barriers it created has also changed. These historical shifts create a context where women can now get an education and receive higher pay which could make the transition different and more possible for a

Mexican American woman in the 21st century than a Mexican American woman in the 1930's.

Elder's second principle, "(2) *timing in lives* states that: the developmental impact of a succession of life transitions or events is contingent on when they occur in a person's life" (Elder, 1998, p.3). On-time or off-time transitions from expectations from society can occur. Family event sequences, as just one aspect of social time, are linked to these age markers, which provide the individual with a measure for deciding whether she or he is "on" or "off time" in marrying, becoming a parent, and seeing children leave the nuclear family (Hill, Nelson, Aldous, Carlson, & MacDonald, 1970). Particular age norms and event sequences defined by societal norms are considered either appropriate or inappropriate. Furthermore, these events are influential on other members who are interconnected. Whether relatively early or late, the timing of life transitions has long-term consequences to subsequent transitions (Elder, 1998). For example, the Berkeley and the Oakland cohorts in Elder's study, experienced a difference in the order and timing events such as marriage, childbearing, and leaving home. Differences between the two cohorts pertained to early marriage versus late marriage, and with early childbearing versus late childbearing. Early marriage and early childbearing prompted circumstances such as financial difficulties and lost opportunities for educational attainment. These subsequent transitions may connect and foster the cycle of poverty. Because of the influence from timing of past transitions, future transitions may be either more successful or more detrimental.

This second principle could relate to Mexican American women in recognizing the importance of timing for two areas, marriage and children. Family orientation is very

important to the Mexican American culture and therefore postponing marriage and childbearing may be non-normative because it is in contrast to a more traditional role of starting a family as a woman. When women marry it can mark a transitional point in the life course, but more specifically it can mark the starting of a family. Beginning a family and childbearing as a teenage or early for young women can result in loss of work experience, wages, and education (Byrne, Myers, & King, 1991). This choice of timing for marriage and childbearing for women can either place them in a position to continue in poverty or exit poverty. As is well-known those most likely to live in poverty are single-parent ethnic minority mothers. Single-parenthood combined with lower levels of education results in less likelihood an individual will be able to make the transition. That is why for Mexican American women postponing marriage and childbearing into later years after obtaining an education and a career can aid in the exit from poverty. Timing therefore is crucial in the process of making this transition for Mexican American women.

Elder's third underlying principle also resulted from his studies on the "Children of the Great Depression". Elder's principle of (3) *linked lives* states that: "lives are lived interdependently and social and historical influences are expressed through a network of shared relationships" (Elder, 1998, p. 4). He found that historical events and individual experiences are connected through the family and the "linked" fates of its members (Elder, 1998). The misfortune of one member of a family is shared through the relationships with other members. This concept can be applicable to Mexican American lives through their culture of collectivism and family unity. For example, Elder found that Depression hardship tended to increase the explosiveness of fathers who were inclined

toward irritability. The more irritable and explosive they became, the more it affected their parenting and marriage relationships. Therefore, successive generations also felt the effects of the Great Depression as their parents did.

The Mexican American values and beliefs of familism and collectivism mold the experiences of its people by influencing individual decision making processes. Because decisions are constructed from one's beliefs and values, and beliefs and values are couched in culture; culture therefore influences life's decisions. Therefore if a Mexican American woman is operating from the culture who values familism, respect and obedience to her parents and family would be most important. It may be more difficult to go away to college or pursue personal goals because it would mean less time and support to the family. Finding a way to integrate the two would be necessary. Thus, the lives of Mexican American women are linked to their family members because choices are constructed from the context of value and importance of family obligation and closeness.

A model from economics literature supports Elder's concept of linked and interdependent lives. The *resources model* proposed by Becker (1981, 1993) suggests lack of material resources is a determinant of individuals continuing in poverty. Parents in poverty have little time, and money, spend more time working at low wage jobs and have less energy than middle or upper income parents do to devote to their children. Increased stress and time at work leave parents with fewer resources to contribute to their child's human capital (schooling). Many times these individuals, because of low wage earnings, live in disadvantaged neighborhoods that have fewer resources to offer children in terms of educational opportunities. Further, Loury (1981) and Massey (1990) argue living in disadvantaged neighborhoods is a greater risk for ethnic minority children

because of discrimination and the lack of neighborhood options available to them compared to non-ethnic-minorities. The resources model contends living in low income, high risk neighborhoods in turn offers few opportunities to exit poverty. Thus the children are highly likely to continue in poverty because of the low wages of their parents. This model provides an example of Elder's concept of linked, interdependent lives where the outcomes of the children are influenced and intertwined with the lives of their parents.

The literature on intergenerational income mobility focuses on familial characteristics and community backgrounds. In a review of the literature by Israel (1998), four factors that influence the likelihood a youth will escape poverty were discussed. Family background variable, parents' educational attainment influences children's education attainment which in turn influences future income mobility. In addition to a literature review, Israel conducted a secondary analysis on data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY). Minority youth and disadvantaged White youth were over sampled to obtain a relatively large sample of poor youth. Results indicated that youth from married couple families and youth who had mothers with at least 12 years of schooling fared significantly better than youth from female-headed households and youth with mothers who dropped out of school (Israel, 1998). However, father's educational attainment did not have significant effects. Findings also suggest that it is the condition of poverty rather than reliance on welfare that inhibits intergenerational movements out of poverty (Israel, 1998). Lives of family members are therefore linked in many ways and some of these influence future income earnings.

Last, Elder's fourth principle is the concept of *human agency* in choice making. "*Human agency* states that individuals construct their own life course through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of the history and social circumstances" (Elder, 1998, p.4). "The Great Depression brings to mind 'a world out of control,' and yet families often worked out successful adaptations in these circumstances" (Elder, 1998, p.4). "Parents and children made choices and some engaged in effective adaptations within available options and constraints" (Elder, 1998, p.4). This concept of human agency is useful to consider when using the LCP to explain resilience as exits from poverty. Individuals that demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity make positive choices within the constraints of their social circumstances. This kind of human agency in choice making can alter the life course trajectory.

This principle of human agency can change the lives of Mexican American women. They may notice racism or discrimination but decide that those circumstances will not discourage or stop them from achieving a goal. These women may also choose to go to college but take what is readily available such as the local community college or local university. They may also pursue scholarships or community organizations to help them financially go to school. Mexican American women trying to exit poverty may also alter their life course by choosing to take precautions to not have children as a teenager or before marriage because of the economic implications and strains. Making these types of decisions, possessing human agency during transition points that can have consequences for the remainder of their lives can alter the life course onto a path that is more likely to result in higher wage earnings and therefore an increase in socioeconomic status.

Life Course Perspective Concepts

Elder's LCP includes key concepts to discuss the life course. These concepts are important to note when using the LCP, as they often connect and overlap in the life course. First, *trajectories* are pathways an individual travels. Laub and Sampson (1998), refer to trajectories as a pathway or line of development over the life span such as work life, parenthood, and criminal behavior (p. 227). They can be long term behavior patterns that consist of transitions or turning points (Laub & Sampson, 1998). Turning points or transitions influence trajectories. When an individual is born and begins school, society and external factors may influence the trajectory of that individual. Living in a neighborhood dominated by drugs and high drop out rates may also increase the likelihood that an individual could continue on a trajectory or path to drop out of school, be involved in drugs, and continue in poverty. In contrast, for example living in a middle class neighborhood, attending a private school with high teacher and parental involvement places an individual onto a life course trajectory that more likely to lead to a higher socioeconomic status because of differing opportunities present.

Secondly, *turning points or transitions* are times or events that alter the life course causing an individual's life to move in a different developmental pathway or trajectory (Clausen, 1998). In essence transitions are turning points that alter trajectories. The term transition refers to changes in the lives of individuals that are in accordance with the socially constructed life course (Dewilde, 2003). In other words, a transition may be defined as a socially accepted switch or change between two life stages. For example, transitions include marriage, parenthood, and entering college. These transitions can be off-time or on-time. When an individual encounters a transition or turning point, the life trajectory could be altered and cause the individual to move onto a different

developmental path. Rutter (1989) contends "...work careers, marriage, and parenting, all provide further possible turning points whereby 'success' in the form of personal relationships or task accomplishment may change the life course onto a more adaptive trajectory (p. 208). If an individual born into poverty and in a low socioeconomic status neighborhood, despite obstacles can complete college, the transition of entering college changes the trajectory of their life course. Completion of college can place them on a course to exit the poverty they once lived.

Clausen (1998) stated that often when asking about turning points and what changed to make their lives different than before, respondents refer to attitudinal changes or transformations in personal development or feelings rather than a situational event or occurrence. Shifts in perceptions on life and personal viewpoints are mentioned as turning points for individuals. Therefore, Elder's concept of turning points was used to investigate women's perceptions around their transition from poverty to the middle class. Questions surrounding this type of change in the life course were used to address altering perceptions and viewpoints on their situations growing up as children in poverty.

The concept of *human agency* or individual goal orientation Giele and Elder (1998) define as "any dynamic system that persists through time and adapts its behavior to the environment to meet its needs (p.10). They also contend the goals of an individual result in active decision making processes within the opportunities available (Giele & Elder, 1998). These goals may center on being economically secure. Human agency is connected with on-time and off-time transitions. Choices made as these transitions can affect life trajectories, by changing the life course of an individual toward a path of affluence or a path of poverty and economic hardship. Elder uses an example of teenage

pregnancy to illustrate the role choice-making has on transitions which in turn influence trajectories. Elder, (1998) in his work on life course as developmental theory explains this further:

In fact, the transition to motherhood in adolescence can be thought of as a *multiphasic* process in which each phase is linked to a choice point. Young girls may choose to engage in premarital sex or not, or to use contraception or not, to seek an abortion or not, and to marry the father or not. Only a handful of options lead to a birth out of wedlock. (p. 6)

The concept of human agency was used to guide questions surrounding choice points women made towards exiting poverty. It was used to examine the active roles the women took in creating their futures by asking about steps they took or goals they had to reach their current economic status. Questions therefore also took into consideration the context in which these goals and choices were made and sources of support they used during these choice points to be able to accomplish those goals.

There are three types of factors identified from the research on resilience that can positively aid individuals during transition points when there has previously been a life of hardship. The three categories of protective factors are places of strength or support individuals use that can foster positive decision making at transitional points in the life course. Therefore the following is a review of the literature on resilience.

Resilience

Empirical work focusing specifically on examining women who succeed in exiting poverty and attaining middle class status is scarce; there are studies however, addressing factors that foster resilience in individuals who face multiple adverse circumstances. Risk factors threaten an individual's well being, while protective factors are those factors that help lessen the negative consequences of a situation. Protective

factors therefore help to alleviate the consequences of an adverse situation such as poverty, while risk factors associated with poverty create negative consequences for those living in it. The empirical research on resilience has identified three categories of protective factors that foster resilience: (1) *individual characteristics* (2) *familial support* (3) and *external support and resources*. These three areas emerge frequently throughout both the quantitative and qualitative literature on resilience and provide a lens with which to view individuals who exit poverty.

Because of the extensive literature on resilience the following review will include only quantitative and qualitative studies that explore experiences of individuals who along with other multiple risk factors, faced poverty. The quantitative studies that will be highlighted rely on large sample sizes and on longitudinal design. The large sample size provides greater reliability in qualitative research and the longitudinal design was chosen because of the nature of life course studies. The life course spans over a length of time and therefore studies possessing these qualities were chosen. Because the current study is qualitative in nature, more emphasis will be provided to articles focusing on resilience using a qualitative design. The qualitative studies that were chosen examine resilient individuals who overcame adverse situations including poverty. Studies examining ethnic minority groups, and Hispanics in particular, will also be highlighted in order to address cultural influences on resilience.

Individual Characteristics

There is evidence that individuals who possess certain personality characteristics are able to overcome adverse circumstances. In a review of the literature on resilience,

Seccombe (2002) concluded that certain personality traits such as intelligence, positive self-concept, sociability, and humor contribute to resiliency. Thus individuals who are smart, who are comfortable with who they are, who get along with others and who use humor in difficult situations are more likely to be resilient and surpass adversity than those who do not possess these personal characteristics (Brosky, 1999; Herbert, 1996; Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005; Strother, 2003; Thompson, 1998; Werner, 1989; Werner & Smith, 1992; Williams, Lindsey, Kurtz, & Jarvis, 2001). In the Kauai Longitudinal Study, (Werner 1989; Werner & Smith, 1992), followed a sample that included people of Asian, Pacific Islander, and European descent. Poverty, divorce, mental illness, or parental alcoholism were some stressful life conditions the individuals experienced, yet one out of three of the high risk individuals grew into competent adults who according to Werner and Smith (1992), “loved well, worked well, played well, and expected well” (p.192). Werner concluded that differences between the children who grew to be successful adults and those in the sample who did not, was due in part to individual characteristics such as: average intelligence and robustness, vigor, and an active sociable temperament, dispositions that elicit positive responses from family members and strangers (Werner & Smith, 1992).

Thompson (1998) utilized both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to examine predictors of resilience in African American adults. Qualitative interviews were conducted with six women and six men who all labeled themselves as African American except for two who labeled themselves biracial. These African American adults were currently, middle or upper class citizens, who labeled themselves as resilient. One of the reoccurring themes from the qualitative data was that the participants noted they had

personality characteristics which differentiated them from their siblings and made them successful. The quantitative section of the study included young adults who as adolescents and young adults faced risk factors such as parental death and incarceration, physical abuse, racism, discrimination, and poverty. Professors at two historically Black colleges were contacted to gain access to college students for the study. A four page questionnaire was given to the college students, mostly juniors and seniors, through their professors at these two universities. Resilience was measured by participant's perceptions of their own resilience and what they perceived others thought of their resilience. Quantitative results suggest a combination of coping strategies were used. Some of these include prayer, hard work, studying hard, dreaming of a better life, and relying on a role model which will be discussed in later sections of the paper.

Hines, Merdinger, and Wyatt (2005) studied foster youth who experienced academic success and found all fourteen participants were assertive in protecting themselves, were independent and self-sufficient. Herbert (1996) in an ethnographic case study examined the sources of resilience for three young men who lived in an inner city neighborhood. They were identified as high achievers in their high schools by their teachers, through school records, and awards and honors received. Living in an urban environment proved to be a challenge, however, the young Latino men possessed certain characteristics and insight into their own lives. All three young men Orlando, Lucio, and Carlos possessed characteristics that aided them in their success at school. Lucio's resilience came from his strong belief in himself. He had become comfortable in himself and his individuality and realized early in his life his peer group could influence his life. He learned early on to think ahead to what the consequences of his actions would be,

both good and bad and was able to avoid risky behaviors. Carlos came to a conscious choice to be successful and focused on his own abilities. He focused on doing well academically and recognized he had the ability to be successful if he concentrated not on the progress of others but on accomplishing his own goals.

Other individual characteristics reported for those who were resilient included possessing qualities such as determination, motivation, and setting life goals. These types of characteristics allowed individuals to cope with and overcome negative circumstances in their environments. Williams, Lindsey, Kurtz, and Jarvis, (2001) used a multiple case study to explore factors that contributed to resilience in homeless, young runaway women. These young women exited this living condition despite the lack of apparent protective factors present. Five cases were selected from a larger previous study of 22 former runaway and homeless youth .The women, ages 18 to 25, previously resided in a shelter or alternative home during their adolescence, and currently had exited those living conditions for at least 2 years. Three of the women are Caucasian and two are African American. All the women experienced a traumatic event ranging from poverty, sexual abuse to psychiatric hospitalization. The women participated in in-depth interviews about their homelessness experiences. Four themes emerged from their dialogue. The themes included determination, meaning and purpose in life, self-care and readiness to accept help (Williams, et al. 2001). Williams et al. (2001) concluded from interviews with homeless runaway women that determination and self care played an important role in their success. These individual characteristics played an important role in the women's exit from homelessness and the previous instable lifestyle.

Similarly Hines, Merdinger, and Wyatt (2005), examined academic success in a diverse sample of foster youth, and found thirteen of the fourteen participants were goal oriented, determined, and tenacious and had goals to exceed academically. Thompson (1998) noted as stated briefly previously, that having a strong work ethic was a strong predictor of resilience for African American individuals. Studying hard in school was an effective coping mechanism as well as having a strong work ethic and dreaming of having a better life. Werner & Smith (1992) noted the resilient adults in their study exhibited personal competence and determination as well. In addition, Herbert (1996) concluded all three young Latino men who did well academically in school and were high achievers had aspirations and future goals as a part of their lives.

In a study most closely related to the current study, Strother (2003) used a Grounded Theory methodology. Strother (2003) examined the process by which women, who previously lived on welfare, achieved economic viability. Interviews were conducted with 19 AFDC-dependant (Aid to Families with Dependant Children) female heads of household who received at least five years of public assistance. Fifteen of the women were Caucasian while four were African American. All 19 had at least a high school diploma. Education levels for the women varied: three had some college, seven held two-year degrees, two had four year degrees, two had completed courses towards a master's degree, and two had master's degrees and doctorates. However education did not guarantee staying off welfare. Some of the women who had some college became welfare recipients during that time. Those with Bachelor's degrees had become welfare dependant because of the difficulty in finding employment.

The study investigated the actions and attitudes of mothers who not only “got off welfare” but were able to exit poverty as well (Strother, 2003). In this qualitative study all the women exited welfare assistance and rose to a status of “greater than just above” the poverty level. Individual characteristics in the form of a driving force emerged as a determinant of their success. The women focused on broader life goals similar to those of the economic mainstream, not a goal of merely exiting welfare. “All of the women in the study had such an area of driving force in which they persevered despite obstacles, using the ability to plan and set incremental goals leading to their objective and doing what is necessary to achieve those goals” (Strother, 2003, p. 106). They possessed a “take it where you find it” mentality. They also possessed efficient planning skills in terms of saving and budgeting the little money they had. The women also demonstrated the concept of human agency as they utilized resources in the community. They received information from bulletins, flyers, and newspapers. The women were willing to pursue opportunities when they arose. The driving force was used during difficult times to accomplish the goals set by the women. The women planned, even their welfare acceptance. Some discussed the decision to remain on AFDC as a part of larger life goal of completing an educational goal or career objective.

Strother’s (2003) research on women exiting welfare to achieve economic stability is most closely related to the current study on Mexican American women exiting poverty. Goal orientation, planning, and decision making were identified as determinant of success for the women. Although the concept of human agency was not addressed in connection to the women in Strother’s research, its presence is evident. The women used the opportunities available in the constraints of their environment and actually used

welfare assistance as a means to a larger life goals and objectives. Likewise human agency, decision making, and goal orientation was a part of the current study to examine how Mexican American women used these characteristics to exit poverty and achieve middle class status.

In addition to personality traits other individual characteristics emerged that allowed individuals to be resilient. Relying on religion/faith or prayer created a source of strength for individuals (Herbert, 1996; Thompson, 1998; Werner & Smith, 1992; Williams et al., 2001). In a case study focusing on Latino youth, Herbert (1996) reported that for one young man the source of resilience came from strong religious beliefs. The young Latino man reported his religious convictions and faith was his strength. Similarly, Thompson (1998) reported that the use of prayer was the most frequently used coping strategy; for individuals who experienced problems in their childhood and adolescent years. Werner and Smith (1992) also report resilient individuals in their study relied on faith and prayer. In the study by Williams et al. (2001), examining resilience in homeless runaway women spirituality was also mentioned. The women expressed a belief in a higher power that had an impact on their lives. Connection to a higher purpose and meaning in life, expressed through their spirituality, encouraged the young women and provided a sense of comfort and strength. It seems therefore, believing in some sort of higher power, faith, prayer, religion, or spirituality contributed to the resilience of individuals faced with poverty and other multiple risk factors.

In sum, personality and individual characteristics are found to contribute to the resilience of individual. These characteristics can range from personality traits such as temperament and intelligence to faith, determination, and goal setting. These

characteristics assisted in the success or resilience of individuals who faced multiple risk factors including poverty. Not only do individual characteristics play a role in resilience but the combination of these and familial social support, aid in doing well in the face of adversity.

Familial Support

Second, the *positive support families* provide to individuals plays a role in resilience (Conger and Conger, 2002; Herbert, 1996; Hines et al., 2005; Werner & Smith, 1992; Williams et al., 2001). Garnezy (1991), concluded families demonstrating warmth and cohesiveness helped individuals cope with stressful life situations. Conger and Conger (2002) conducted a study to explore how familial support promotes resilience in adolescents going through adverse transitions. Findings concluded positive parental support served as an important mechanism to help the cohort of adolescence adapt successfully to economic stress in the family. Werner & Smith (1992) found that children who grew to be successful adults had affectional ties with parent substitutes such as grandparents and older siblings, who encouraged trust, autonomy, and initiative. Lucio, Orlando and Carlos, three young Latino men in a case study by Herbert (1996) all expressed the importance of family in their lives. In another multiple case study, factors that contributed to resilience in homeless, young runaway women found the women received and accepted help from family members as well as other in the community (Williams et al., 2001). Hines et al. (2005) suggest that while the former foster youth lacked connections with their family of origin they still expressed the importance of extended family members. The youth noted helpful adults or parental substitutes such as aunts, or foster parents as helpful as well as having good friends.

In sum, familial support influenced the resilience of individuals who faced a multitude of risk factors. Positive parental support as well as extended family members served as important mechanisms to help individuals adapt successfully to the adverse conditions they faced. Not only does a combination of individual characteristics and familial support play a role in resilience for individuals, external support and resources aid in this process.

External Support/Resources

Third, *external support and resources* provide life chances or opportunities, and aid in developing resilience when utilized by individuals. Sources of external support such as a church or a kindly concerned teacher help individuals cope (Garmezy, 1991). Individuals such as a coach or a mentor are also external sources of support. For two of the young Latino men in Herbert's (1996) case study, individuals in their school served as sources of support. For Lucio, a coach served as support and for Carlos a school counselor. Thompson's (1998) study with African Americans also found most participants had relied on a role model present at some point in their lives that helped in their resilience.

An after school program, and extracurricular activities and sports organizations serve as external resources in the community that also foster resilience. Herbert (1996) notes all three young Latino youth were involved and participated in extracurricular activities in their schools. Werner and Smith (1992) concluded that successful resilient adults had an external support system that included church, youth groups, or school. These community organizations not only encouraged their well-being but gave the individuals a feeling of unity and consistency. Former foster youth expressed the

importance of external sources of support (Hines et al., 2005). All participants noted sources in the community such as the foster care system and the educational system as positive alternatives to their lives and recognized these community sources as giving them new safe outlets and opportunities for their lives.

There is evidence that external and community sources of support have positive influences on people who accept, seek, and utilize those sources. External support and resources are shown to be most helpful and influential when not only are they accessible and available but when they are sought after, accepted, and pursued by individuals in need. Werner (2001) concluded that there is an “extraordinary importance of the (early) childhood years in laying the foundation for resilience, and second, the possibilities for recovery at later life stages in development were available to most individuals who seized the opportunities offered to them by naturally occurring support systems in the community” (p.172). Therefore, it is important to note external support and resources were useful in fostering resilience for individuals when individuals pursued, utilized, and took advantage of the resources offered. Merely the existence of resources was not sufficient enough, but the presence of the resources in conjunction with an individual’s motivation and drive to utilize the resources allowed community resources to aid in resilience. Strother’s (2003), study found the welfare dependant women who exited the system effectively utilized resources in their community and social supports. They pursued the opportunities presented to them; they received information from bulletins, flyers, newspapers. The women were willing to pursue opportunities when they arose. Finally, not all their acquaintances lived in poverty. The women were not just exposed to other welfare recipients or people in poverty, but they also knew others who had more

resources. To achieve economic viability, the women demonstrated help seeking behaviors and pursued the opportunities present in their communities.

Readiness to accept help from the community resources served as a protective factor for young homeless women (Williams, et al. 2001). The women received and accepted help from people in the community. Accepting help from others included several sub themes: readiness for help, quality of professional helpers, and developing a sense of trust in these relationships. They accepted help from friends and professionals and were able to find comfort and guidance from these individuals that allowed them to build a sense of trust. Ibanez, Buck, Khatchikian and Norris (2004) used qualitative analysis to examine coping strategies among Mexican disaster survivors. The coping mechanism of seeking support emerged as one of the reoccurring themes. Findings show seeking support as the most commonly used coping strategy, and other coping strategies may vary depending on type of disaster. Brodsky explored components and the process of resilience in single African American mothers living in “high risk” neighborhoods. Brodsky (1999) concludes the mothers sought out and used supportive resources available to them to help them cope with the stressful situations and make new goals.

Furthermore a combination of these resources forms “a chain of protective factors” that can contribute resilience in individuals and families (Patterson, 2002). Similarly, Werner (2000) notes, a combination of factors such as social support, religiosity and education produce a “safety net” for those who grew up in poverty. These multiple factors work in combination to foster resilient adults who function well in the mainstream middle class society, despite their harsh upbringing. It therefore suffices to

say both external support and resources, promote resilience in individuals faced with difficult situations.

Cultural/Ethnic Identity

In addition, to these individual, familial, and external support and resources factors, a fourth factor emerged in the literature on resilience in ethnic minority groups. Specifically, strong ethnic identification has been found to serve as a protective factor to help promote resilience in individuals from ethnic and cultural minority groups (Holleran & Waller 2003, Holleran & Jung 2005, Phinney & Kohatsu 1997, McCubbin, Futrell, & Thompson 1998), while increased acculturation to mainstream values places individuals at greater risk (Cuellar, Nyberg, Maldonado, 1997; Parker, Sussman, Crippens, Elder, & Scholl, 1998).

In a review of ethnic and racial identity literature, Phinney and Kohatsu (1997) state that current models suggest strong group identity is associated with better psychological functioning and self-esteem. Ego identity is defined by Miville, Koonce, Darlington, and Whitlock (2000) as “those identifications pertaining to oneself as a unique individual living in the larger society” (p.208). A strong sense of self in being a member of an ethnic minority group buffers the negative effects of risk factors. Miville et al. (2000) examined ego identity and racial/cultural identity for African Americans and Mexican Americans college students. Results demonstrated a significant correlation between ego identity and racial/cultural identity for both ethnic groups whereas strong ego identity was predicted by cultural identity. A strong ego identity is related to high self-esteem and competence; therefore, cultural identity being a predictor of ego identity, suggests that an important component of resilience for ethnic minorities is ethnic identity.

Not only does ethnic identity correlate with a positive ego identity, studies suggest it serves as a protective factor against risky behaviors in ethnic minority youth (Brook & Pahl, 2005; Parker et al. 1998). In a pilot study by Parker et al. (1998), 7th grade students of various ethnic backgrounds were assessed to measure the relationship between ethnic identity and tobacco use. The results revealed that strong ethnic identification protected adolescents against cigarette smoking use. The more they identified with their ethnicity, the less likely they were to smoke cigarettes. The reverse was also found. Acculturation to mainstream culture increased experimentation in tobacco products; the more acculturated to mainstream culture the more likely they were to use. Therefore a strong sense of ethnic identity, not acculturation to mainstream values helps to protect Latinos from risky behaviors, such as smoking cigarettes.

Similarly, Brook and Pahl (2005) explored the role of African American ethnic/racial identity in risk and protective factors. Scales examining drug use and attitudes, and ethnic identity were administered to adolescents and young adults. Results suggested ethnic and racial identity played a positive role in the relationship between protective factors and other behavioral risks for African American college students. Church attendance and familism emerged as contributing to positive ethnic identification. African American affiliation was significantly positively correlated with high achievement, and high familism (an African American cultural value) had a positive significant correlation with low perceived drug risk. For this group of African Americans therefore, ethnic and racial identity helped to minimize risky drug use and encourage high achievement.

Possessing a strong ethnic identification and holding to traditional Mexican cultural norms served as protective factors for a group of Mexican American youth. Holleran and Jung (2005) conducted an ethnographic study to examine acculturative stressors and experiences of violence, as well as sources of resilience for Mexican American high school students. Findings revealed these young individuals faced various acculturative stressors including discrimination and violence. Despite these hardships sources of resilience emerged for these individuals. The youth also focused on the positive, they saw hardships such as violence as growing opportunities and places to develop strength in their lives. Traumatic experiences were seen as having positive effects on their lives and many times served as turning points for the individuals to cease gang membership or other deviant behaviors. These Mexican American youth through the process of acculturation faced unique stressors but remained resilient because of their positive perspectives, and adherence to their native country's cultural values and beliefs.

Holleran and Waller (2003) also explored the connection between ethnic identity, adherence to traditional Mexican cultural values, and adolescents' perceptions of life challenges in Mexican American adolescents. Adhering to traditional Mexican values and beliefs emerged as salient in forming a strong ethnic identity for the youth. Furthermore, strong ethnic identification served as a protective factor that helped these Mexican American youth cope with life challenges. In sum, a strong sense of ethnic identity serves as a protective factor for ethnic minority individuals for a variety of circumstances, therefore it is expected that this factor will also help Mexican American individuals cope successfully with adversities such as poverty.

Studies on resilience lack including the cultural connection to this process. The literature on ethnic identification has shown this aspect to be an important predictor of resilience for ethnic minority groups. Therefore the inclusion of ethnic and cultural identity into resilience studies needs to be addressed. Also, previous studies on resilience have included poverty as only one of the risk factors examined and have not studied in depth, the experience of transitioning into the middle class specifically. Studies have thus far included poverty as only one of the risk factors faced by individuals, but have not examined it in a more explicit manner.

Women and Economic Resilience

An examination of women's experiences in exiting poverty is merited because women experience income mobility and the work force differently than men. The economics literature examines income and labor market features for women but only, many times, when it is associated with loss of market capital because of childbearing or teen motherhood. A deficit perspective often is taken when examining women and economics because of the costs women pay to have children. In a review of the empirical and theoretical literature on intergenerational income mobility, Corcoran (1995) found the focus to be only on how familial and neighborhood characteristics influence girls' education, fertility, and welfare use. Corcoran (1995) contends there has been very little research on background influences on girls' income mobility and the greatest gap in the research is in the area on how living in poverty as a child affects daughters' adult economic outcomes. "There is a clear need for theory and research on the ways in which background and neighborhood disadvantages, especially parental poverty, constrain girls' economic mobility" (Corcoran, 1995, p.264).

Another area of research on women is on poverty in single parent households. Divorce or death of a spouse is more likely to place women in poverty than men, because women are left caring for children with limited income and limited work experience. Therefore these life course transitions can influence women's economic mobility negatively. Women are more "at risk" for life course changes because they can become pregnant, and are most often responsible for raising and caring for children (Byrne, Myers, & King, 1991). Women who stay at home and are not employed outside the home after having children lose labor market experience and time needed to make higher earnings. Men in contrast do not lose time in the labor market nor do they pay such a high cost to bear children because they are expected to work and make money. Consequently, childbearing responsibilities and its effects on labor market experience make transitions for women uniquely different from that of men.

In this way, traditional gender roles have had an effect on the financial status of women in society and especially Mexican American women. Traditionally Mexican American women work in the home and their husbands work full-time to provide financially for the family (Baca Zinn & Pok, 2002). This expectation of women in general and more specifically Mexican American women, may make it more difficult for those who want to work and/or pursue an education and a career. Women who choose to work or go to college must deviate from a culturally held norm. However as is widely known, women are attending college, working, and becoming professionals in the workforce as well as raising children in today's modern society. This movement into the workforce, however does not completely alter past, historical, traditional roles of women which are in contrast to women working outside the home and making higher income.

Some of the studies on resilience mentioned previously, include both men and women in the sample. Those studies most often however do not differentiate, mention, or account for differences in the gender of the participants. When women and men are both included, most studies have a slightly higher number of women represented in sample than men which is what tends to happen in general.

As a female researcher it is also fitting to choose women as the target group for this study. To have an insider perspective can be an advantage because an insider is able to be more sensitive to the research process and experiences of the participants. An insider perspective allows the analysis to be unconsciously adapted to that of the participant's experiences (Greenfield, 1994). It is also possible a good rapport with the women can be established because I am a woman interviewing women.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Qualitative Tradition

Interpretive phenomenological analysis was used to explore the phenomena of exiting poverty from the perspective of Mexican American women (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The purpose of a phenomenological study is to understand the experiences of individuals who have experienced a phenomenon of interest. A phenomenological study seeks to “describe the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a phenomena” (Creswell, 1998 p.51). Phenomenology has its roots in philosophy and the work of Edmund Husserl. Phenomenology requires the researcher to set aside, or “bracket”, preconceived notions and judgments. Bracketing creates a self awareness of biases within the researcher. In this way, phenomenology recognizes the researcher as an instrument through which data is filtered and interpreted.

It is fitting to use interpretive phenomenological tradition to explore Mexican American women’s experiences of exiting poverty because the study seeks “to explore personal experiences and is concerned with an individual’s personal perception or account of an object or event” (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p.51). It is also suitable for this type of research question because little is known about Mexican American women’s experiences of exiting poverty and transitioning to the middle class. Also less is known about their experiences in relation to income mobility; therefore, interpretive phenomenological methods will serve to provide insight into this phenomenon.

Sample/Participants

Participants were recruited using a non-probability purposive sampling procedure (Baker, Wuest, & Noerager Stern, 1992). This purposive sampling technique was used to locate the desired sample size of six Mexican American women who experienced poverty as children and adolescents and experienced the phenomena of exiting poverty as adults. Smith and Osborn (2003) suggest “5 or 6 as a reasonable sample size for a student project using interpretive phenomenological analysis” (p. 54). This sample size “provides enough cases to examine similarities and differences between participants but not so many that one is in danger of being overwhelmed by the amount of data generated” (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p.55). Therefore, this small sample size allows for greater depth in analysis of the interviews. Because interpretive phenomenology’s goal is not to find generalizable data for the greater public but to understand the experiences of the participants who lived the phenomena being studied, the sample size is suitable and reflective of the purpose of this research study.

Before data collection began or any interviews were completed, a proposal was submitted to the Institutional Review Board of Texas Tech University and approved (see Appendix A). A local Latino organization was visited to recruit Mexican Americans in the area. The assumption for sampling from this group is these members are largely Mexican American professionals and are likely to live in middle class because of the types of jobs they occupy such as faculty and staff positions at a public university. An email announcement (see Appendix B), was also sent to group members (n=29) through the mass email list. I requested that members of the organization send the email

announcement to other friends and colleagues that they believed fit the criteria.

Therefore, word-of-mouth method was also used to recruit participants.

Specific criteria were met to be eligible for the study. The participant self-identified as Mexican American. For the purposes of this study, the operational definition for Mexican American is a person of Mexican-origin or ancestry living in the United States. These individuals also classified themselves as living in middle class and had previously lived in poverty in their childhood and adolescent years. For this study exiting poverty was operationally defined by using two sources: (1) the United States federal government's criteria of having an income above the poverty threshold for the family size or an income close to the median for Hispanics (\$33,565) for a family of four (2) as well as the participant's own definition of "how they knew when they were out of poverty" (see Appendix C, question 5).

The U.S. Census Bureau does not have an official definition of "middle class". Therefore the term can be ambiguous and subjective for not only the census but for individuals as well. For this reason, middle class is difficult to measure because it includes such a large discrepancy and range in what constitutes its existence. The U.S. Census Bureau does, however, derive several measures related to the distribution of income and income inequality (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). The U. S. Census Bureau does estimate median income distributions for groups. Median income is the amount that divides the income distribution into two equal groups, half having income above the amount, and half having income below that amount (U. S. Census Bureau, 2001). Median household income for all households is \$42,228; for Hispanic households \$33,565 (U.S.

Census Bureau, 2001). Therefore, the women interviewed were expected to be at least around the median income level for Hispanics depending on number in household.

Poverty in their childhood years was measured by their own definitions and understanding of poverty. I am aware however, that income is not the only determinant of poverty but neighborhoods, beliefs, and schools and are all connected to the construction of this definition as well. The definition of poverty was personally defined to stay true to the qualitative methodology that the participants are experts on their own lives and experiences. However to obtain a more accurate picture of the economic status of their lives as children questions were asked pertaining to childhood region or area of residence, number of siblings, parental education, and parental occupations. These questions were all asked at the time of the first phone contact to complete the demographic questionnaire which was used as a screening tool. To preserve homogeneity of the sample, the sample consists of either currently single women living in middle class, or married women who exited poverty into the middle class before they were married or not through marriage. In essence their exit from poverty what not therefore from the result of marriage. I screened for this criteria by asking at the time of the first phone contact, upon the completion of demographic questionnaire, if they had exited poverty by means other than marriage. All respondents answered affirmatively to the question during the screening phone conversation.

Five participants responded via email and stated they were interested in being a part of the study. One was approached in person and asked to be a part of the study. All participants were contacted by phone. Participants were then asked demographic information including their birth date, current income level, number of children, and

highest level of education (see Appendix D). All participants interviewed grew up if not entirely, in part, in the West Texas region. The participants met the criteria of identifying as Mexican American, living in poverty throughout their childhood and adolescent years, and having lived in the middle class for the past several years. Each respondent had a job for at least two years, that salaried above poverty level and was around the median income for a Hispanics as previously mentioned. One participant however, was now a stay-at-home mother, but previous to staying at home she was employed at a job for eight years that paid enough to be above the poverty level and be at a level of middle class status.

After the screening by phone was completed and the women were found to qualify, an interview date and time was set. One woman was interested and sent an email but a subsequent phone call indicated she would not be able to spend the several hours it took to do an interview and was apologetic in not being able to do it because of her busy schedule at the time. Therefore, all the women with exception of one who contacted me qualified and were later interviewed. Interviews were completed at the time and place of the women's convenience. Two of the women were interviewed at their place of employment. Luz was in the process of moving from her previous job in the school system to a new job as an Education Program Specialist. We met twice because the interview went past the two hours allotted. A subsequent interview was scheduled at her place of employment during the same week to complete the remaining interview questions. One woman I met at a local coffee shop. It was moderately crowded and did not interrupt the audio quality on the tape cassette in later transcription. Three women were interviewed in their homes. At two of the women's houses I sat at the kitchen table.

And for the other, I sat in the dining room table. While talking with Sylvia, her father and sister were present in the living room while her brother entered half way through the interview. Mari's two children were present in the home as we talked and were very quiet as to not interfere with the audio recording. Likewise, Amy's children were present during the interview and the tape had to be stopped a couple times so she could attend to her children.

Description of Participants

At the beginning of the interview participants were given the opportunity to decide their own pseudo name. The women therefore chose the pseudo-names and will be referred to as:

1. Paloma: 51 years old, has a Master's degree, and works as a librarian at a public university. She has been married twice and divorced twice and has three adult children. She currently has an income of about \$38,000 annually. She grew up with nine siblings and both a mother and a father.

2. Sylvia: 41 years old, has a Bachelor's degree, and works for a health organization. She has never been married and has no children. She currently has an income of about \$30,000 annually. She grew up with seven siblings and both a mother and father.

3. Mari: 44 years old, has a Bachelor's degree and a Juris Doctorate. She is an attorney at a law firm and currently has an income that fluctuates depending on clientele but averages about \$80,000 annually. She is married and has two children. She grew up with four siblings and both a mother and a father.

4. Luz: 36 years old, has a Master's degree and is currently working on completing a Doctorate degree. At the time of the interview she was in transition between jobs. She had been the principal of an elementary school where she earned \$68,000 a year. She is now in a new job as an Educational Program Specialist working for the federal government. The new job will pay about \$108,000 annually. For most of her childhood she lived with her mother and four siblings. Then her mother married a man who had five children. This relationship however, was not stable. At one time, because of the her mother's marriage she had nine siblings living in the home. She is currently married and has two children.

5: Amy: 40 old, has a Bachelors degree and currently stays at home with her children. Before she made the decision to stay at home her income was about \$32,000 annually. She had worked as case manager for a health organization at that time. She is currently married and has two children. She grew up with one brother and both mother and father.

6: Nina: 48 years old, has two and half years of college at a public university. She works in rehabilitation services and her income averages \$38,000 annually. She is currently married and has two children. One of her children died at age 15 and the other is a young adult living at home. She also grew up most of her life with a mother and father present (her father died when she was seven and her mother remarried when she was 10 years old).

All participants spoke both Spanish and English fluently. They all self-identified as Mexican American and stated they lived in poverty growing up and exited poverty

before marriage.² Four of the six participants worked doing farm labor in agriculture fields as children. Notably, four out of the six participants grew up with a mother and a father living in the home; of the remaining two, one lived with a step father for most of her childhood after her father died when she was seven. The other participant had lived with, who she refers to as “her mother’s husband.” She stated that he was not supportive of the family and she did not see herself as having grown-up with a father at home.

For many of the women they had siblings that also attended college. Sylvia has seven brothers and sisters. Six of the seven graduated from college. Interestingly enough she states the one who did not graduate with a college degree now makes the most money. Paloma had nine brothers and sisters. Two brothers went to college and four sisters went to college. Mari had four siblings, two graduated from college and one went to community college and graduated. Luz’s brothers and sisters went to trade schools and a business college. And for Amy, both she and her brother graduated from college.

Data Collection

Informed consent (see Appendix F) was given to the participants detailing the purpose of the study, their voluntary status for their participation, and the confidentiality agreement. The participants were informed that they could quit the study at any time, that all data and information gathered was confidential, and that data would be used only for research purposes.

Data was collected through one-time semi-structured interviews lasting from an hour and a half in length to two hours. The grand tour question was: “Tell me about your experience of getting out of poverty.” The interview included questions as guided by

² See Appendix E for demographic information table of participants.

Glen Elder's Life Course Perspective. The questions explored: (a) meanings of their experience of poverty (b) their experience of being Mexican American and getting out of poverty (c) and their experience of exiting poverty including life transitions. Follow-up questions or probes were asked if responses were vague or if I needed further clarification.

The Life Course History Calendar (Giele, 1998) was also used to help participants in recalling their past memories. Before beginning the semi-structured interview, I went through the Life History Calendar with the participants and asked about different areas in their lives from birth to adulthood. I recorded their responses on the Life History Calendar (Appendix G) after each answer. The calendar helped me to better understand the women's larger life context. It was also used to increase the accuracy in the write up of the results. Many times the participants referred to the calendar and it helped them put in context the situations they brought up in the interview. It also gave an overview of the transitions and changes in their lives such as beginning a college education, getting married, and moving away from their family of origin.

Analysis

Data were analyzed using an interpretive phenomenological framework. Smith and Osborn's (2003) method for interpretive phenomenological analysis was used and included several stages. Their methodology consists of several readings of transcripts to obtain a deep understanding and familiarity with the responses in the interviews. Smith and Osborn (2003) suggest "qualitative analysis is inevitably a personal process, and the analysis itself is the interpretative work which the investigator does at each of the stages"

(p. 66). Watson’s (2000) analysis process was also used to guide the current study’s analysis and was integrated with Smith and Osborn’s (2003) methodology.

First I transcribed all audio-taped interviews. In initial reading, I read the transcripts through in their entirety to get an overall sense of the interviews (Watson, 2000). Then I read the transcripts a second time. On the second reading I wrote notes on the left hand margin according to what stood out to me or what was interesting in each response, for each paragraph (Smith & Osborn, 2003). What stood out to me consisted of what the participants stressed in response to the question I asked. For example, Sylvia answered in response to the question “Tell me about your experience about getting out of poverty? the following:

NOTES IN LEFT MARGIN	TEXT
<p>Going to college was important</p> <p>Education is important for all not just minorities</p> <p>Education benefits many areas of life</p>	<p>I mean to this day and any of my sisters will tell you the same thing, my brothers.</p> <p>You have to have a college education.</p> <p>Everyone should not just minorities but I think because of our experiences we really have to. I mean the education is not only because of the better money you can make, its just the way it broadens you and it teaches you and hopefully breaks that whole discrimination cycle. At least you would hope. I mean that’s really, that’s’ it.</p>

<p>Determination</p> <p>It was a personal choice to get a degree and no one could do it for her.</p> <p>She (and brothers and sisters) had a determination and desire to do better; personal enrichment</p> <p>Want different and more than what she had when she was young</p> <p>Realized money was connected to education</p> <p>Believes in what father said (go to college) was what helped her. Listened to her father.</p>	<p>And the work. And you have to be determined to do it. You know you don't just go to college and someone's going to give you a degree. You know my dad told us we had to go but he couldn't force us to do well. That was up to us. So our own determination, our own willingness to want to do better for ourselves. And not want to be like we had been always wanting to live paycheck by paycheck and getting on public assistance or living in a low income home. You know we wanted to have nice things, we wanted to be able to go to nice places. And we knew that if we were going to do that we needed to have money. We knew that if we were going to get money we needed to be educated to get a better job. So it just made sense. It was just, really just doing what my dad said, exactly what he said. And he was right.</p>
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I completed this process for all the transcripts before beginning the third read through. Then without referring to notes from the previous reading, a third reading of the transcripts was done and notes were written in a notebook about what was interesting about what the women stressed in answering the questions. Answers to their responses were summarized. Some examples of these notebook comments include: received public assistance, embarrassment from being poor, faith in God learned through father, friends served as support for college admittance, wishes women would see their opportunities here (in U.S.). This process was done on all transcripts once again for all transcripts before fourth reading began. On the fourth reading, once again without referring to previous notations, notes were written on the right hand margin. Previous notations were not consulted as to not influence subsequent readings and to allow for new insights. This time I concentrated on major concepts that were stressed by participants throughout the interviews. The following is an example.

TEXT	RIGHT HAND MARGIN NOTES
<p>I mean to this day and any of my sisters will tell you the same thing, my brothers. You have to have a college education. Everyone should not just minorities but I think because of our experiences we really have to. I mean the education is not only because of the better money you can make, its just the way it broadens you and it</p>	<p>Education is key</p>

<p>teaches you and hopefully breaks that whole discrimination cycle. At least you would hope. I mean that's really, that's' it. And the work. And you have to be determined to do it. You know you don't just go to college and someone's going to give you a degree. You know my dad told us we had to go but he couldn't force us to do well. That was up to us. So our own determination, our own willingness to want to do better for ourselves. And not want to be like we had been always wanting to live paycheck by paycheck and getting on public assistance or living in a low income home. You know we wanted to have nice things, we wanted to be able to go to nice places. And we knew that if we were going to do that we needed to have money. We knew that if we were going to get money we needed to be educated to get a better job. So it just made sense. It was just, really just doing what my dad said, exactly</p>	<p>Work</p> <p>Determination</p> <p>Father's influence</p> <p>Personal determination</p> <p>Want better</p> <p>Life realization</p> <p>Education</p> <p>Father's influence</p>
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what he said. And he was right.	
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Then I developed theme headings that best summarized the concepts that emerged throughout all the interviews. This procedure was done on all interviews individually and a chart was made with the themes that were frequently noted in all readings. Themes were noted on a chart with the participants name on the left hand side. The chart was used for a cross comparison of the participants' experiences. Themes consisted of shared meanings or experiences that reoccurred throughout the interviews that were similar for all participants. Then I used the quotes in the descriptions to support the themes. The quotes were organized to describe the essence of the phenomena being explored. This overall description of the meaning is the "essence" of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Through being extremely familiar with the interviews and these steps, the participant's interpretations of their experience of the phenomenon emerged.

Reliability and Validity

As with any research, issues of credibility and trustworthiness must to be addressed. Sound research contains elements present in both the analysis and the design to create a credible and trustworthy study. This is where member checking and internal auditors are useful.

Validity in phenomenological qualitative research depends on how accurately the data reflects the essence of the phenomena experienced by the participants (Baker et al, 1992). To do this, a strategy called respondent validation or member checking gives the researcher more feedback from participants on the data and provides an avenue of validation from participants (Creswell, 1998). Member checking consists of giving the

data and findings to participants to increase validity in the study (Morse, 1998). Member checking can give the participant a voice to evaluate and comment on the data collected to validate that it represents their experiences (Creswell, 1998).

Two phases of member checking were utilized. The first member checking phase was done after the interviews were transcribed. I gave copies of the transcript of each individual's interview to the participant for review within two months after their face-to-face interviews. I requested feedback and suggestions pertaining to the accuracy in meanings and content of the typed interviews. I wanted the participants to confirm that what they read held true to their experiences and what was said in the interview. Four transcripts were emailed for review and two participants were given printed copies at their home and place of employment. I completed feedback suggestions over the phone with four women. I met with one in her office to go over the transcript, and received one woman's feedback via email.

Three women had no corrections or additional clarifications on the transcript and said everything was fine as it was. The other three women had mostly grammatical and some content corrections and deletions they wanted to make. All suggestions were incorporated into the transcripts before data analysis began. Incorporated suggestions included grammatical changes such as deleting various "umms" or "you know" throughout the transcript. One woman clarified inaudible words with words she said so the sentences were complete. On another woman's interview the tape recorder began to skip and eventually stopped because of technical difficulties with the equipment and about ten to fifteen minutes of the interview was partially inaudible or not recorded. We spent some time organizing her interview transcript at her office to make it complete and

understandable. However, the women's suggestions centered mainly on their concern with how grammatically incorrect the dialogue in their interview sounded. I explained that transcripts are typed verbatim and verbal conversation is unlike what we would write and that discrepancy was just a part of the process of transcription. I assured them other women felt the same way about "how bad they sounded" in the transcripts and that this was nothing to be concerned about. All participants therefore responded, gave their feedback, and "okayed" the transcript.

A second phase of member checking was completed after I wrote the results section. I sent all participants the results section of the study to be reviewed via email within one month of their receipt of the transcripts. This stage was included to confirm that the participants believed the experience detailed was representative of their experiences (Creswell, 1998; Janesick, 1998). All six participants responded and "okayed" the write up within two weeks of receiving the results section. A follow-up questionnaire was asked and documented via email and phone calls (see Appendix H). After emailed follow-up questions were received, an additional phone contact was made to double check answers and feelings concerning the final paper and process. Phone contacts were made with five of the participants asking the same questions that were completed on the follow-up questionnaire. I contacted the women by phone to continue the rapport with the women and give them a chance to verbally express what they may have otherwise not wanted to write in the questionnaire since it was rather impersonal. Their verbal feedback included comments such as, "I liked how you used the quotes, I hadn't seen that in a while", "it was real interesting to read the report, I was intrigued by everyone's stories and it was nice to have my feelings validated by what others said", "I

was very impressed with the writing and with the other women's stories", and "thank you for taking the time to do such a study."

Four follow-up questionnaires were received via email, one was completed over the phone, and one email from a participant was sent stating she had "questions that were not substantial." She expressed however, that if I had a deadline she was "okay with what was presented on her behalf." In response to the question "Do you think this is an accurate description of your experience?" all participants said yes. Four of the women had nothing they wanted to change or clarify. One wanted to add her mother's name to a sentence. For example the quote read, "My dad taught us..." she wanted to change it to include, "My dad and mom taught us..." And the other participant wanted to add into the theme of education the importance her mother played in her going to school and getting good grades. These suggestions were incorporated into the write up and changes were made according to their feedback. Therefore, two stages of member checking were a part of the process to make sure the data collected was accurate according to participants' perspectives.

Bracketing was also used to increase scientific rigor in the current study (Creswell, 1998). In bracketing, I acknowledged my preconceived assumptions, preconceptions, and biases concerning the phenomenon studied. Some preconceptions and biases I acknowledged as the researcher included my experience being Mexican American. My experience as a Mexican American is uniquely my own and is likely different than others therefore, I went into the interviews conscious of this to allow new ideas and meanings to come forth in the women's interviews. I also recognized my assumption around the idea that the transition would include turning points as guided by

my experience with Elder's Life Course Perspective. I wanted to allow the women to express whether or not there was a turning point. I also carried an assumption for recruiting the sample from a local Latino organization. I concluded that professionals who work in education equal people who are middle class and this may not be true. I also recognized that I was influenced by my previous knowledge in the area of poverty and ethnicity from the literature and research I had already reviewed.

Another design component of a qualitative study to increase credibility is the use of an internal auditor or as Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Creswell, 1998) call peer reviewing or debriefing. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe the role of this person as "an individual who keeps the person honest...and provides the researcher with the opportunity for catharsis by sympathetically listening to the researcher's feelings (p. 202)." The internal auditor was the primary advisor to the current study. Throughout the course of analysis, I consulted with the internal auditor who had some experience in qualitative work and extensive experience and knowledge in ethnic and cultural studies. I used her to reflect and to be sure I was bracketing my ideas throughout the process. The internal auditor was involved in the research project and worked with me directly by asking questions about and advising on data collection and procedures. I was held accountable through bi-weekly meetings and discussions about the research process. These were to communicate difficulties and questions throughout data collection and analysis about my thoughts or preconceptions that arose during the analysis process.

In this interpretive phenomenological study, elements present in the design as well as the analysis served to increase the credibility and trustworthiness of the study.

Bracketing, a two stage member checking process, the use of an internal auditor, as well as detailed analysis procedures, assisted in yielding sound research data.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Themes

Several themes or overarching experiences resulted from an interpretive phenomenological analysis of the interviews. The themes include aspects of Mexican American women's perceptions on their exits from poverty into middle class. Themes included: the positive impact of college in exiting poverty, a personal faith and belief in God, hard work, the role of the family, personal characteristics including determination, life choice consciousness, and "bucking the norm". Themes pertaining to college and faith were salient for each woman across interviews. The role of the family transcended across interviews and across themes within the analysis as well. Themes are, therefore, organized according to the prominence in each interview and across participant experiences.

Theme 1. The Positive Impact of College in Exiting Poverty

This theme arose as a response to not just one question in the interview but was repeatedly mentioned throughout the interview in reference to other areas of their lives as well. When asked, "What do you believe got you to this place you are in now financially," education emerged as one of the main factors in their success. It was also brought up when asked, "What advice would you give to a child or adolescent living in poverty?" To "keep going to school" and "get an education" was emphasized as a response to those questions. The theme refers to the idea that a college education is important and pivotal in making the transition out of poverty into the middle class.

All participants cited that going to college played an important role in their transition out of poverty. The participants did not, however, necessarily refer to an education as being important only because of the degree obtained. Going to college gave them a vision of what they could have and what life could be like. College showed them a larger world and provided opportunities. Paloma expressed going back to school helped her get to the place she is now. She stressed going to college to students she advises in her job and encourages those with whom she comes into contact to pursue a higher education.

A quote by Sylvia illustrates this idea of college being prominent in making the transition out of poverty.

...You have to have a college education...I mean the education is not only because of the better money you can make, it's just the way it broadens you and it teaches you and hopefully breaks that whole discrimination cycle. ...And we (my siblings and I) knew that if we were going to do that, we needed to have money. We knew that if we were going to get money we needed to be educated to get a better job.

Luz, also talked about education as key in breaking out of a cycle of poverty.

You can exit that (poverty) by working hard, and being educated, working smart.... But using education to get out of there to break that cycle and knowing that when you get student loans, that's an investment into your future.

And college education provides skills for the future as well. Luz stated:

An education brings you stability and it gives you ability to go out and have a job that you can move up with. You know you can, even if it's gradual, a gradual process you can move up to do better, to learn more, to become more qualified to do something or learn the skills to do something else.

Nina began college directly out of high school and attended for about two and a half years. She did not finish a degree but did say, "I got enough college to be able to get a

good job.” She now has worked for the state for over 20 years and feels she makes a “good middle class living.” A quote by Nina illustrates how going to college, although she did not finish her degree, opened her eyes to a vision that she had not seen before.

...other than being exposed to my family’s work ethic, their teaching me how to manage my money, the biggest impact for me was coming to Tech. Leaving home and coming here, even though I didn’t have what everybody else had, exposed me to what I could have. It made me realize that I could have a nice home, a good job and nice things. I think coming to Tech really was an eye opener for me. So many kids from so many different places.... Yea coming to Tech and having the exposure to so many different people and ideas and different ways of living....but I think coming to Tech was probably a major factor in being able to say I made the turning point and this is how I got myself out of poverty.

Interestingly enough, this new vision for Nina came from seeing other Mexican Americans going to college and other people from different avenues of life get an education. In particular she saw her professor who was Mexican American and thought that if he is doing it, I can. She also knew her college roommate’s brothers, who were Mexican American, graduated from college and were successful. This told her she could accomplish similar goals if they could. In seeing these people model what could be done she believed she could do it as well. Getting a college education therefore exposed her to these types of people to encourage her to continue on a path toward exiting poverty. The new insights Nina gained through her experiences in attending college influenced her perspective on the world around her. For Nina, college influenced her perspective by presenting to her a different lifestyle that was possible to obtain in life. It was not a degree that helped but rather the new insights that college provided that encouraged her to aspire to a life she had not previously known. Nina believes education is such an

influential factor in the success of individuals, that she and her husband, after the death of their daughter, created a scholarship fund for first generation college students.

Luz talked about the positive influence education plays as well. To her, education taught “a whole new way to navigate through life” which included learning new methods to get help from people to obtain what you need, and get the best results. Luz expressed that education does more than just give you a degree:

...because it (education) has taught me a whole new way to navigate through life... Because you're not hesitant to call and say hey, well you know I really would like to do this... Learning who resources are, learning how to tap into those resources, learning to recognize when you don't know so that you can call somebody that does know.

Luz continued on to talk about how she has been able to figure out and get the help she needs, whether it be at work or in her personal life, by asking and talking to people she knows have the resources to help her. Luz also added:

So looking around at other people and really education is so important because it opens up doors to other possibilities and it opens up gateways to new dreams.

Mari also expressed the importance of an education. Since she was a young girl, Mari liked school. She loved to learn and talked about her experience starting school and the struggle it was to continue onto college. She wanted to be a lawyer and began at a small community college and continued on to a larger public university after working as a county clerk for a short time. Going to college provided her the opportunity to move into the profession to which she aspired.

Education for all the participants was intertwined throughout their lives and played a role in their current financial status. Throughout the interviews and questions,

the women expressed that education played a role in providing the means to exit the poverty they knew as children.

Theme 2. A Personal Faith and Belief in God

A belief in God and strong faith were mentioned by all participants. The women emphasized its prominence in their experiences. The participants talked about believing in God, and the role He played in their lives. Sometimes it came up as a response to the question, “What do you believe got you to this place in your life now?” or “Who/what was a major influence in your life?” Many times however, the women brought it up themselves as a natural part of the dialogue in the interview as something that was important and very influential. Participants talked about the importance of God in their lives and how it provided a source of strength. They depended on Him and trusted Him throughout their childhood and adult lives to help them through difficult times. This faith and belief in God was expressed as a personal commitment to God and their faith in Him.

Paloma talked about how God had been an important strength in her life. She expressed her reliance on God and faith as a source of strength in this way:

...But I do believe, I do believe in God. I read my Bible every night. I read my devotionals and it's an encouragement right there like oh are you talking about me whatever the devotional is for the day. But I do strongly believe in that....I ask God for forgiveness everyday if I thought of anything bad or said anything bad you know it's very important. I believe that it's very important you keep in touch with God all the time... And sometimes like I say we have to rely on Him like everybody does. Sometimes we don't rely on Him when we should. But I think that's very important to have God on your side.

God provided strength for her and in turn this strength gave her the ability to make the choices and accomplish goals that were necessary in her transition from poverty to the middle class. Similarly Sylvia stated how her faith was an important part of her life and

helped her in making this transition out of poverty. God orchestrated her life in ways she says were not just coincidence. But she believed there was divine help involved to put her in contact with the people and places she needed to get out of poverty. She said:

And when I have to look back in my life, how I got these things, how we (siblings and I) all got these things I mean I have to believe that it was another presence. That it had to be God doing it. Because some things aren't just coincidental. There is too much to be coincidental I think and when I look back to the timing of things I have to believe that God's hand was in there because things are just too much of a coincidence for things to have happened the way they happened. So I really do have a lot of faith in God... And you can't explain faith, you have to feel it.

Throughout the interview Luz, talked about how she asks for forgiveness from the Lord and is so thankful to the Lord for his Grace and Mercy and expressed her connection to God. Luz indicated that faith in God has definitely played a role in helping her get to where she is now financially in her life.

And all the way through God has always been a big huge part of my life and a faith and a hope in something better. In a belief that there could be something better.

Faith in God provided hope and that hope presented a vision for a better life. This vision or hope for the future was necessary for Luz to begin to take the steps toward making the difficult transition to middle class. A hope for the future was a primary necessity to be able to continue on towards goals and aspirations of obtaining a better life with financial security. Luz depicts what she calls her spiritual awakening at age 11. Her mother's husband was abusive to both her and her mother. One day after he had been abusive to them both Luz recalls:

.....And I was in that room and I was just laying on the floor and I just, just kind of turned my head on the floor and he had already shut the door and it was dark in there. And underneath the door I saw some light come in, just barely any light. And you know how the dust is floating in there.

And I saw that light and that dirt and when I saw that dirt I knew that there was a God. I knew in that moment all my life, I knew there was a God. And in that moment in my life I could feel God telling me you are going to be ok. You are going to get up off this floor and you are going to be fine. And I knew it. And everything in me, I knew it. I knew that God was good and I knew that it didn't matter what was happening it was going to be fine.

Once again, Luz detailed an experience surrounded by great hope she needed to be able to make her life better, which included getting out of poverty. This experience carried Luz throughout her life knowing that God was there and He was going to take care of her, that she would "be okay" no matter what happened in her life from then on. This deep faith in God was apparent in her professional, personal, and familial life through her dialogue in the interview on how she uses His teachings to live everyday. Luz believed that God put people in her life so that she could learn and grow from them. Mari talked about God being a higher power and in control:

... I still believe in God but just in knowing that there is another power that can open the door for us. But we have to follow through with it. In that way because I think that's where these professors came into my life but if I had not used them then I would not have been where I am....(God) Put them in my path for me to make my choice. That's how I believe.

Nina, a practicing Catholic, also said her faith was very important to her and a source of strength through her life. When asked "What do you believe got you to this place in your life now financially?" she stated:

So I think I really just put everything in God's hands. It's just as if my faith had always brought me to where I needed to be. I knew whatever the next step I was walking with Him (God) so wherever it took me I was going to be ok. He wasn't going to lead me anywhere I didn't need to be. I think we (my family and I) just base so much on our faith that we just kind of went with the flow and said ok Lord where are you taking me now. So just give me the guidance in knowing what steps I need to take and I'll follow you. So much of the time I just asked ok what do I need to do now?

Amy also talked about how having God in her life has been a source of strength and helped her make this transition. Amy stated:

...God has always been a part of my life. Ever since I was a little girl like her (pointed to her daughter) I knew that God loved me and that nothing was impossible. I just felt that, I don't know how to explain to you that's its real and that it's something you feel in your heart.

The women's faith in God provided a place of strength as they made this difficult transition from poverty into the middle class. His hand in their lives was a powerful and influential presence in their lives, and continues to be a powerful source of strength.

Theme 3. Hard Work

Along with education and a strong belief in God, hard work and determination were attributes the participants found as indispensable in exiting poverty to become middle class. Working hard was talked about by all of the women.

Working hard refers to, at times, having to work two jobs and going to school full-time. Working hard meant long hours and not being lazy but having a good strong work ethic and doing your best in your job, wherever you work, whether it be in the cotton fields or elsewhere. It is important to note that all of the women worked while attending college and some held two jobs. Holding a job while obtaining a higher education required hard work and was a struggle.

The hard work also included overcoming emotional and personal feelings. Facing the feelings of being the only Mexican American in the college classes as well as being a first generation college student proved to be difficult. Hard work meant having persistence in times when they felt isolated because of their ethnicity and cultural backgrounds. It was difficult because they were doing something they did not see their

peers doing. There were few social support networks for Mexican American students in colleges during the time these women went to school. Getting past these obstacles is what the hard work was. Nina talks about hard work and going to college:

There were so few of us Mexicanos then. I mean we could all fit in one classroom. I look now whenever we get together and see the physicians, attorneys and all the really successful people and think gosh we were just little kids and we came through it. It was a hard time for us. There was so much discrimination then. It was hard for us to make the adjustment.

Amy talked about how, because she was Mexican American it was harder for her to make the transition because of the discrimination and prejudice in school and in the workplace. Overcoming those preconceived ideas about her because she was Mexican American made it hard and Amy said it was definitely “a struggle.”

While attending a community college, Mari held two jobs and went to school full-time to earn her education. Her parents told her that if she wanted to go to college she had to pay for it, but she could live at home. So Mari paid for her gas, tuition, and books until later when her parents saw she was so exhausted they helped her by paying for her gas so she just had to work one job.

Paloma likewise worked two jobs and went to school. Paloma had three children at that time and was able to go to school and work because her mother and her sisters helped babysit the children. She believes that “You have got to work hard and be positive, you know, have the determination.” Paloma stated:

You can get out of it (poverty). You know you may not, you cannot afford this or whatever or say yeah I am going to be rich but you can work. You have to work for what you want. You have to work hard. A lot of people just want to sit back and see if it falls in their lap. There is no such thing.

Luz similarly worked two jobs while going to college so she could still help her mother and family financially. She worked as a waitress and was in the military while in school. She talked about working hard and trying to be responsible to her mother and her family to make it happen:

I really tried hard, because when I was in school I was still doing the military thing and waitressing because I still wanted to keep up with the money for her (mother) but still go to school.

Nina talked about how “It’s hard, it’s really hard to go to college, but it can be done.” She said becoming middle class is hard work:

...I work really hard, you know, just like my mom and my stepdad and my dad did. It’s just in a different arena. I don’t think you’re, you’re not middle class for the lack of work, for the lack of commitment to it. You have to really work....

Nina stated that being middle class required hard work, which consisted of discipline to go to work everyday, commitment to the job, and living frugally financially.

Theme 4. Role of the Family

The role of the family was prominent. Their parents, grandparents, and other relatives played an important and pivotal role in the women exiting poverty. Throughout the women’s dialogue in the interviews, families were expressed as influential. Their families influenced their decisions to pursue an education, their reliance on God for guidance, their work ethic, and their attitudes and beliefs toward finances. The family helped create the values to which the women still adhere to today. The families played such an influential role in their exit from poverty into the middle class because some of the areas the women said aided them in the process (education, faith, hard work) were

taught by their parents. Therefore, the women took the skills they learned as children and utilized those skills in their adult lives to help them exit from poverty into the middle class. In this way, the family played an indispensable role in giving and teaching skills the women needed to exit poverty as adults. Luz states: “So we really learned a lot of skills at home that helped us to make that transition over in the world we live in now, the mainstream life.” It was these teachings adopted by the women in the study that aided them in their transition out of poverty and played a large role in their success and resilience.

Family and Education. All of the women mentioned parents playing a role in their education. Some stated their parents strongly encouraged them to pursue higher education, while others discouraged it. Parents encouraged college through expectations for entering college, expectations for good grades in school, and stressing of the importance of education through words and teachings in the home. Some discouraged education by stressing work or staying home over educational achievement. Sylvia’s father expected her to go to college when she graduated from high school. It was never *if* she would go but *when*. Paloma remembers her mother stressing the importance of school by her enforcement of expectations that they get good grades in school throughout her childhood years. Whatever their parents taught in relation to their education, all the women’s families played an important role in their lives.

Sylvia and Amy’s fathers highly encouraged going to college. Amy recounted the time when she took an aptitude test in high school. It said she would be a good secretary. When she told her father he said, “Absolutely not. You are not going to be a secretary.” She recalls how he said, “You’re better than that, you’re smarter than that, you know.”

He believed she could do more. Amy wanted to be a secretary at first, but then she started thinking about what her father said and thought “Well if he thinks I am smarter than that and can do more maybe I can.” Likewise her aunts encouraged her to go to college and always said she was smart and she thought “Wow they think that? I probably can.” Therefore, Amy’s family was influential for her future because she would have accepted becoming a secretary and not continuing on into college.

Sylvia’s parents were influential in her continuing on to college as well. Sylvia recalls:

My dad and mom taught us that if we are going to amount to anything in this world, we need to work and we need to go to school. And from the day I can remember that was what I heard. I never was told *if* you go to college or *if* we can send you to college. It was always *when* you go to college.... And then as we got older he would always tell us you know you need to go to school ...My dad was very traditional but when it came to education it was just unorthodox for him because considering he was from Mexico and you know the whole male Macho thing. He wasn’t like that. He truly believed that girls needed to go to school.

In response to the question, “How do you think you made the transition out of poverty?”

Sylvia responded:

We (her and siblings) just did what my dad told us to do, go to school. It really was that simple....I think so. I truly do.

Sylvia’s father was instrumental in her entering college and starting on a new path of obtaining a higher education and exiting the poverty she knew as a child. Her mother and father sacrificed so she could get an education by working long hard hours and not buying themselves things. She recalls how much they emphasized that not going to school was not an option. Sylvia stated:

...my dad would always say “Por eso nos fuimos de Mexico. Porque alla, no les pude dar lo que puedo dare aqui. Y de que me sirve sacrificar tanto para traerlos aqui si ustedes van ir aruinarse.”, so but that type of mentality. (*translation: That’s not why we left Mexico. In Mexico I could*

not give you what I can give you here. What good is the sacrifice to bring you here if you are going to ruin your life?(talking about getting pregnant, not getting an education, and marrying young to a man who was a "bum")

Nina talked about how her mother supported her and made sacrifices for her when she was going to college. She remembers that on her first birthday away from home, her mother sent her a birthday cake at the dorm. She said how her mother must have sacrificed to buy her the cake, it must have cost her a whole week worth of gas. Her mother would also send her five dollars and that was a lot of money for her.

Paloma's mother only went to the first grade in school, yet she was influential in the realm of education. She encouraged going to school and knew the importance of education. Paloma said her mother knew what it meant to get an A, B, C, or D, and would get angry at her children if they got a D or an F. Paloma remembers how her mother knew they could do better and she expected better from them in school. They would get in trouble at home if they did not bring home good grades.

Not all the women's parents were supportive in their educational goals however. Luz's family did not understand why she was going to college. She did not tell them she went back to school to get her Master's degree because she knew they would not understand. Luz recounts:

I learned a lot of that from her (my mother) too but then she was very resentful when I went to get my Bachelor's. She was very very resentful because in her mind if I was going to school I couldn't work and if I couldn't work, I couldn't send her money and if I didn't send her money what where she and the kids going to do? So she was very very resentful about me going to school. She didn't understand why that was important. She didn't understand why I thought that I needed to. And she kind of somehow thought that I was trying to be better than the rest of my family. And I kept trying to explain to her that that's not what it was.

Luz is currently pursuing her PhD and talked about how getting an education including getting her Master's degree was something she did on her own. Her family however, was not involved in this process.

...And um, my siblings didn't even go to my graduations either Bachelors or Masters. We didn't have a party. Even high school, we didn't do like high school pictures or senior rings. We didn't do any of that, invitations, nothing, none of that because they just didn't understand that at all. And so like for my doctorate, they just think it's an incredible waste of money that people would still be going to school. What for?

....Yea they (my siblings) are just like "Why do you want to know that much?" What else could you be learning, you know there really can't be anything else to learn. And so I really think they just think I'm a real slow learner and I just haven't gotten it yet. So but we just don't talk about it at all. Even my grandfather, just even right before he passed away, he thought I was a janitor at the school. He always, and I never corrected him ever. Because I remember going to see him, I was already a principal at a school and he said are you still working at the school? And I said yes. Oh that's a good job, that's a good job. You stay, and he goes you get like \$7.00 an hour now? And I said yes grandpa, you know. And so he would tell everybody that that's what I would do and I never corrected him, I never told him anything differently...

Luz's family played an important role in her life but was not encouraging her to go to college. Her mother, however, taught her other values and beliefs in life that helped her make the transition from poverty.

Family and a Strong Faith and Belief in God. A strong faith and belief in God was mentioned by all participants when recounting how they exited poverty. This belief in God was attributed to their parents. *Faith* was demonstrated by people in the family including fathers, mothers, and grandmothers as the participants were growing up. The participants learned about faith from watching these people and seeing them live their faith. Faith is embedded in the Spanish language and Mexican culture with common sayings such as: "Dios te Bendiga" (God bless you), "Si quiere Dios" (If the Lord wills

it), “Gracias a Dios” (Thanks be to God), and “Suena con los angelitos” (Sleep with the Angels). Sylvia’s father not only encouraged her to have faith, he also demonstrated his faith. Sylvia told how her father taught and lived his faith:

And I learned that (faith in God) from my dad. One of the things my dad would always tell us and to this day he still says “Si quiere Dios” (*if the Lord wills it*) its always “Si quiere Dios”. “Si Diosito quiere. Lo que Dios diga. (*what the Lord says*) Lo que Dios quiera.” It’s always whatever God’s will is. So that was always a big thing at our house. And when we would talk about going to college and getting jobs and getting out of the situation we were in and you know getting a nicer place and having a good working vehicle that wasn’t stopping every two hours it was always “Dios siempre por adelante. Qualquier cosa que ustds quieran primero pidanselo a Dios” always. (*translation: Whatever things you need always ask God first.*)

Sylvia also recalled what her dad taught her about faith:

He would tell us that God was in you, He wasn’t in a building. That you could go to every church in the world everyday in your life and that wasn’t going to make you a good Christian. He said your faith was in you, it was what you believed in, how you believed in God, and the praise and thanks you give to God. Not being in a building. Because if God is everywhere then he is everywhere he is not just at church. And that makes perfectly good sense to me.

Learning about faith and God through parental teachings was important because the women cited that their personal faith and belief in God is what provided a source of strength to make the difficult transition. Therefore, parental teachings were not only important because it passed down beliefs and values but that the teachings gave the women the tools they later needed to make the transition out of poverty. Amy talked about faith being more than church attendance and that she learned from her parents as well:

I always knew that God is God wherever you go. It doesn’t matter what religion you are. You can be Catholic, Baptist, not have any religion, God is going to still love you regardless. And I think that’s where my parents get their love and their

compassion. You know they always showed us, they didn't just say it. We always watched their actions and they did practice what they preached...

Similarly for Luz, she remembered her mother talked to her about God. Luz states:

Everything was If God Wills, Si Quiere Dios. You know everything we would say, Gracias a Dios (*thanks be to God*), everything. You know people would ask her how she is doing, 'Bien gracias a Dios' (*Good, thanks be to God*). Everything, I was like 'Man mom.' You know so it became so normal and when we go to bed she would always say Sleep with the Angels. ...or that God would want us to share, God would want this. And even when bad things would happen, 'Oh that's okay. God's going to take care of it. You just got to have faith, you just got to believe.'

Through this daily dialogue about God and faith, Luz learned about a divine source of power and strength. Learning about something that was bigger than she ultimately taught her about the hope she needed to see a vision of a brighter future. Luz talked a lot about how her mother attributed everything to God. Her mother demonstrated daily faith and emphasized that when they woke up they were living and breathing because God allowed it and everything was a blessing from God. Her mother taught her faith because she incorporated it into her daily life and language.

Nina remembers seeing her grandmother and mother live their faith as well. They were both generous to others and always giving even when they did not have much money. Nina states, "We've always led a very faith filled life. Our Catholic faith is very embedded in us. I grew up with that." She recalls seeing her grandmother wake up saying the rosary and go to bed saying the rosary every day and every night. They would cross themselves upon entering the house and exiting the house and had the traditional altar in the corner of the bedroom. Her grandmother would always say good night by saying "Dios la bendiga". Nina grew up in a traditional Mexican home and was taught to be very respectful to her elders and respect the faith.

The women adopted for themselves this faith, demonstrated by members of their family and now carry it on in their lives. A strong faith and belief in God was taught and demonstrated by their parents and in turn influenced the women's future. This transmission of belief in God and a strong faith translated into strength for the women and helped them make the transition from poverty into middle class as adults.

Familial Work Ethic. The women also talked about having learned to have a good work ethic, and to work hard from their parents. The women talked about how they grew up seeing their father and mother work long hours and work hard in order to take care of their families. Seeing their parents work hard meant different things to the women. For some it was seeing their fathers always have a job, work several jobs, and never call in sick. It was watching their mothers make it their life's work to budget, cut corners, scrimp, and save money to make ends meet and take care of the family.

Mari grew up seeing her parents work hard and have a strong work ethic as well. She recalls working in the fields with her parents while her mother talked about working hard and working honestly.

...So my dad and my mom always taught us that you have to work hard and you don't have to wait for somebody to come over and see you to work. ...Especially they would tell us that when we were working in the fields. They are gone, they go drop us off to go work in the fields and then they come back and pick us up at noon. Well some people would sit around and not do anything for an hour or so, they would take breaks. And my mom would always say, 'you don't think they know. I mean do you really think that they are that dumb that they don't know that somebody sat around. Of course they know more or less how much we should have done and if we didn't do it.' I mean they weren't going to say anything to us but they weren't going to hire us the next year either. So my mom said 'you work, it doesn't matter. You have got to think about yourself and have dignity in your work no matter what you do.'

These experiences taught Mari not only to work hard, but to work with dignity regardless of the type of work. Mari used these lessons when she went to school and pursued her goals.

Luz also talked about learning to work hard from her mother:

And um another thing too, the kind of work we did with my mom and stuff, she gave us a real strong work ethic, very strong work ethic. You go to work when you are supposed to, you don't be messin' around. You do what you are asked to do, you do it well so they don't fire you. All these things that they show us how to do by doing that kind of work really carried over to whenever I got a real job, knowing go to work when you are supposed to, volunteer for extra time if you can.

Amy learned the same lessons as she saw her father work very hard. She remembers:

...my dad worked very hard. I did watch that. I don't remember my dad ever calling in sick hardly unless he was really sick. The job was very important....when we were growing up I saw a lot of my dad going to work in the morning but he didn't get home until late at night because he put in a lot of overtime to make that extra money.

Sylvia had similar experiences:

My dad was never unemployed. I never remember my dad being unemployed, never ever. And I never remember him complaining I don't want to go to work today. He never complained. I never remember him needing an alarm clock to wake up. He always got up himself. My mom did too.

Financial Teachings from Parents. All the women also talked about learning to value and manage money from their parents. The women incorporated these lessons in their lives and used them to exit poverty. Even though their families did not have much financially, there were underlying beliefs about money: "You pay bills first, save, and don't borrow or owe people money." These were the strategies the parents used to make ends meet and be able to live from the little money they had.

Saving money, budgeting, and staying out of debt was a major value taught by the women's parents. Much of the teaching was done by their mothers, who were at home with the children while the fathers worked outside the home. Mari remembers:

My mom saved a lot. They definitely believed in, if you can't afford it you don't need it, and you save up for it. So we didn't have any credit or anything like that. And then, in fact when I first got my first credit card after I moved out when I was 24, 25 my dad really got upset at me. He couldn't believe I did that.

Similarly, Amy recalls:

I learned early on you don't borrow money from people. You don't borrow money from institutions; you don't use credit cards you know frivolously... When you wanted to have something you would save up until you got enough money to do that. ...Saving was very important.

Most of the women talked about their mothers budgeting and making the money and the food last longer. *Consciousness about spending and buying* was emphasized as well. Some remembered financial talks about how to make money decisions. Statements and questions like: "Only buy what you need," and "Are you sure you need that?" or "Are you sure that's what you want?" were asked of them as they were children. All the participants learned the concept of "bills first." This meant that bills were paid first and whatever was left over was saved or on occasion used to purchase what was needed. Credit was to be used for emergencies and only to be paid the next month after working overtime. Luz recalls hearing "Don't be even looking at something else if you can't even afford to pay for what you had now."

The women learned to value and respect money from their parents as they were growing up. They then carried them through to their adult years. Some, as they got older,

did use credit cards. For the most part, all the women talked about still being conscious and frugal with their money and taking care of the bills and things they needed first.

Theme 5: Personal Characteristics

The individual characteristic of determination emerged from interviews with the women about their experiences of getting out of poverty. Determination was mentioned by a majority of the women as something that was imperative to making the transition.

Determination. Determination meant having drive and persistence to set a goal and do whatever it took to accomplish the goal. Being determined meant “never giving up” no matter what tried to “knock you down” or stop you. Determination meant following through on specified goals and aspirations. The women possessed determination because they decided to do and be something different than what they saw around them. They never quit striving for what they wanted. Determination also connects with working hard.

Paloma described how she kept going despite obstacles and was determined:

You pick yourself up and keep going. I always see myself as crossing the hurdles... I have to cross this hurdle, I have to. I am not going to stop there just because it's in my way. If I can't jump over it, I will go around it in some way. So you know you have to look at those obstacles, those hurdles in your life and say I'm not going to let this stop me.....

Luz uses a powerful example to illustrate how important determination is in life. She believes she needed determination in life in order to continue through the hard times and not let negative circumstances stop her:

... it's like Candy Land you know, you get to go this many spaces and you get to go this many spaces. ...it's so pretty and I like that game because it's bright and it reminds you of good things. So when you are thinking of the vision of your life, it's about good things. We don't ever say oh, I want to grow up and go to prison and I want to have like 10 kids and be on

welfare. We don't say that. We think of this real pretty image. And so I said it's like your Candy Land but then you get stuck and you have to go back to the Mud Pitt or whatever. Well you don't quit playing because you went to the Mud Pitt. You are anxious about the next move you can make. What's the next time going to bring you?....No matter what is being dished out to you, there is a way around it, over it, through it. You can do it. It can be done. You can't just throw in the towel and say ok that's it, never mind I'm not playing anymore. You know you still have to play.

Luz also talked about getting up and "dusting yourself off" and continuing on. Sylvia mentioned her determination several times throughout the interview and the role determination played in her life and in continuing on in college. Sylvia stated:

...And you have to be determined to do it. You know you don't just go to college and someone's going to give you a degree. You know my dad told us we had to go but he couldn't force us to do well. That was up to us. So our own determination, our own willingness to want to do better for ourselves. And not want to be like we had been always wanting to live paycheck by paycheck and getting on public assistance or living in a low income home.

Amy said she was just trying to "stick in there" referring to college. It was difficult being the first in the family to get an education, and not have Mexican American role models. She believed because of that she "missed out on a lot of things that could have made my life in college easier." She talked about how if there had been other Mexican Americans before her they would have been able to teach her about what to do to be successful in college. She gave an example that she did not know about getting a pass fail grade instead of dropping the class or getting a failing grade. She had to use drive and dedication to overcome these setbacks and eventually graduated from college. Nina talked about the hard work it took and how it required drive to be one of the first in the family to go to college.

It's hard, it's really hard, and I wouldn't want to work and go to school full-time and work full-time as a student now but you know that drive I

guess. You got to have that drive to succeed and I see that a lot in those kids with that, the first generation college bound.

Theme 6. Life Choice Consciousness

Life choice consciousness is defined as participants' realizing that their life circumstances were not desirable and that they could make decisions for a better life. They realized at some point, what I would identify as a turning point, that they were in control of their own future and could make decisions to influence their future paths. The turning points included a change of perspective for the women. For the women this point happened at different times in their lives. For some it was as children and others later. For some it was a self-realization and for others it was triggered by someone encouraging them to do differently and believing what the person said about their future potential. The women reported remembering a moment they said to themselves and decided, "I don't want this, I will not work in this the rest of my life." The women wanted more, they wanted better than what they had and saw in their lives. All participants talked about making a conscious decision at some point in their lives.

In response to the question, "Was there a turning point in your life or something that stands out in your mind that greatly affected your future? Amy responded that two situations greatly affected her in making this transition. She talked about the time her dad said what was against the test she took and the other was when her friend got pregnant and she saw what happened with her. For Amy these served a pivotal role in her life and set her mind to do something so she would not continue to live in poverty. Sylvia, said it was a culmination of factors but most importantly was doing what her dad said which was go to school.

Paloma took longer than the other women to exit the poverty cycle. After she had already been married and divorced she was struggling to pay bills and living paycheck to paycheck. She relied on food stamps and lived in public housing for a time with her children. So it was later in her life after her 40's that she said "I don't want to live like this (poor) forever, like other people." And when she was alone after her divorces she said "I cannot go through this again." At that point she told herself "I said, I know I can do it. And I feel that I did it."

Sylvia remembers when she saw herself as being in control of her situation; ultimately she knew she was in control of her own destiny.

I mean your parents can tell you don't do this, don't do that, but it's just so easy to do certain things and when you start seeing for yourself what the consequences are then you have to decide for yourself is this something that I want to keep doing or am I going to change it. And how am I going to change it. Because really I was the only that could. And I have always been of the opinion that I have to depend on myself, not anyone else. Because no one else is responsible for me but myself... If I want something I need to get it myself. I need to work for it. Whatever I do with my life is up to me not someone else... You're responsible for yourself, you really are.

Sylvia knew her friends, brothers or sisters, or other people could not get her out of poverty because she had to pursue and accomplish her goals to be successful. She did use her brothers and sisters, friends, family, and God for support and encouragement but ultimately she knew she had to do the hard work to get through college and get a good job herself.

Mari worked on the agriculture fields during the summers for seven years of her life, from the ages of 11 to 17. She remembered she would get paid five to ten dollars a

week to work in the fields with her mother. Mari recalled telling herself and her mother she was not going to work in the fields the rest of her life. She stated:

I kept walking up and down the fields I would say I am not doing this the rest of my life. I would tell my mom I am not doing this the rest of my life. I am not doing it. I would tell her. I am not going to do it.

Mari also remembered:

The last day of working I said 'I am not doing this the rest of my life.' I walked out of there. I told my mom this is it. Then that's why I started working at the Dairy Mart and everywhere else you know but I wasn't going to be working out in the fields. I wasn't going to do that.

After that, Mari began attending college and pursuing a different life by putting into action decisions that would support her goal. She continued working at jobs so that she could go to school and never have to work in the fields again.

Amy recalled two turning points that were pivotal memories and times she realized she wanted and could do more. The first is when she was in high school and her father refused to let her take secretarial classes towards a degree to become a secretary. And secondly, Amy remembered when her friend got pregnant in high school she realized she did not want that. Amy made conscious decisions not to get married young and wait to have children. Amy stated:

You know my best friend got pregnant in high school and she was a mess after that. I'm like no I don't want to be like that. I want to have and do things you know. I don't like not being able to get things that I want or that I need or having to say oh gosh if something happens what am I going to do.

Nina remembered:

And I thought ok I'm not, I'm not going to sit here get married at 18 and have a baby at 19. That's just not what I want to do. So I knew, and it was a matter of ok are you going to go to school or are you going to be satisfied working at Dairy Queen for the rest of your life. I knew that if I

stayed what my fate was. I would work at Dairy Queen, get married and have babies and that didn't appeal to me.

When Luz was in the military after she graduated from high school, she recalled a time when a sergeant in the military talked with her and told her she could do more and she needed to go to college. This was an "eye opening" experience. The sergeant told her "do not accept a lower life for yourself." He said, "You need to go back to school, you need to get a better life, you need to see a better life for yourself." She responded that school was not for her and that she wanted to stay and work in the military. The sergeant then made her do more cleaning duties, run errands with him, and get up extra early to do more physical exercises. She recalled:

... I'd have to walk behind him a few steps and he would always tell me in Spanish, be telling me all the time 'This what kind of life you want to live, this what kind of life you want to live?' He goes 'you need to go back, you need to go back to school you need to go to college.'

She then transferred to the local military base and was enrolled in college. This event was a turning point for Luz and placed her on a path towards education which she feels was pivotal in aiding her exit from poverty.

Theme 7: "Bucking the Norm"

"Bucking the norm" as referred to by one of the participants emerged as part of the transition to do something different in their future. Some of the women noted that they wanted to prove wrong certain people who had told them they were not going to amount to anything. They went against what was normal and expected at the time as well.

Many times, because they were women, Mexican American, and poor they were expected to get pregnant early, be married young, and work in menial jobs the rest of

their lives. This, however, was not what these women decided to believe for themselves and their futures. Amy pursued her education first and was married later in her life. People she knew would ask “Why she wasn’t married?” and even at one point asked, “Are you a lesbian?” But Amy attested she did not need to be married to prove anything to anybody else.

Mari recalled what a teacher said to her when she was in high school. She then wanted to show her different and prove her wrong.

I mean she would tell me straight to my face, ‘you are not going to do anything with your life. The only thing I see you doing is being married and having a bunch of kids. That’s your life.’ Because my parents told us you don’t talk back to authority, you have to respect your teachers, in my mind I said ‘no I am not.’ And I didn’t get married until I was 30. I guess I waited so far, I am not, I’m not and then and I didn’t have a bunch of kids like that. I mean I had my first one at 34, but I always remember her telling me that. And in my mind I said you don’t even know me, for you to tell me that.

Mari also talked about an internal dialogue with herself to not accept what others thought she could do:

I think the major thing is people telling me that it can’t be done and just me inside saying I am going to see if it’s true or not. Like those teachers saying that I couldn’t do anything or saying I don’t belong in law school. Well, really why not?

Paloma stated that her ex husband did not think she could make it and she wanted to prove him wrong. Paloma said:

...my exes thought I couldn’t make it. Especially my first one, no you cannot make it on your own. He was that type that a woman has to have a man in her life to make it. I said nuh huh. And not just to prove it to him but to prove it to myself. I can do this. I had to prove to myself, yes. Not just for them but for me, you know for my kids.

Luz remembered a time when she was working in the cotton fields and saw a helicopter fly by. She said out loud “I am going to do that.” Her family laughed and joked about what she said. She started crying and her grandfather said, “You won’t do that. This is your pencil (talking about the hoe) this is the only pencil you will use.” And she said to herself, “No I don’t want to push that pencil, I want to push the other pencil (talking about a real pencil).” Luz decided she did not want to do what was expected of her which was to continue to work in the fields, and stay poor.

Nina talked about how she saw what was going on around her and knew that she had to do something that was different in order to get out of the poverty she knew. Nina recalled:

At that point, most of my girlfriends were getting married and had babies because that was what they did. That’s what you did. So me leaving and going to school was a big shock. College wasn’t in the plan, especially for Mexican Americans. So I was kind of the odd ball. I mean the guys here (at home) are dorks. I’m not going to stay here and marry somebody. I’ll go find a dork somewhere else. (laughing) But it really was, I’m not staying here you know. So I did it - I got out.

So Nina decided not to stay at home, get married, and have a baby at 19. She also stated:

I think it was harder because I was kind of bucking the norm of not staying home and getting married. It was harder for me to get them (my parents) to understand that leaving home wasn’t a bad thing.

Amy also did not do what she felt was expected of Mexican American women at that time. Her quote illustrated how the concept of ‘bucking the norm’ and ‘life choice consciousness’ are intertwined with one another.

You know that’s what people expect of us, to be barefoot and pregnant and go nowhere. I don’t want that you know. I remember saying that. I’m like, I don’t want a loser husband because a lot of people I knew who were, you know, right out of high school got married and two years later were getting divorced. I didn’t want that. I wanted a guy with ambition

because I remember thinking boys in high school were such losers and then when I got to meet boyfriends in college well, hey, they had ambition....Yea, but uh just, I think my dad and my best friend's pregnancy really made my mind click saying oh you don't want to be, you don't want to be in this neighborhood forever. I want to do better for myself.

Mari and Luz's parents did not expect them to go to college. Luz recalled what her mother told her:

...she (her mother) just kept thinking I was just trying to be somebody that our people weren't. You know none of our people did that. Those aren't the people God called us to be. And I'm like, "How do you know." No because this is the life of a poor person, she would say all the time. You know "La vida de los pobres" that's us, you are always going to be like that. You are never going to get out.

Luz did not do what her family and parents told her life would be like. Mari went back to school and became a lawyer and earned a Juris Doctorate. Mari also moved out at age 23, which was against what her family expected, so that was difficult for her as well. She went against what was the norm in her traditional Mexican American family. These women notably went to college when, as they describe, they were the only Mexican Americans in their classes. Amy recalls:

I'll tell you when I went to Tech I stuck out like a sore thumb. Back when I went there weren't as many Hispanics on campus as there are now. You could count on one hand how many Mexican Americans there were in class. I think most of the classes I had I was the only one there.

The women went against their teachers, parents, or societal expectations and norms.

Additional Findings

During the analysis, additional findings regarding the women's experiences emerged. These findings, however do not necessarily pertain to or deal with the transition of exiting poverty. They do however, describe how the women made sense and have

come to terms with their experience of poverty and what the transition has meant to them. All of the women said they didn't know they lived in poverty at first. This was identical across women and the experience was shared by all. They came to terms with living in poverty at different times, but all said they didn't know. Also some of the women described how they used the experience of living in poverty to relate to and help others in their job occupations. This experience proved to be strength for the women now and has benefited them in their jobs.

Didn't Know We Lived in Poverty. At the beginning of the interview, all participants were asked, "What is your experience of poverty and what does poverty mean to you?" All six women responded that they did not realize they were poor and living in poverty. Many times the women did not know they were in poverty because everyone else around them was in the same situation. It was not until they became cognizant about money and material things did they realize they lived in poverty.

For some, noticing differences between themselves and their peers did not happen until high school or college. Mari said it took a long time to realize she lived in poverty. She told a story about when she was in college. Someone said her shoes were really old. She thought "well, it hasn't been a year yet" because she was accustomed to wearing one pair of shoes for at least an entire year or until they could not be worn anymore. She said she began thinking about it and realized she had not noticed anything was wrong with her shoes. She said she always thought "you had one pair until you can't wear them anymore and then you buy another pair." Then another student made another comment to her about her shoes. She then began thinking about their comments and hanging out with other people who had not grown up like her. Some of the guys she dated "came from

families that had a lot of money.” She said, “I saw some of the stuff they did and I was going what? I didn’t know.” She talked about how her friends would talk about how they grew up or things that they did that she didn’t even know existed like having more than one pair of shoes at a time or going on vacation.

Amy didn’t realize she was poor until she was in high school. She went outside of her neighborhood and met different people and realized there were other neighborhoods besides her own. She had friends and saw their beautiful homes and thought “wow.” She was also surprised when she went to the mall with her friends and they bought new clothes and different shoes. She was amazed they had more than one pair of shoes. Like Mari, she thought “you just had one pair of shoes and they had to last you all year.” When Amy began to make the connection between the differences in the things others had and the things she did not have she began to realize her family was poor.

Paloma also did not realize her family lived in poverty until high school. She remembered asking her mom for a quarter and she did not even have a quarter. She had friends in the Brownies, a Girl Scouts organization, but her parents could not afford the uniforms. Her mother would always sew their clothes for school and they never went to the dentist because they could not afford that either. She started to realize they lived in poverty when she noticed these differences between her own family and some of her friends.

For others, the realization began in elementary or middle school. Sylvia remembered she was in elementary when she began noticing she was in poverty. She knew when as she stated “...people would make references to certain things like eating out or getting certain toys or getting new clothes for school, new clothes for Easter, and

we didn't get that kind of stuff." It took her several years to realize they lived in public housing. They moved in when she was in first grade. She heard kids make jokes or say things about where she lived and then she began to realize her situation. She later came to an even deeper understanding of her family's financial situation in junior high. She stated:

It wasn't until I was in junior high that I ever realized that we were considered to be below poverty level because of my dad's income. He was the only one that worked and then with eight kids. But I mean I can't say we were destitute like I have seen other families. I mean we always had food to eat. It may have not been what we wanted and there were times when it was very very difficult to get that food and we were on food stamps for about six years, mostly through elementary, most in elementary we were on food stamps. And I remember my brother Jesse, because he was the youngest one, my mom got WIC for him.

Several years for Christmas her family was adopted by a program called Good Fellow. People brought presents, a box of food, and a tree on Christmas morning. Salvation Army also gave them food and gifts during Christmas time. These things were exciting when she was young but as she grew older she recalled being embarrassed because she realized *why* they were getting those gifts. That's when she realized they were poor because that had never "dawned" on her before. She stated:

I didn't understand what poor meant. I just knew we would always hear no we can't get that, we don't need that. We don't have the money for that. I didn't understand what money was. But as I got older I started realizing the way things were and that's when I realized that we were considered to be poor or lower income.

Luz said she was in fifth or sixth grade when she began realizing their financial situation. Children would make fun of her because she would wear her step brother's hand-me-down clothes and shoes to school. They would also make fun of her bad overbite that she never got corrected because they could not afford to go to the dentist. She talked about

how she could not go to an amusement park, buy pizza, or eat out because they did not have money. She said she had good attendance and always went to school because you could eat breakfast and lunch there. She started thinking, “You know maybe something is different here.” She also talked about not having a working vehicle and said as she was laughing, “it was kind of noticeable to see ten people walking down the street.” She added:

...going with my mom to the welfare office, I would ask well why do we have to get money from here or why do we have to have food stamps? Or what is that for? I didn't realize everybody else didn't do the same thing. I didn't know everyone else didn't pay for the groceries with food stamps and so that's really...when I heard it from other people did I begin realizing there was something different about our family than other families.

When Nina was asked, “How did you come to realize you lived in poverty” she said, “You know it's a funny story I tell all the time.” She described how growing up, every Christmas the Lions Club picked a young girl from each of the elementary schools to receive a dinner at a café, and a gift bag full of fruit and candy. She continued:

And it didn't really occur to me until I was about fourth grade that, I'm always the girl they pick you know. And it was because out of most of the people in my class we (me and my family) were probably the poorest of the group... And so, but it was kind of an eye opener to me to finally realize that hey I'm the poor kid and that's how come I get picked every year.

Many of the women however, expressed that in spite of being poor, they always had food to eat and things they needed. Their mothers would put clothes on lay-a-way and make payments, sew clothes, or give them hand-me-downs from the other children.

Five of the six women said they did not go on vacations growing up. Amy, whose demographic indicators suggest more working class, said she did go on a vacation to an amusement park but it was still much less than where she heard her friends had gone on

vacation. Some of the women spoke about wearing clothes handed down from their siblings, or clothes from garage sales, thrift stores, or only buying clothes on sale. Several women talked about not being able to keep up with the latest trend, although Nina said she could keep up because her mother was style conscious and sewed her own clothes. Several of the women also said they only had one pair of shoes, or they had one pair for church and one for school and they wore those shoes until they were worn out.

Four of the six women said they never ate in restaurants or fast food places growing up while the other two noted they ate fast food rarely or only on special occasions. All the women talked about eating the same type of foods, the staples in the Mexican diet. Rice, beans, hamburger meat, “pa pas” (potatoes), and tortillas were cooked in many different ways for variety. These types of experiences were similar across all the participants. A couple of the women remembered not desiring others’ food primarily because it was not what they were used to eating. Some, however talked about sandwiches as treats when they were able to eat them, and for some being on the free-lunch program at school helped.

The Experience Helps them in Their Profession. Four of the six women mentioned that they believed their experience living in poverty and overcoming that as a Mexican American had given them a greater understanding for the people they worked with and helped. Interestingly, all the women worked in service occupations. Three work in health related service, one an attorney dealing with civil cases, one an elementary school principal, and the other an information service librarian. In this way the experience has proven to be an asset that helps them better understand the people whom they serve in their professions. The experience of living in poverty and being Mexican

American gave them insight into the lives of other people and granted them greater understanding of their situation. Nina stated:

I guess it's been through working with people with disabilities and the underserved. People with disabilities seem to be in low income or poverty level a lot of times. It makes it easier for me to understand what they are feeling and what they are going through. They live on Social Security or a limited income a lot of times.

Luz talked about her job as a principal of a school and how her experience growing up in poverty had actually helped her in her job:

So I think that with my job it helps me really relate to the children that we have that are living in similar situations, because I really do know what it feels like to go to bed hungry or to see a parent give up her portion of the dinner meal so that the kids can eat... So that really helps me with my kids or when I have parents that come in and they are trying to explain their situation and... I think a lot of times administrators don't understand that ... It is a lifestyle for some people and its real and it has, you know, it has its effects on the children, so I try to understand where they are coming from too, to see how we can help.

Mari saw her experience of growing up poor and in a Mexican American family help her in her profession:

... I think in doing family law all the other experiences help me out. I understand what those people are going through and I know what to ask. Especially like if we are fighting on custody because when they are saying something I know what they are talking about, but the people that have never gone through any of that don't have any idea. ... I see, like right now I see people graduating from law school and they are 25 and you know I was 33. And I look at them and they have no idea what life is about. You have got to have life experiences too. They are totally lost. They ask me questions and it's like ok, that I have to explain from my life experiences not what you learn from a book or the law. It's real life because that's what we deal with people.

Paloma said that when she worked at a welfare office she would encourage people, especially women, to go back to school and get their GED and a college education. She

said she would encourage them and could because she knew what it was like to be in their place.

This was my encouragement to them. I said I have been through it. I know what it is to struggle...I had one man say 'well you don't know what it is, you're sitting on that other side of the table.' 'No' I said 'Whoa, that is my soap box right there.' ... I have worked in the fields since I can remember and he would just stare at me and I said 'yes, I have worked in the fields.' I have worked to be this far...but when they would tell me you don't know what it is to work in the fields, I said Whoa, and I would put up my hand and say wait a minute, I know what it is that's why I am here to help people, to encourage them, you know, you don't need to be like this.

This experience of living in poverty and transitioning out has given these women strength to draw from in their professions. This strength allows them to understand and help others in a similar situation.

The women used their experiences to encourage others who were struggling to break the cycle. They told others about the importance of education as well and the lessons they learned from their experiences. Luz expressed the importance of education to young adults she encountered in the school where she worked and to her own children as well. She teaches her children:

...when you grow up and you have your own family, you need to have a solid education that you can go to work and be employed enough to take care of you and your family...

She also strongly believed and stated:

...Um, definitely an education I would say and I tell kids that all the time and teaching high school.... really pushing education for those kids and really letting them know that it doesn't matter what background you come from. That's insignificant to where you can go in the future, but you have to have a vision for that.

Paloma also said she stressed that when she saw women she helped:

Usually, of course, I like to tell the women (at work) I say ah, ha I know you hurt, you go down whatever, but get up. Shake off the dust. Keep going. That's all. No matter what, you are still going to encounter obstacles no matter what. But I said knock them over and keep going. You have to be positive.

Positive Attitude. Having a positive attitude was mentioned by two of the six participants. Having a positive attitude included having a positive mindset and outlook on life. It meant looking for the best in situations and believing that things would work out for the best even when it did not look like it. Paloma mentioned having a positive attitude several times throughout the interview and credited it with helping her in this transition. She saw herself as a positive person and believed that one has to be positive in order to overcome obstacles in life. Paloma stated:

So you sort of like self encourage yourself and say look I am better than this, I can do better than this. And I mean that's my big thing. My positive thinking you know sometimes you feel like oh my gosh where am I going to go from here? Whatever but that is what you say. Like that song says "I will survive"... You have to be a positive person even if you are by yourself. Think positively and things will work out.

Luz also sees herself as a happy and positive person. She felt that it was important to have a good attitude when trying to accomplish life goals.

And attitude has a lot to do with it. ... So having a good attitude and remaining as positive as you can about life and just understanding there is going to be bad times and I mean that's normal, it happens to everybody but what are you going to do from there. You know when we get in a mess and we are just like all depressed or whatever you know ok enough of that. Now what are you going to do? What are you going to do from here? And just really trying to remain positive even when things don't look so great. And it really pretty much works. Because it's a mindset, it's a mindset about how you want to see your life and what you want to do.

Intelligence. Being "smart" or "advanced" was discussed specifically by three of the women. Three of the six participants talked about different situations in which they

were seen as smart or advanced intellectually growing up. Two of the women in this study report teachers giving them more work to do because they would finish their school work quickly. One of the teachers separated the students and gave them extra work because they were advanced. For one of the participants the teacher noticed her ability and had her moved up a grade in school so then she was in the same grade as her older brother. And another of the participants notes her family members said you are so smart you should go to college. Two of the women graduated third in their class while one says she studied hard and was very close to being valedictorian at her high school.

Summary

In discussing their transition out of poverty, the women referred to their education, faith, hard work, and determination as factors that aided them in becoming middle class. Education not only brought them a degree to further themselves professionally, but also gave them a vision of something better and broadened their horizons. Going to college provided an avenue to exit the cycle of poverty they saw growing up. Education and going to college also showed them the possibilities the world had to offer and what they could have. Going to college provided a new vision for their lives and a practical asset to get a better job in the professional world. It is important to note there also were influential and important people in their lives who encouraged these women in their educational endeavors. Some directly encouraged them to go to college. Sometimes this was their parents, sometimes it was others outside the home like teachers and for one woman a sergeant in the army. Others encouraged the women by providing emotional and practical support in general. These people did not necessarily encourage college specifically but they did encourage the women's self-esteem as children and

young adults by what they said to them or the ways they treated them. Sometimes the parents did not encourage school but they were supportive in their adult child's choice to go to school. It was these encouragements and the women's personal decision to go to college that started these women on a new path into financial security.

The women talked about their faith and belief in God at various times in the interviews. They discussed how God had a hand in their lives and how He has helped them through out their lives. The women also believed that their faith was not necessarily about going to church but it was about having a strong faith and doing things daily that recognized Him in their lives. They learned about God and faith as children from their parents and grandparents. Faith was expressed by believing he had been with them and helped them in this transition to strengthen and encourage them. It was also expressed in simple everyday saying in the Mexican language which incorporated God into everyday situations and life. God was a source of strength for all the women and was referred to as something you "just feel" or something that "you can't really explain", but his presence was there taking care of them and helping them.

The women's hard work and determination was necessary in their transition as well. To buck the norm and do what was against societal expectations took a lot of hard work and determination to accomplish. The women possessed these qualities and endured the struggle to go against what was expected of them. The women worked hard to pay for school and help their families while being determined to pursue and achieve their goals of not living like what they had seen and experienced growing up. Their work ethic and determination changed their life course trajectory onto a path less traveled by Mexican American women in that time. There were still few Mexican Americans in college when

these women decided to go to college. The strong work ethic, taught by their parents, gave them the discipline and strength it took to accomplish those goals. Bucking the norm and having insight into their lives to decide to do something different in combination with their hard work and determination put these women on a different course and changed their lives by enabling them to become middle class.

All the women stated that they did not know they were in poverty growing up. Not knowing was their first response when asked, “What does poverty mean to you?” Everyone they knew was in the same financial situation as themselves, so they did not know any different, and if you do not know any different you do not know what you do not have.

The role of the family was prominent in the interviews and emerged as having influence on other areas of the women’s lives that helped them exit poverty. Some of the things the women mentioned as playing a role in their exit from poverty, such as faith and working hard, were taught by their parents. The women were taught similar beliefs and values when it concerned money. The women were taught by their parents to pay bills first and take care of what you need first. They were taught to save for what you want and to not owe or be in debt to anyone. They were taught to be conscious about money. The teachings from their family played an important part of the transition because it gave them aspects of what they used to exit poverty and move into the middle class. Experiencing this situation along with their experience being Mexican American gave them insight and understanding to better help the people they work with today.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The current study was designed to explore the experiences of Mexican American women who grew up in poverty and have made the transition into the middle class. Even though there are high percentages of Mexican Americans living in poverty, there is an upward movement of the middle class (Martinez, 2001). Little is known, however, about the unique experiences of these individuals as they exited poverty. This study hopes to begin to fill the gap in this area. An interpretive phenomenological approach was used to give a voice to the participants and interpret the essence of their experiences exiting poverty. Several themes emerged from interviews with six Mexican American women who grew up in poverty and are now middle class. The themes detail their experiences and highlight what aided them in this process.

Resilience Research

Few studies, quantitative or qualitative, examine specifically the transition from poverty into the middle class in specific ethnic minority groups. Therefore, the current study's findings were compared to the research on resilience that examined risk factors including living in poverty.

The Positive Impact of College in Exiting Poverty

The role of college in exiting poverty emerged as a major contributor to this transition. Going to college broadened the women's horizons and gave them a realization of what they could have. Participants referred to going to college as not only opening doors and providing more opportunities, but also providing a vision of what was possible.

Education did not serve merely as a means to an end but provided something much deeper, a new “picture” for their lives that was never before even conceived. The women saw how their lives could be different than what they knew. Previously they had an abstract view of what they did not want but entering college exposed them to different people and ideas and showed them what they could have and be and how to obtain it. In this way for the women knowledge was power. The more the women were exposed to new ideas, concepts, and people the more in control they felt of their future.

This finding adds detail to what entering college can provide- a new vision for a better future and not just practical help. This sort of detail possibly emerged from the qualitative nature of this study. Going to college served as a protective factor because it gave a vision of what was possible, encouraged the goals they already possessed, and encouraged a larger life perspective.

A Personal Faith and Belief in God

Theme two, a personal faith and belief in God supports the research on resilience that found this individual characteristic played a role in resilience (Herbert, 1996; Thompson, 1998; Werner & Smith, 1992; Williams et al., 2001). All the women talked about their spirituality in the sense they believed in God and had a strong faith. They expressed a belief in how He had a hand in their lives, directed their steps, and provided or protected them throughout this journey. The current study supports previous findings about the importance of faith for people facing hardships or other types of risk factors. Relying on religion/faith or prayer created a source of strength for those facing hardships (Herbert, 1996; Thompson, 1998; Werner & Smith, 1992). In a study on homeless runaway women, Williams et al. (2001) also found spirituality was a part of what the

women believed had an influence on their lives. The women in the current study discussed how a belief in God and strong faith that included praying, reading the bible, for some going to church, and a daily walk with Him helped them get to where they are in their lives currently. God and faith provided a very strong source of strength through their journey of exiting poverty and making that challenging transition.

The importance of this finding is the implications on how God and faith provided the women with hope. Hope ultimately motivated and encouraged consistent change. The women talked about determination coming from the underlying sense of hope the women possessed. Without that hope, determination, change, and hard work meant little. The women drew from their source of faith and this source most importantly provided the hope to continue in their journey when it seemed hopeless.

In addition, the women believed ultimately God guided their steps, made the path, and provided those choices. They realized they could make choices to affect their future but also realized and believed through their faith that God had a part in guiding their steps and therefore influencing their future. Luz talked about how there have been angels in her life that have helped her along the way. And Mari talked about God placing people in her life to help her as well. In this manner faith and God emerged as prominent in these women's lives.

Hard Work

Theme three, hard work emerged as a behavioral component necessary for these women to transition into the middle class. The women talked about how it took hard work to get out of poverty and that is what was necessary. The women expressed the necessity of working hard and talked about jobs, at times needing two to get to where

they were financially. Similarly Thompson (1998) used both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to study African American young college students and adults. The quantitative section gave young African American college students questionnaires to measure resilience. Their resilience was based on their belief of their own resilience and what they perceived others thought of their resilience. The college students faced several risk factors as young children, including poverty. The second most frequently used coping strategy was hard work. It is interesting both the African American participants in Thompson's study and the women in the current study noted they used hard work, a strong work ethic to overcome the hardships they faced. For ethnic minority individuals hard work may be essential to overcome lingering effects of discrimination and segregation in society. Ethnic minority groups therefore may have to use hard work and a strong work ethic to overcome possible racial barriers such as stereotyping still present today.

In many other studies, however, this theme is not discussed as a protective factor to promote resilience. For the majority of the women, in the current study hard work meant overcoming obstacles that made it difficult for them to get out of the life they once knew. Hard work was the outward expression of the internal determination the women possessed. Many of the women had to work two jobs, pay for their education, and overcome the feelings that came with being an ethnic minority student at a large university. All the women were internally driven to work hard. They also had to believe in themselves when other people did not believe in them. They had to continue toward a goal while facing discouragement and feelings of isolation.

This hard work may be different from that required of mainstream middle class individuals who might have more social support when entering college. Some beginning college students may have parents who know how to navigate in higher education matters because they attended college. These women were all first generation college students. They had to learn how to find their way in the college arena and succeed while doing so. This challenge of becoming middle class from poverty required the hard work discussed and the women did what was necessary to finish college and continue on pursuing a better financial life for themselves.

The Role of the Family

Theme four, role of the family includes the importance the women's families had in teaching, supporting, and influencing their lives. The women learned about the importance of education, having faith, a good strong work ethic, and a set of financial values about money from their families. Luz called these "cultural things" taught by her mom and termed it as just "good solid living." They learned these skills from their families even though their parents were not highly educated or middle class.

The research on Mexican American values of familism supports the findings in the current study. These women were raised with strong ties with their families, a characteristic integral to the Mexican American culture (Baca Zinn & Pok, 2002). The women's experiences reflect a closeness and respect for their family and parental teachings. They used and integrated these teachings because they held their parental opinion with great respect and significance. Thus, the family had great influence in the women's life experiences because they were reared in a culture that values family closeness, unity, and solidarity.

The role of the family was prominent for the women and supports previous research suggesting family plays an important role in individual resilience. Research suggests the *positive support families* provide to individuals plays a role in resilience (Conger and Conger, 2002; Herbert, 1996; Hines, Merdinger, and Wyatt, 2005; Werner & Smith, 1992; Williams et al, 2001). Warmth and cohesiveness in families helped individuals manage stressful life situations (Garmezy, 1991). Research on resilience proposes that familial support is a key in resilience and can serve as a protective factor amongst risk factors, poverty being one of them. While this study supports familial support it provides additional insight into the ways the family helped. It places an “everyday” face on what cohesiveness, help, and support means. It provides a picture of how family closeness and support played out in the lives of the women.

Most importantly, the role of the family holds implications for increased consideration. While living in poverty the women’s parents taught and practiced skills the women attributed their exit from poverty. Their parents modeled a strong work ethic and hard work as well as belief and faith in God. Therefore it was not merely what the parents taught, but it was also what the parents did, what they practiced. Both in combination are why the family was such a powerful force for the women. Bandura’s social learning theory proposes *imitation*, “humans acquire new behaviors simply by observing others perform them” (Trawick-Smith, 2003, p. 41). Social learning theory suggests children learn by watching others like parents perform tasks. Parental modeling therefore suggests these women learned to imitate their parents by watching and in turn they later incorporated these skills into their lives. As social learning theory states the women learned skills from their parents through the process of modeling and imitation.

Therefore, the findings in the current study support Bandura's social learning theory through the experiences detailed by the women.

Education was emphasized in the majority of the women's homes as well. This is something their parents had not been able to do but the importance was still stressed through their actions. Paloma remembers her mother punishing her and her siblings if they received a D or an F in school. Her mother "would always make them go to school and never let them miss a day unless they were very sick." Parents emphasized education through their sacrifice for their children as well. Sylvia, Nina, and Amy talked about how their parents sacrificed so they could go to college. Their parents placed such a great importance on their children's education that they were willing to work harder, have less, and deny themselves so that their children could have more. Sacrifice was embedded in the theme of education. This came through especially in Sylvia's experience. She remembers her father telling her in Spanish about how he sacrificed and left Mexico so he could give her what he could not give her in Mexico, and that was an education.

It is important to note that in spite of the prominence of this theme across participants, two of the women's parents actually discouraged education. Mari talked about applying for college against her parents' wishes. She expressed how much she wanted to go to college and submitted her application but would not go because she wanted the "blessing" of her parents and that was important to her. This reiterates the value in the Mexican culture of obedience and respect (Baca Zinn & Pok, 2002). Although confronted with a barrier from their parents, the women talked about them with great respect, and reverence. They were nonetheless grateful and appreciative for their teachings and support and still held their parents' opinion with great value.

Individual Characteristics

Theme five in the current study supports research suggesting the individual characteristics of determination and a positive attitude were important in individual resilience. Williams et al. (2001), Hines, Merdinger, and Wyatt (2005), Werner and Smith (1992), Strother, (2003) found determination was one of the characteristics that played a role in the resilience of individuals. The women in the current study in many cases specified determination as what they needed to become middle class. They talked about how they never gave up, did not let others discourage them, and just “dusted themselves off” and kept going.

It would be useful to discuss determination in conjunction with hard work mentioned previously. The women’s determination was an internal characteristic of the external action of hard work. Determination seems simplistic and direct in its use, however, it was an indispensable individual characteristic that played a role in their exit. Encountering an obstacle without determination could prove fatal in terms of making a successful adaptation in the circumstance. For a couple of the women, possessing a positive attitude aided in their exit from poverty as they used it to overcome barriers and obstacles they encountered. They also used a positive attitude to stop negative thoughts and emotions that discouraged them from continuing on toward being middle class. Having a positive attitude kept their future looking bright even when surrounding circumstances suggested otherwise. These two characteristics were useful in making this resilient transition.

Another individual characteristic of intelligence was discussed as well. In a review of the literature on resilience, Seccombe (2002), noted that intelligence

contributes to resiliency. Herbert (1996) found all three of the young Latino men did well academically in school and were high achievers as well. Werner and Smith (1992) noted average intelligence was one of the characteristics of the successful adults in the study who grew up with multiple risk factors as children. This study therefore supports the current research about intelligence serving as a protective factor for those facing hardships.

Life Choice Consciousness

Theme six, life choice consciousness supports Elder's concept of *human agency* in choice making. Human agency refers to the idea that individuals make choices and engaged in effective adaptations within available options and constraints in the environment (Elder, 1998). These choices and actions ultimately construct their life course pathways. The women talked about certain moments when they made decisions and choices to be different from those around them. Some of the choices included going to colleges that were close to them so they could live at home to save money, and work to pay their own way through college. The women therefore took advantage of what was available to them in order to realize their goals.

Within the life choice consciousness is the idea of placing a negative value on certain life circumstances. The women placed a negative value on what they saw around them and placed a positive value on doing something different. They in essence replaced what they saw with what they wanted for their future. Life choice consciousness deals with perception. They labeled early pregnancy, getting married young, and not getting an education as negative. Because the women perceived their current situation as children and adolescents negatively they wanted to change and do what it took to make a

difference in their own lives. If they had not placed a negative value on what they saw around them they may not have seen their lives as needing change. This connection is the significance of their life choice consciousness.

For some women this happened while working in the fields and for others it was at certain situations that were a catalyst for change. Working hard in the hot farm fields for some was the force that spurred change. Amy saw her friend's pregnancy as negative and therefore was opposed to what led to that lifestyle. Luz's sergeant in the military encouraged her towards an education but he merely relit the spark which started when she was young in the fields and saw the helicopter and said she wanted to do that. Nina saw peers around her and the cycle of not graduating from high school, getting married and having babies. Mari was in the fields as well when she said "I will never do this again." The majority of the women expressed a time like this where they saw what was around them and decided they did not want to do that.

Sylvia's experience was slightly different. She did not cite a time she thought she did not want that life, but she learned to see early pregnancy and marriage to a "bum" negatively from her parents. She stated how she thought that was her mother's biggest fear, that she would not go to college, become pregnant, and marry a man who would be unable to support her. It was important the women saw their circumstances negatively, because this fueled their desire to do better and get out of poverty.

"Bucking the Norm"

Life choice consciousness connects with theme seven, "bucking the norm." Awareness of their life circumstances, their ability to make choices to create a new future for themselves was required to "buck the norm" and be different. "Bucking the norm" is

unique to this study perhaps because the participants were a minority in two groups, Mexican Americans and women. The women went against the societal norms of Mexican American young girls. During a time when there were few women and fewer Mexican Americans in college, these women went to college and began a unique life trajectory.

Within this theme of “bucking the norm” is the concept of balancing two worlds, their Mexican American collectivistic culture and their mainstream individualistic culture. It was because the women were able to balance the two and combine the cultures that they were successful in making the transition from poverty into the middle class. In a sense they became acculturated, more like mainstream society in order to “buck the norm”, to go against the stereotypes surrounding what it meant to be a poor Mexican American girl. Acculturation served as an adaptive process to be able to exit the poverty they knew and achieve economic viability.

Theoretical Basis: Elder’s Life Course Perspective

In addition to supporting some findings in resilience literature the current study fits into the model provided by Elder’s LCP. The themes correspond with personal, familial, and external support and resources and play a role in a larger framework while reflecting the resilience literature. At poignant turning points in their lives, these individuals possessed personal, familial, and some external resources that played a role in helping them make the transition out of poverty into middle class.

Some societal expectations were present because the participants were Mexican American, women, and had lived in poverty. Society places expectations on these groups. The women began their lives with fewer available resources because of their families’ limited financial resources. Some women worked in

fields as children, and some were told they could not go to school and would never get out. Some saw friends and peers staying poor, having children early, and getting married young. These societal influences and expectations could have had an effect on these women as they affected their peers.

This is where the concept of turning points is so poignant. For these Mexican American women there were certain turning points they identified and believed were a part of their transition out of the trajectory of continuing in poverty. For some of the women it was a very specific time when they decided and began to do something different. For others it was not so evident but was a culmination of influential factors that contributed to their exit from poverty. The turning points were places where the life course trajectory began in a new direction. Each choice point or step they took contributed to their transition into the middle class. Notably, several of the women postponed parenthood and marriage until after they pursued and received their college education. They made these types of transitions later in life and much later than expected for young, poor Mexican American women.

Elder's Life Course Perspective considers *historical time* as playing a role in transitions and experiences. Historical time played a role in the lives of the women in the study. The women who ranged in age between 36 and 51, began college during a time when there were few Mexican Americans attending a university. This made the women's experiences unique to the time period. Most of the women remembered being one of the only Mexican American students in their college classes. In this way one of the theme, "bucking the norm", emerged as

something these women had to do to make the transition in this time period. This study done 20 years from now with a new group of Mexican American women may suggest different struggles and hardships because there are currently more Mexican Americans in college than when these women went to college. A cohort born today and making this transition 20 years from now may not experience the same attitudes as these women encountered in getting to and attending college. Therefore these women experienced certain discrimination and prejudices because of when they were born and the time they became young women and began going to college and entering the work place.

The experiences of these women fit within the model of the LCP. Elder's trajectories, turning points, and transitions are concepts that help explain the experiences of the women and the process of transitioning out of poverty into the middle class. These women were resilient because they decided to utilize and take advantage of possible turning points and transitions through their human agency and life choice consciousness.

Conclusions and Additional Thoughts

These are new and unique insights this study adds to the literature on resilience and Mexican American women. Even though the women had a strong familial affiliation and connection they still made individualistic choices to further their own lives and careers. They figured out how to blend the best of both worlds, collectivistic and individualistic. They utilized teachings from parents and were close to their families while being able to pursue personal goals and an education for themselves. Acculturation or conformity to mainstream ideal and values were adopted by the women while

maintaining family closeness. These women were able to navigate and integrate two cultures and were therefore able to make this transition into the middle class.

Individual characteristics, familial support, and external support and resources were found to be components that foster resilience in individuals. Some external support and resources were present and played a role in the lives of the women but they were not nearly as salient as individual characteristics and familial support in the interviews. Herbert (1996) studied Latino men, extracurricular activities proved to be strength in their lives. On the contrary these women expressed not being able to participate in extracurricular activities because they did not have money to do those types of things. For these women it was not an option. So they used other things for fun and found fun things that were free and stayed together as a family. Also for a majority of the women physically going to a church was not a strong aid but their faith was. Therefore, the external support of church was not as prominent for these women as was their faith and belief in God.

Some areas previously mentioned in the literature review deserve attention but were not a part of the findings in this study. The resources model proposed by Becker (1981, 1993) as cited in Corcoran (1995) suggests lack of material resources is a determinant of individuals continuing in poverty. Lack of resources for employed parents include little time and money to spend on their children because they work at low-wage jobs; little time and no education to help children with their school. Some experiences of the women in the current study suggest that this assumption is simplistic and may not apply. Some of the women talked about their fathers and mothers teaching skills such as reading in Spanish and English, writing, and life skills such as having a good strong work

ethic, being respectful, and values about money. The mothers were involved in raising their children and all the participants frequently mentioned that their mothers were there for them and taught them valuable life lessons about money, faith, and life in general. This is different from the resource model assumption that if one lives in poverty the parents do not have the time or energy to teach their children. On the contrary these women's mothers were involved and present throughout their lives. Fathers, even though they worked long hours outside the home were also an influential presence in the home. In this way the resources model ignores cultural and historical differences in ethnic minority groups. Poverty does not necessarily equate to living in a single-parent home, living in a disadvantaged neighborhood or living in alcoholic and abusive family environments. These Mexican American women experiences of living in poverty included learning about education, hard work, and faith in two-parent homes. They saw their mothers and fathers work hard, sacrifice, and teach strong values.

This concept of modeling and teaching by example was powerful for the women. In this way it is important for especially ethnic minority groups to see modeling to help foster resilience. The implication for intervention programs is that more modeling is needed as opposed to solely teaching skills through verbal communication. Programs would be wise to include mentor and teacher activities that allow time for individuals to influence, model and demonstrate life skills that children need to increase resilience.

Admittedly, a few of the women in the study were more working class than poverty so their parents may have had more time to give to their children. Still, the majority of the women in this study both working class and poverty lived in a two-parent household most of their lives and all discussed how their parents were influential and

present in teaching throughout their lives. Notably experiences from those women who were working class were similar to those who were in poverty. Even though there was little money, for most of the women, only the father worked outside the home. Nina was the only participant with a mother who worked outside the home and even then she sewed and cleaned houses which allowed her to stay at home with her child until she went to school. Four of the women worked in the fields with their families and parents and parental work was done alongside the children.

This is where cultural connections must be considered. It is very integral to the Mexican American culture that women are caretakers of the children and home according to gender specific division of labor (Baca Zinn & Pok, 2002). Considering the connection between mother's staying at home and their cultural values of the family as primary for Mexican Americans it serves to explain why their mothers worked in the home even when the family lived in poverty. Research by Lichter and Landale (1995) support this family structural component of Mexican American families in poverty despite their two-parent status.

Lichter and Landale (1995) examined parental work, family structure, and poverty in Latino children. From their review on current literature they concluded high poverty rates are less associated with family structure among Latinos than they are among Blacks. This is particularly true for Mexican American and Cuban American children. Lichter and Landale (1995) evaluated "whether ethnic group differences in child poverty reflect variation in labor force participation, part-time employment, and full-time employment. "The modal pattern for all Latino children is one of living with a full-time employed father and a mother who stays at home, 23%" (Lichter & Landale, 1995, p. 349).

According to Lichter and Landale, most Mexican children 68% reside in two-parent homes. Interesting as well is the mere 20% of Mexican children that live in mother only homes compared to Blacks, at a much higher 47%. Of Mexican American children in poverty, 25% lived with a full-time employed father and non-employed mother, only 14% of Puerto Rican children live in this type of family structure, whereas only 7% of Blacks lived in this type of family structure. Therefore difference in familial structural and poverty vary based on racial and ethnic differences. These racial and ethnic differences may be attributed to cultural beliefs about work and values of division of labor. Licher and Landale concluded from their findings that “Latino children experience higher rates of poverty than their non-Latino White counterparts, regardless of whether they live with two parents or one, or whether their parents are employed or not” (p. 353).

Strengths and Contributions of This Study

This study contributed to the knowledge of Mexican American women and their upward income mobility. A qualitative phenomenological method was used to address Mexican American women’s experiences of transitioning into the middle class and the use of this type of methodology to examine this type of transition is scarce. Currently, no known study has qualitatively examined Mexican American women about this specific area. Research on minority groups and Mexican Americans in particular is lacking, as is research on women. Therefore the combination of these two areas is a strength of the study. Some research from the area of economics has addressed upward income mobility but it is highly quantitative in nature and lacks the voice and experience of the people who lived it. An important strength of the current study resides in it including a novel

approach that explores both upward income mobility in a specific minority group, Mexican Americans, and addresses the transition through women's experiences.

The current study used the process of member checking throughout the research and analysis process to increase validity and credibility (Creswell, 1998; Morse, 1998). Member checking was done on two separate phases of the data collection and analysis. First all the participants gave their approval and corrections on the completed typed transcripts. The women gave their feedback on the transcripts by giving suggestions on grammatical and content corrections that needed to be made. All six of the women were contacted and all six responded with their feedback. All six transcripts were approved and the suggestions were incorporated into the interviews before analysis began. A second phase of member checking was utilized. The participants were given a write-up of the results section and asked for their input and feedback once again. A follow-up questionnaire was also completed. The current study worked closely with the participants and received feedback from all six participants at both phases. This process served to increase the scientific rigor in this qualitative study.

Study Limitations

One limitation of the current study is the use of only self-reflective, retrospective reports as the source of data. Many times, in retrospective accounts discrepancies emerge because of memory loss or changes. Participants described their past and made sense of their past experiences in the present which maybe have influenced their interpretation. Even when using the Life History Calendar I found the women had difficulty remembering timing and age of certain transitions even when they were important memorable experiences in their lives. Therefore retrospective data is subject to less

accurate representations than longitudinal studies that interview people during different phases in their lives. Interviewing participants as they go through each of the transitions in life would increase the reliability of the findings in this study.

The women participated in this study of their own volition. It is possible that the women who volunteered may have had different experiences in their lives than those who did not agree to participate. It is possible that these women may have come to a better, deeper understanding of the transition into middle class from poverty than women who did not participate. The latter group of women may have had hurtful, painful memories or shame concerning their experiences in poverty or may not really think they are middle class yet. Therefore, because the women in this study were chosen solely on a voluntary basis their responses may be unlike those who may not volunteer for a study of this nature.

An external auditor also increases credibility. It is unfortunate however due to restrictions and time constraints an external auditor could not be included in this study. The external auditor could increase the strength of the study because the auditor has no previous work with the project and could, therefore, provide an objective perspective on the clarity of the data analysis procedures. The external auditor reviews the process of the primary researcher by looking at documents including copies of transcripts and notes to examine that there is a logical path from the data to the final essence of the experience described. For this project, the external auditor was not used and is a limitation of this study.

Recommendations for Future Research

The current study leaves room for future recommendations and questions that need to be addressed. First, it would be useful to duplicate the study using a population of men. Their experiences and processes may be unique because societal expectations are different for Mexican American men than for women. Mexican American men are expected to work and provide for the family as opposed to a woman who is expected to stay home and raise children. The expectation of working for the family, if traditional beliefs are held may make this transition different for men than women.

It would also be interesting to duplicate the study in other settings and ethnicities such as in Non-Hispanic White men and women. Because societal expectations may be different in those populations, this transition may be different as well. Working in the fields and doing seasonal labor or working the migrant circuit is historically a job Mexicans work when they immigrate to the United States. Therefore the type of work, and pay associated with it, places these families in poverty. For these Mexican American women their parents had a low income because of the type of work historically offered to Mexicans because of their immigration status. They were not poor because they did not work, could not work, or lived in single parent homes. On the contrary the parents worked long hard hours while living in poverty. This type of transition may be different for Non-Hispanic White families, whose parents have been born and raised in the United States. There may be different circumstances for living in poverty and unique societal expectations felt for Non-Hispanic White individuals in poverty. Familial relationships and coping strategies associated with living in poverty may look different as well. Racial barriers and obstacles for Non-Hispanic Whites may also vary because of their

historically dominant status in the United States. These types of similarities and differences would be interesting to explore for future research.

Using a grounded theory analysis and framework with the current study may address more areas that need exposure in this transition to middle class. A grounded theory method may raise better questions for the future and increase a deeper understanding about the process of this transition for Mexican American women.

It would also be interesting to examine other pathways in the life course to becoming middle class. Directions for future research should examine the experiences of individuals who make this transition without a college degree or any college experience. The factors that contribute to their resilience may vary according to these differences in transitions.

Interviewing women who exited poverty because of marriage would increase the scope of how this transition may look as well. Examining women who lived in poverty, and then transitioned to the middle class because of marriage, would provide new insight into the life course trajectories and transitions as well.

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APPENDIX A

**Texas Tech University
Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Office of Research Services
203 Holden Hall / MS 1035
742-3884**

May 2, 2006

Yvonne Caldera
Human Dvpt & Family Studies
Mail Stop: 1162

Regarding: 500438 Exiting poverty: Experiences of Resilient Mexican Americans

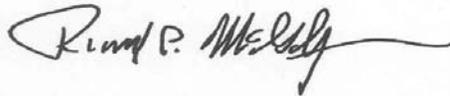
Dr. Yvonne Caldera:

The Texas Tech University Protection of Human Subjects Committee has approved your proposal referenced above. The approval is effective from May 2, 2006 through April 30, 2007. This expiration date must appear on all of your consent documents.

You will be reminded of the pending expiration approximately eight weeks prior to April 30, 2007 and asked to give updated information about the project. If you request an extension, the proposal on file and the information you provide will be routed for continuing review.

Best of luck on your project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Richard P. McGlynn", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Richard P. McGlynn, Chair
Protection of Human Subjects Committee

APPENDIX B

Mass Recruitment Email

Hello. My name is Victoria Bowman and I am a Masters student working on my thesis entitled *Exiting poverty: Experiences of Resilient Mexican American Women*. I visited a Latino/Hispanic Faculty and Staff Association meeting. I work under Dr. Yvonne Caldera. Some of you may remember me when I passed a sign up sheet around for volunteers for my study about Mexican Americans.

I am looking for volunteers now and some of the criteria has become more specific as I am further along in my research. If any of you fit this criteria or know anyone that does or even might have these experiences please if it is ok with them, email me their contact number and emails or refer them to me.

I am looking for:

single women (can also be women who are married now but considered themselves middle class before they were married)

identify themselves as Mexican American

lived in poverty the majority of their childhood and adolescent years (can include residing in typically low income neighborhoods; parents had minimal education or held lower wage jobs etc.)

now classify themselves as living in middle class.

**I want to explore the experiences of exiting poverty and transitioning into middle class for this group; so if you can help in any way or point me in the direction I can find some women who are included in this group let me know. Thank you so much for your help and time on this.

Any questions email me at victoria.l.bowman@ttu.edu or call me at 742-1114.

Victoria Bowman

APPENDIX C

Semi- Structured Interview

Project: Exiting poverty: Experiences of Resilient Mexican American Women

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

(Briefly describe the project)

Questions:

1. *When you talk about living in poverty what does that mean to you? How did you experience poverty?*
 - a. Did you realize you were in poverty?
 - b. When did you realize this?
 - c. How did you come to realize you were?
2. *Describe your financial situation as you were growing up.*
 - a. What you learned/thought about money?
 - b. Having or buying things?
 - c. Parents affording things?
3. *Describe your experience growing up Mexican American?*

What did it make you feel?

Did these experiences affect your decisions or choices?
(if did: how)
4. *Tell me about your experience of getting out of poverty?*
5. *When did you know you were out of poverty? (the moment you could buy something etc.)*
6. *What does being middle class mean to you?*
7. *How did being Mexican American affect this transition or did it?*
 - a. Made it harder? Easier?
8. *What do you believe got you to this place in your life now financially?*
 - a. Goals you had? (toward career)
 - b. Steps you took?

c. Monetarily handling of finances? (how organized money, beliefs and values surrounding money that helped them toward this place of middle class)

9. *Describe a “turning point” in your life? Something that stands out in your mind that greatly affected your future (present situation).*

- a. events/people/places that you see as transition or key points in your past that has greatly affected your future?
- b. Who/what was major influence in your life growing up?
- c. Who/what has impacted or changed your life the most?

10. *What advice would you give a child, adolescent living in poverty?*

11. *How did you experience this interview? Was there something I left out you want to add or that we didn't talk about that you want to?*

APPENDIX D

Demographic Information Questionnaire

1. Ethnicity:_____
2. Birth date: month____ day_____ year_____
3. Childhood region/area of residence:
4. Marital Status (check one):
_____ Single _____ Married _____ Divorced _____ Other
5. Number of children currently in home (under age 18): _____
6. Job Title/Position:_____
7. Current income (yearly: before taxes) \$_____
9. Your highest level of education: _____
10. Parents job title/position when you were a child: Father-_____Mother-

11. Parental highest level of education: Father-_____Mother-

12. Number of brothers or sisters growing up:_____
12. Generation:_____
13. Language spoken:_____

APPENDIX E

Table 1. Participant's Demographic Information

	Age	Highest level of Education	Marital Status	# of children	Job Title	Income	# of sibs	Two-parent home Y/N	Parents jobs/highest completed education	Childhood region of residence
Paloma	51	Master's Degree	Currently single; married & divorced twice	3	Information Services Librarian	38,000	9	Y	Dad- farm laborer/3 rd grade Mom- At home and farm laborer/ 1 st grade	South Texas, Rio Grande Valley
Sylvia	41	Bachelor's Degree	Never married	0	HIV Planning Coordinator	30,000	7	Y	Dad- Public university maintenance/ 3 rd grade Mom- at home/6 th grade	West Texas
Mari	44	Bachelor's Degree, and Juris Doctorate	Married	2	Attorney	80,000	4	Y	Dad- farm and ranch hand (also had own land)/no formal education Mom- at home/ 3 rd grade	Arizona, West TX
Luz	36	Master's Degree (currently working on Doctorate)	Married	2	Principal Supervisory Education Program Specialist	68,000 108,000	4	Y/N	Mom- at home/ 10 th grade Mom's husband- farm hand, migrant work/3 rd grade	Chicago, West TX
Amy	40	Bachelors' Degree	Married	2	Homemaker (previous case manager for health organization)	32,000	1	Y	Dad- Fork lift operator/9 th grade Mom- At home/ 10 th grade	West Texas
Nina	48	2 and ½ years of college	Married	2	Rehabilitation Services Technician	38,000	0	N/Y	Step-dad/Uncle- Utilities city worker/ 3 rd grade Mom/Aunt- seamstress, dishwasher, cleans houses/3 rd grade	West Texas

APPENDIX F

Consent Form

I agree to participate in a research project called "Exiting Poverty: Experiences of Resilient Mexican American Women." I understand that the persons responsible for this study are Dr. Yvonne Caldera whose phone number is 742-3000 extension 262 and Victoria Bowman whose telephone number is 742-1114.

I understand the purpose of the project is to understand the experiences of Mexican Americans who exited poverty and now live in middle class. I understand all information shared will be kept confidential. I understand I will be identified only by a pseudo name of my choice.

I understand a 90-120 minute interview will consist of open ended questions about 1) past experiences related to living in poverty 2) experiences related to getting out of poverty 3) feelings of living in middle class and 4) feelings about ethnicity and culture on the experience of this transition.

I do also realize some of the questions may bring up past feelings which may be happy or sad memories.

I also understand there may be a follow-up telephone contact asking about feelings and thoughts about the accuracy of the interview transcripts. I know I have no obligation to do the follow-up interview as well.

I understand there is no compensation for participation in this study and I can withdraw at any time. I agree I am participating voluntarily and understand there will be no negative consequences should I decide to withdraw from the study.

I grant permission for the data to be used in the process of completing a Master's degree, including a dissertation and any other future publication. I grant permission for the above personal information to be used. I realize if necessary I will be contacted at a later time to discuss additional information about the interviews. I also grant permission to tape-record the interviews.

By signing below I agree that I have read and understand this form as well as have had all my questions answered.

Research Participant

Date

expiration on approval: April 30, 2007

APPENDIX G

Life History Calendar

	Birth – 10 (early childhood)	Adolescence 11-18	Early Adulthood 19-30	Mid-Adulthood 31-current
Lived Where?				
People in HH (Siblings other family members)				
Your Parent's Job				
Your Education				
Work Jobs Held				
Income Estimates: Self				
Major events/Transitions?				
Who was there for you? Familial support School: Teachers Community Resources				

SOURCE: Format from Giele, Janet K. Innovations in the Typical Life Course. (1998). In, J. Z Giele. & G.H. Elder Jr. (Eds.), *Methods of Life Course Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (pp.231-263) Thousand Oaks, London: Sage Publications, Inc.

APPENDIX H

Follow-Up: Member Checking Questions

Do you think this is an accurate description of your experience?

What are the places/if any you would like to change?

Things you want to clarify?

Any additional insights or feelings you had as your reread the write-up?

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Agree (Permission is granted.)

__Victoria Bowman_____
Student Signature

_11/20/06_____
Date

Disagree (Permission is not granted.)

Student Signature

Date