Abstract

High attrition rates among Latino students have long been identified as a major problem in college. Few attempts have been made to understand the normative developmental experiences among this population. This study, based on a study of lives, narrative approach, examines the experiences of urban Dominican-American college students. Their strategies for effectively navigating a wide variety of contexts (e.g., school, work, family, and neighborhood) are analyzed, and implications for their educational efforts are examined within a developmental framework. Gender disparities and immigrant processes are also explored.

Two part interviews were completed with eleven participants. The first interview was semi-structured and the second was open-ended. Participants were also asked to collect images that represented success. Analysis of the data focused on gathering the following: 1) identifying ‘master ‘cultural narratives of Dominican immigrant experiences, especially those relating to school 2) highlighting the reproduction of culture and identity within the narratives 3) emphasizing and revealing strategies and choices that participants were making to gain success and 4) drawing attention to the immigrant experience and its salience in the psychological and developmental processes of this group of college students.

The results showed that daily contexts in men and women's lives appeared to be gendering educational experiences and opportunities for successful school outcomes. Both male and female participants cited challenges about staying in school, with roles being influenced by the current social and cultural-historical context. Men’s experience was uniquely challenging;
their definition of success was contextualized within a framework that offered limited and negative meanings of masculinity.

Women’s definition of success focused on the search for independence and the desire to have a family. Education was a means of access to these goals. They experienced protection and support within their contexts. As immigrants, all students experienced a consistent negotiation of self and identity that led to transformative behaviors in themselves and their contexts.

The current research aspires to contribute to understanding the complexity of psychological processes in immigrant groups living in the United States—beyond Dominicans and other Latinos. Of salience, it implies that institutional practices may contribute to the disengagement of young men of color.