OPTIMISM & BELIEF IN THE AMERICAN OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURE:
THE CASE OF URBAN SECOND GENERATION LATINO YOUNG MEN

Maria Rendón
University of California, Irvine
I examine second generation Latino young adult’s choices, decisions and worldviews—cultural outlooks—about or in relation to getting ahead.

I try to examine if and how the urban context influences these cultural outlooks.

The goal is to provide greater understanding of how and why inner city Latino young men think as they do & point out the opportunities & limitations to focusing on cultural outlooks as a way to address the problems associated with these young men.
Why are “cultural frames” “belief systems” “narratives” important?

Academic and popular rhetoric around inner city young men suggests their cultural outlooks are different or add odds with “mainstream” ideas of getting ahead.
Cultural Outlooks & Urban Poverty

- Academics – **Reconsidering Culture and Poverty** (Harding, Lamont and Small, 2010 *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*)
  - National Poverty Center Brief; Congressional Hearing
  - “Culture of Poverty is Back” – NY Times

- **President Barack Obama’s Initiative** “*My Brother’s Keeper*”:
  - “…learn life skills, like how to be a responsible citizen, how to deal with life’s challenges and how manage frustration in a constructive way and how to set goals for themselves… make right choices, and to be resilient and to overcome obstacles and achieve their dreams.”
Cultural Outlooks & Urban Poverty

- “We have got this tailspin of culture, in our inner cities in particular, of men not working and just generations of men not even thinking about working or learning the value and the culture of work, and so there is a real culture problem here that has to be dealt with”

  Representative Paul Ryan (R-WI)

From the left or the right, addressing the problems of inner city young men involves correcting their choices, decisions and worldviews. The consensus seems to be that these young men have strayed too from away from America’s core values.
Latinos In Urban America

- **53 million**, 17% U.S. population
  - CA: **14.5 million**; Los Angeles: **4.8 mill.**, highest of any county

- **65% Mexican-origin;** 9.4% Puerto Rican, 4% Salvadoran, 4% Cuban, 3% Dominican and 2.3% Guatemalan.

- **25.3% poverty rate; $38,624**, median household income

- **35%** of Latino children live in poverty; **6.1 million**, more than any other racial/ethnic group & **2/3** are children of immigrants

- **Hypersegregated & concentrated high poverty** neighborhoods

- **Working Poor**: **67.4%** 16 & older in labor force (vs 64% national average)
Figure 1
Hispanic Children, by Generation, 2007 and 1980
(% in each generation)

Source: Pew Hispanic Center tabulations of the 1980 Decennial Census and 2007 American Community Survey Integrated Public Use Micro Samples.
Downward Assimilation for the Second Generation? (Portes and Zhou, 1993)

- **Economy**: Bifurcated Economy
- **Context of Reception**: Social (Racism/Xenophobia) & Political(Safety Net, Immigration, Laws/Enforcement)

- **Urban Context**: Children of poor, non-white immigrants at risk to develop a “reactive identity” and adopting an “adversarial subculture” (oppositional culture) of “downtrodden” racial minorities (i.e. Blacks, third-plus Mexican Americans)
## Figure 1.1
For Young Latinos, a Difficult Passage to Adulthood
(%)  

### Females age 19 who are mothers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hispanics</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacks</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whites</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asians</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### High school dropout rate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hispanics</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacks</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whites</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asians</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Living in poverty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hispanics</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacks</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whites</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asians</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Whites, blacks and Asians include only non-Hispanics. Asians includes Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders. The high school dropout rate is the share of 16- to 24-year-olds who have not received a high school diploma or equivalent and are not enrolled in school or college. Poverty rate is estimated for 16- to 25-year-olds.

Figure 1

Hispanic Education on the Rise
Share of Hispanic Youth Dropping out of High School at a Record Low ...

And Share of Hispanic High School Graduates Immediately Enrolling in College at Record High

Notes: The top figure shows the status high school dropout rate for Hispanic 16- to 24-year-olds. The bottom figure shows the immediate college entry rate for recent Hispanic high school graduates. Due to the small sample size for Hispanics, a 3-year moving average is used. The 3-year moving average uses the year indicated, the year immediately preceding and the year immediately following. For 2012 a 2-year moving average is used.

### Figure 1.2
Native-Born Young Latinos Do Better Than Foreign Born on Some Measures (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Foreign born</th>
<th>Native born</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proficient in English</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled in high school or college</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Foreign born refers to those born outside of the U.S. including Puerto Rico. Proficient in English refers to those 16- to 25-year-olds who can carry on a conversation, both understanding and speaking, very well or pretty well. High school enrollment is tabulated for 16- to 24-year-olds.


### Figure 1.3
...But Native-Born Young Latinos Do Worse Than Foreign Born on Other Measures (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Foreign born</th>
<th>Native born</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knows someone in a gang</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Got into a fight in the last year</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Foreign born refers to those born outside of the U.S. including Puerto Rico. Figures refer to 16- to 25-year-olds.

Source: Pew Hispanic Center, 2009 National Survey of Latinos.
Exclusion or Integration for Second Generation Mexicans?


- **Stagnation - Permanent Working Class** *(Ortiz, 1996; Telles & Ortiz, 2008; Waldinger & Feliciano, 2004)*

- **Delayed Integration** *(Bean & Stevens, 2003; Brown, 2007; Perlmann, 2005)*
Original Research Questions

- Does the urban neighborhood impact acculturation processes and social mobility prospects of second generation Latino young men? If so, how?
  - Is it a function of an oppositional culture or what other neighborhood mechanism?

- Specifically, what are the education and work-related outlooks of Latino young adults? What informs their views and what explains their education and work-related decisions?
Pre-Recession Study (2007)

Identified two similarly disadvantaged neighborhoods in Los Angeles (37% poverty rate)
- *Pueblo Viejo*, Mexican Immigrant Neighborhood
- *Central City*, Black/Latino Neighborhood

42 male young adult (18-24 yrs.) children of Latino immigrants interviewed ~3 times/each over one year
- 1 interview with a parent of each young man
- 160 in-depth, semi-structured interviews

Cases purposefully selected along educational trajectories:
- 1/3 HS Non-Completers; 1/3 College Youth; 1/3 HS Grads

Ethnographic observations complement these interviews
Is the neighborhood meaningful and if so in what way?

- How much time do they spend in the neighborhood – how do they understand its boundaries – how much time outside; how much of their social world is neighborhood bound?
  - Very meaningful in adolescence – what mattered most for these young men were the conflicts, victimization, violence in these neighborhoods.

- Is this violence related to outlooks & decisions about getting ahead?
  - Dropping out is not an event a choice at a given point in time, but a process that involves school disengagement, suspensions, expulsion, going to continuation schools, etc. The interviews suggested violence was part of this process...how so?
Caught Up

I had homies where I used to live in the apartments and you can say that they were gang related. They didn’t try to get me in the gang...because they were more the family type. “I’ll respect you if you don’t do this [join the gang]”. They actually told me, “Nah, don’t do this...I already fucked up so you don’t do this”...like family just looks out for you. But if something happened, if somebody did something to one of us, then we all got his back because we all kicked it together

(Sergio, 18)

Young men draw on male peer ties for protection & inherent in these ties are obligations and expectations. An orientation that privileges these obligations and expectations – and not an anti-school orientation – get male youth “caught up” in behavior counterproductive to school completion, like ditching & fighting.
Why Some but Not Others?

- Not all youth adopt this orientation because not all inner city youth are similarly exposed to the neighborhood.
  - Family and school institutional factors limit some youths’ time in neighborhood, buffering them from violence. Bypassing the need and opportunity to draw on male peer ties, these young men do not employ the same “strategies of action,” avoid getting “caught up” and experience higher chances to graduate.

- ... I was in the Magnet Program. If I was in the regular track, I would have met all sorts of kids my age that lived around my block...and we would have hung out. I would have had friends that lived close by.... I didn’t know anybody around my block. I didn’t hang out with the neighborhood kids and till this day, the people that’s my age around my block I don’t know who they are. I don’t know their name.

  Fernando, 22, a college student
Urban Violence & Cultural Orientations

- Urban violence is the most salient feature of urban neighborhoods and consequential for school non-completion. To understand cultural orientation that guides behavior that contributes to school non-completion requires accounting for how the threat of violence punctuates and organizes the daily lives of male urban youth.

“Caught Up:” How Urban Violence and Peer Ties Contribute to High School Non-Completion.”

Social Problems. 61 (1)
Getting Ahead in the Inner City

- Urban conditions do little to alter conventional outlooks about getting ahead for most young men.

- **Second Generation:**
  - Strong believers in the American Dream & idea that working hard you can get ahead
  - Optimistic - Immigrant parents accomplishments fuel their optimism
It’s like he (undocumented dad) got all this, this is a lot …but he worked for it. So I think that if I work for it too that I may get something of what he got…Even more…’cause I was born here. It’s more of an advantage. You isn’t got to worry about getting stuck there, like there’s no more jobs for you ‘cause you weren’t born here … it’s just up to me to do what I got to do.

Jaime, HS Non-Completer (2007):
Coming of Age in the Great Recession

Unemployment Rate, by Age, 1990-2011

Notes: Shaded areas represent economic downturns. “All” refers to ages 18 to 64.
Follow Up Study - Half of the Original Sample

42 in-depth, semi-structured interviews

- 21 male young adult (23-29 yrs.) children of Mexican immigrants
- 1 interview with a parent
Getting Ahead

- Has the recession altered their “immigrant optimism” and shifted their perspective of the American opportunity structure?

- How are these young men fairing? How did they and their parents weather the economic downturn?

- Did the neighborhood matter now?
Where are they now?

- Dropout (8)
  - Dropout (5)
    - $0-$17
  - HS Grad or GED (5)
    - $10.50-$25.50
- HS Grad (6)
- College-Tracking (6)
  - 4-Yr Coll. Grad (4)
    - $15-$23
  - AA/Some College (6)
    - $8-$30
Where are they living now?

- 14 out 21 – Same Neighborhoods
  - 2 Homeowners

- 11 out 21 still living with parents
  - 1 Homeowner with parent

- 2 Other Kin (1 sister, 1 in-laws)
  - 1 father & married

- 7 living independently
  - 2 Homeowners; 1 SSI
  - 5 fathers; 1 married

- 1 prisoner
Second Generation Optimism
Holds Steady

Efrain, 27, School Non-Completer, $10/hr, father of two (2012):

I see ourselves (achieving) middle class... because my parents have grown a lot. They own their own house, they're pushing themselves...it's pretty hard raising seven kids... And my mom, from where she came from and the steps she took...working at the school district, going to school (community college), doing everything that she could for us, it's pretty amazing. My dad taking all those shifts, night and day...and improving in his English not having a school background. It's pretty amazing...I've seen them achieve things in their life. So they're able to do it not having a lot... And me, I only have two kids and I was born here...there's no way in hell I have to fail. Because if they struggled this much and they've gotten me to this point ... to see me fail?... Might as well just jump off a cliff and never have existed.
Inner City Young Men
Optimistic Believers in American Dream

- American meritocratic ideology (Hochschild, 1995; MacLeod, 1987; Young, 2005)

- Immigrant Co-Narrative Sustains Optimism & Reinforces American Dream -- not just about motivated and optimistic immigrants
Reymundo (2007):

“We paid a high cost. What good is having what we have if I can’t share it with my loved ones, our parents, our siblings? What good is having a good car if I can’t take my mom for a ride? ...What good is it to send my mom money, but what she wants is to be with me?... *It’s not an American Dream.* The American Dream means being truly happy, happy in all sense of the word.”

Brisa (2007)

“*It’s nice to dream, but life here is hard...*”
Immigrant Narrative

- **Narrative of Upward Mobility** - Second generation perceive parents – especially father/fathers figures -- have attained some social mobility in the United States; believe reflects fathers’ strong worth ethic

- **Collectivist Narrative** – Immigrants’ fate and sacrifice is tied to the second generation; this feeds a sense of resiliency and determination when confronted with structural obstacles
Immigrant Narrative of Work and Upward Mobility

“If my dad made it...he’s not a millionaire or has a degree, but he made it starting out from scratch...its because of all the work he’s done. He never gave up. I’m not going to give up either...I can do even better. He tells me too, you must be dumb if you don’t make it...It’s true”

Cristobal, 18, 2007

The Role of Immigrant Fathers Work:

- Latino immigrant men have the highest attachment to the labor market of all men, including whites (Bureau of Labor Statistics, Solis and Galvin, 2012)

- Immigrant men’s experience in the labor market impacts how the second generation understands and approaches their own opportunities to get ahead
Collectivist Narrative: The American Dream Lies with the Second Generation

- “Immigrant parents come here and they work hard...They become stable financially. That’s part of the American Dream. The next step [in fulfilling the dream] comes with the next generation.”

  Federico, 23, undocumented college graduate

- “How do I know I’ve attained the American Dream? When I see it with my children.”

  Carmen, immigrant mother
Analytic Distinction

- **Optimism**, an orientation that captures young men’s faith in their own ability to get ahead.

- **Beliefs about the American opportunity structure**, which can be perceived as open or constrained.
Second Generation Views on the American Opportunity Structure

- Open, Many Opportunities
  “There’s no barrier for us. There’s nothing holding us back. It all takes time, work and effort and if you mix those all up you can get yourself where you want to be. Right now its not where I want to be but I know I’m on the right path”

  Genaro, 25, HS non-completer, $17/hr

- Constrained Opportunities
  - Undocumented
  - College Educated
Constrained Opportunities

“I think this country provides opportunities. It is possible for you to achieve the American Dream ... but I don’t think its accessible to everybody...I’ve gotten, what is it?...disillusioned with the American Dream.”

_Federico, 24, undocumented, underemployed college graduate_

“When you go to college you don’t know what to do. It would have been helpful if growing up you had a role model, an idea of what you want to do...I don’t have to study to work in costura (sewing). I didn’t know anybody that worked in Finance...to help me, guide me on what to do, what to study, where to go...”

_Leonardo, 25, college graduate_
Resorting on an Immigrant-Narrative

“I was able to empower myself and be like, “What the hell am I doing here feeling all depressed?...Look at my parents, they’re undocumented.” I’ve come to the realization that I’m going to continue living my life. I don’t care if I am undocumented. Like I’m going live my life like my parents, happy. This 9 digit number is not going to determine my happiness or my success. I am going to continue, go to graduate school. I am going to do what I want and I am not going to back down.”

Federico, 24, undocumented, underemployed college graduate
Lacking an Immigrant Narrative of Upward Mobility

Self-Blame in the Land of Opportunity

- Fernando described his jobless father as “broken”, someone who “lost ambition”, questioned why “not start at the bottom”; “I’m afraid of losing my ambition and becoming like my dad”
  - “The job came to me, I did nothing. For six years I could have looked for another job”

- “I brought it upon myself... its not their fault (police who profile him)... its my fault... I think of everything and everything just leads to my fault. Its all my fault”

Valentin, 27, HS Non-completer, ex-gang member, on SSI
Does the Urban Context Influence Cultural Outlooks about Getting Ahead?

- Violence $\rightarrow$ social ties & orientation to adhere to expectations & reciprocity $\rightarrow$ HS non-completion

- Urban context does not alter conventional orientations, i.e., hard work, American Dream
  - Second Generation young men adhere to an immigrant narrative, embedded in the idea that hard work pays off & a collectivist orientation that strongly encourages resiliency and perseverance in the face of obstacles. More likely to be harsh critics of their choices, not opportunity structure.
The Problem with a focus on Cultural Orientations

- Do we alter outlooks, cultural frames, worldviews, choices?

- Cultural Outlooks are embedded in structural realities
  - Urban Violence
  - Limited Jobs, Kin & Neighborhood-based Social Networks that link to jobs
Thank you

Gracias