Latina Spaces: Middle-Class Ethnic Capital and Professional Associations in the Latino Community

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This article examines the incorporation of middle-class Latinas in Southern California. Based on three years of participant observation, 30 in-depth interviews, and 50 conversational interviews with the organization’s members, I find that the upwardly mobile Latinas mobilize “middle-class ethnic capital” to create professional associations in ethnic communities that provide valuable business skills, networks, and social capital to coethnics. Members of the organization realize that they must approximate the normative business standards of white middle-class business culture to get ahead, yet they feel that it is vital to retain their ethnic identity and provide resources to the ethnic community. While contemporary immigration research maintains the Latino ethnic communities lack the “high-quality resources” that might buffer against downward assimilation and advance upward mobility, these findings suggest that it takes one or two extra generations for Latinos to mobilize class and ethnic resources to promote mobility.

INTRODUCTION

Previous research on Mexican-origin persons, and Latinos more generally, in the United States is dominated by an interest in the poor and unauthorized (see Menjivar, 2000; Romero, 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Dohan, 2003; Massey, Durand, and Malone, 2003; Agius and Lee, 2006). That the majority of studies examine the disadvantaged is not surprising, considering that Mexican immigrants typically migrate to the United States with low levels of human capital, work in low-wage occupations upon arrival and often thereafter, and usually live in communities that are characterized as poor and working class with few opportunities for upward mobility (Baca Zinn and Wells, 2000; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Dohan, 2003). These factors, combined with the changing nature of the U.S. economy and the fear that some immigrants and their children will be viewed and treated as racialized minorities, has led a number of scholars to posit that the children of low-skilled labor migrants, especially Mexicans, are at risk for downward assimilation into a rainbow underclass (Portes and Zhou, 1993; Ortiz, 1996; Lopez and Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Portes, Fernandez-Kelly, and Haller, 2005). Hence, at the heart of the contemporary immigration debate is whether the new second generation is following the path of yesterday’s white ethnic immigrants who moved rapidly into

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the middle class or whether they are experiencing downward mobility into a minority underclass culture. Few scholars consider that today’s second generation might become upwardly mobile and incorporate into a minority middle-class community (Neckerman, Carter, and Lee, 1999).

This article contributes to the literature on the Mexican-origin and Latino population by studying 1.5- and second-generation middle-class professional and upwardly mobile Latinas, an understudied and often ignored segment of the population. This research is significant as it demonstrates how Latinas mobilize “middle-class ethnic capital” to promote the mobility of coethnics. This study is especially timely considering that Latina-owned businesses have increased 63 percent between 1997 and 2004 (Center for Women’s Business Research, 2006). Latinas are also more likely to attend college and graduate from college than their male counterparts (Feliciano and Rumbaut, 2005; Rumbaut, 2005). One implication of these trends may be that entrepreneurial and educated Latinas mobilize resources in the ethnic community differently than low-income Latinas, who are primarily concerned with day-to-day subsistence. Moreover, the relatively young age structure of the Mexican 1.5 and second generation compared to whites makes the study of their incorporation critical since they will comprise a larger proportion of the working-age population (Bean and Stevens, 2003; Myers, 2007). For this reason, it is important to understand the incorporation experiences of the Mexican-origin and Latino middle class because their labor market experiences and outcomes are extremely different from those of their parents, a majority of whom have worked in low-wage “immigrant jobs” (Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, and Waters, 2004).

I examine a Latina professional organization to determine the role of the ethnic community and professional organizations for upwardly mobile Latinas. Using the Association of Latinas in Business (ALB), an organization in Santa Ana, California, as a strategic research site, I find that Mexican communities are not homogenous in regards to class and that upwardly mobile and professional Latinas use class and ethnic capital to create social spaces in the community to promote the mobility of coethnics. These social spaces also help to reinforce a class-based minority identity. The role of ethnic institutions has been studied with Asian adolescents and adults, but not with Mexican origin or Latino adults, making it largely unknown if and how the ethnic community helps the mobility prospects of Latino immigrants and their children after they reach adulthood. Three questions guide the analysis of this civically active group of upwardly mobile and middle-class Latinas. First and more broadly, how are upwardly mobile Latinos incorporating into American society? Second, what is the role of the ethnic community and ethnic institutions for the Mexican-origin middle class? Third, what types of social spaces do upwardly mobile Latinos create and why?

THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

TIES TO THE IMMIGRANT ETHNIC COMMUNITY

Contemporary immigration research emphasizes that some Asian and black immigrant communities in the United States provide extensive benefits to their residents that buffer against downward assimilation into a minority underclass culture and improve chances for upward mobility (Portes and Zhou, 1993; Zhou and Bankston, 1998; Waters, 2001; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Zhou and Kim, 2006). While these immigrant groups draw on
the resources of the ethnic community to facilitate their upward mobility, Mexican communities are not characterized as having strong ethnic institutions, nor do they traditionally exhibit a strong entrepreneurial presence. This ethnic resource gap within Mexican communities, combined with the reality that the majority of Mexican immigration is a low-skilled labor migration, has led a number of scholars to reach pessimistic conclusions regarding the social, organizational, and financial resources that the Mexican ethnic community can muster and offer to recent arrivals and later generations (Gibson, 1998; Baca Zinn and Wells, 2000; Lopez and Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Portes, Fernandez-Kelly, and Haller, 2005). For example, Baca Zinn and Wells (2000, p. 256) argue that “The social class context of the Mexican community is overwhelmingly poor and working class. Mexicans remain over-represented in low-wage occupations, especially service, manual labor and low-end manufacturing. These homogeneous lower-class communities lack the high-quality resources that could facilitate upward mobility for either new immigrants or second-and later-generation Mexicans.” The overemphasis on the economically marginalized immigrant generation and their downwardly mobile adult children who remain in poor immigrant communities leads to the erroneous conclusion that the Mexican ethnic community is homogeneous in terms of class and therefore able to provide little or no resources to support upward mobility.

Previous research that examines the political and social organization of the immigrant and subsequent generations finds that Mexican females, and Latinas more broadly, usually mediate between the immigrant community and broader social structures because they are more likely than men to orient themselves to remaining in the host country. Consequently, it is important to study women as they may be the first to organize groups in the community that are directed at increasing representation and providing resources to low-income ethnic communities (Grasmuck and Pressar, 1991; Naples, 1991; Jones-Correa, 1998). However, a majority of studies focus on the ways in which poor or working-class Latinas struggle to bring resources to disadvantaged ethnic communities through grassroots organizing and activism. Few studies examine how forms of community activism change as class status changes. One exception is Marquez’s (2003) study of MANA, a Mexican American women’s business association. MANA was founded in the 1970s by feminist Chicana activists to combat racial and gender discrimination while preserving a Mexican identity (Marquez, 2003). MANA works to promote the mobility of its members through networking, leadership training, and lobbying at the national level to protest issues affecting the Latino community, such as the deportation of Mexican nationals and English-only legislation, while at the same time bringing attention to issues that male-oriented Mexican organizations have habitually overlooked, like reproductive rights and domestic violence (Marquez, 2003, p. 95). Although MANA was formed to combat racial/ethnic and gender discrimination, their approach to upward mobility does not officially challenge racial/ethnic, gender, and economic structures. Instead, Marquez argues that they advocate an individual approach to mobility in that they “demand no more than an equal application of the rules governing social hierarchy” (Marquez, 2003, p. 10). The ALB, the organization studied here, is different from MANA for several reasons. First, they are a 501 (c) (3) nonprofit community-level organization, which means that they are a nonpartisan charitable group focused first and foremost on providing resources in a specific geographical area, rather than advocacy at the national level, making them unable to take a position on any political issue affecting the larger
community, such as unauthorized Mexican migration. Consequently, they do not lobby the government or support local or national political candidates that are sympathetic to “Mexican” or “Latino” causes. Their form of activism is to focus exclusively on promoting the mobility of Latinas in the immediate community. Second, MANA was created in the wake of Chicana activism and political struggle, whereas the ALB was created as the 1.5 and second generation experienced upward mobility and began to enter the professional business community.

SEGMENTED ASSIMILATION AND THE MINORITY CULTURE OF MOBILITY

In their influential theory of segmented assimilation, Portes and Zhou (1993) argue that today's new immigrants face three distinct paths of incorporation: straight-line assimilation into the white middle class; assimilation into a minority underclass culture; and selective assimilation, where immigrant parents deliberately embed their children in a supportive coethnic community in order to delay acculturation, subsequently preventing downward assimilation into a minority underclass culture. Selective, or delayed, assimilation has been demonstrated among some Asian and black immigrant groups but not among Mexican origin adolescents or adults, who are touted as lacking these buffering ethnic institutions in their communities (Portes and Zhou, 1993; Ortiz, 1996; Zhou and Bankston, 1998; Lopez and Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Waters, 2001; Portes, Fernandez-Kelly, and Haller, 2005). As Portes and Rumbaut argue (2001, p. 279), “Mexican immigrants represent the (emphasis in original) textbook example of theoretically anticipated effects of low immigrant human capital combined with a negative context of reception” that cumulatively leads to downward mobility across the generations.

One critique of segmented assimilation is that a majority of case studies that examine these three different patterns of adaptation do not go beyond studying adolescents whose life course trajectories are incomplete, making it largely unknown if the Mexican ethnic community helps the mobility prospects of the 1.5 and second generation after they reach adulthood and enter the mainstream economy (Bean and Stevens, 2003). Segmented assimilation assumes that upwardly mobile Mexican and Latino adults will incorporate as middle-class whites because they have become economically successful and entered the mainstream business economy. Other scholars have recently argued that segmented assimilation overestimates the extent of downward mobility among the Mexican-origin and Latino population and recent studies demonstrate large gains in income and education between the first and second generations (Bean and Stevens, 2003; Smith, 2003; Waldinger and Feliciano, 2004; Myers, 2007; Zhou et al., 2008).

While Portes and Zhou (1993) problematize Gordon’s (1964) classic unidirectional path of assimilation, they fail to consider the possibility that incorporating as a minority might not always be in a downward direction. To remedy this limitation, Neckerman, Carter, and Lee (1999) propose an additional possibility—incorporation into a minority middle-class culture. By decoupling assimilation into a minority culture with downward mobility, Neckerman, Carter, and Lee (1999) advance the possibility that today’s new immigrants may achieve upward mobility yet incorporate into a minority middle-class culture and community. The minority culture of mobility—which is not a separate culture but a set of cultural elements that emerge in response to distinct problems rooted
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in structural disadvantage, discrimination, or a negative context of reception—helps to explain how minorities deal with challenges that accompany minority middle-class status. The minority culture of mobility proposes that ethnic social and civic spaces in the community might be especially important as today’s new immigrants become upwardly mobile and enter into a mainstream professional economy that is largely white and middle class. These organizations might help promote mobility, foster ethnic solidarity and retention of an ethnic identity, and also provide shelter from the everyday experiences of discrimination.

The three paths of incorporation outlined by segmented assimilation do not allow for the possibility that second and later generations can become upwardly mobile and middle class without cutting their ties with the ethnic community and becoming white. By following the theoretical model of the minority culture of mobility, I suspect that the ALB might foster retention of a class-based ethnic identity rather than a white identity. I also suspect that middle-class Latinos face a unique set of challenges associated with their middle class and minority status, especially in the context of Orange County, California, a region that has a long history of discrimination and exclusion of the Mexican-origin population. Membership in ethnic organizations embedded in the Latino community might help deal with these challenges while at the same time providing valuable business skills that facilitate mobility.

DATA AND METHODS

This research draws on 36 months of observation and participant observation of a middle-class Latina professional organization that serves the Latino community in Orange County, California. Lasting between one and two hours, I conducted 30 face-to-face, in-depth interviews, which were structured, open-ended, tape-recorded, and then transcribed verbatim. I also conducted 50 conversational interviews with members of the organization. I have logged over 1,200 hours of fieldwork. I attended 30 two- to three-hour board meetings held once a month and observed at the ALB’s monthly breakfast meetings and quarterly mixers that provide members with networking time and valuable business topics such as negotiating business deals and business etiquette. Furthermore, I attended the ALB’s yearly strategizing retreat, which lasted nine hours and was held at a ritzy hotel located along the coastal Orange County area. It was at this retreat after six months of continual observation that the founding president and president-elect asked if I would be interested in co-chairing one of the more esteemed committees. I agreed and my more visible participation increased my credibility with the board members and members of the organization in general.

THE ORGANIZATION

The Association for Latinas in Business,1 or the ALB, is a 501 (c) (3) nonprofit organization based in Santa Ana, a city in Orange County. The ALB was established in May 2004 and currently has nearly 300 members, 22 percent of whom are men.2 The members of this organization are Latino entrepreneurs or executives and are first- or
second-generation immigrants, meaning that they or their parents are foreign born. Membership in the organization is $100 and must be renewed yearly. Members must also pay to attend all events, but at a discounted rate.

The founders of the organization specifically filed for 501 (c) (3) status for several reasons. First, they wanted to set themselves apart from 501 (c) (6) groups, like the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, that primarily focus on advocacy rather than education. For example, the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce can endorse political candidates or lobby for issues affecting business owners while the ALB cannot. The intention was that the ALB would be a charitable organization that provides hands-on educational training to members of the immediate community. As one of the founding board members explained, “We are not a chamber of commerce organization. A (c) (3) is more of what you are doing for the community and helping those in need.” The second reason for applying for 501 (c) (3) status was to be eligible for corporate and federal grants to underwrite their business education programs. The ALB relies on corporate sponsorships and grants to fund their signature instructional programs like the Financial Literacy School and the Latina Business Development Program.

While I observed, interviewed, and constantly conversed with the membership at large, the majority of my day-to-contact was with the ALB’s 19 female board members, eight of whom are entrepreneurs. These small business owners own service-oriented businesses such as accounting and marketing firms and staffing agencies. One of the board members works for a large nonprofit organization, and the remaining board members are employed as bankers, lawyers, and high-ranking executives in medium to large corporations. While the majority has college degrees, several of the small-business owners, and a few of the bankers, have only graduated from high school or technical schools. Those without college degrees are more likely to own businesses because they understand that not having a college degree restricts opportunities for upward mobility in corporate settings. Several of these small businesses cater to the ethnic community, both to upwardly mobile Latinos and the more recently arrived. Those with college degrees or who work in corporations are more likely to work in white middle-class business settings. Over half of the board members self-report that they grew up poor in low-income neighborhoods, meaning that they have achieved their mobility in one generation. All of the board members own their own homes and make well over the national median income. A third of the board members live in middle-class neighborhoods scattered with historic homes in North Santa Ana. Everyone else lives in affluent, primarily white, towns in the surrounding area. However, a number of those who live in upper middle-class areas beyond Santa Ana grew up in the city’s poorer neighborhoods. Like middle-class African Americans, the majority of these middle-class Latinas are strongly embedded in the lower-class Mexican ethnic community in Santa Ana through their social ties to poorer coethnics who remain there (Pattillo, 2000).

Their ages range from 24 to 65 years and mirror that of the organization as a whole. While a majority of the board members are of Mexican origin, several of the board members are from Central and South American countries, such as Ecuador and Argentina. All official business is conducted in English but the board members speak Spanish frequently to convey a particular point or when informally speaking among themselves. The board members, and the general membership, also run the gamut in phenotype, from dark skin and dark hair to blond hair and blue eyes.
<table>
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<th>Total Population</th>
<th>Santa Ana</th>
<th>Orange County</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bachelor of arts or higher (%)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Source: 2000 Census.

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

The city of Santa Ana is located in Orange County, one of the most affluent counties in the nation and an area made famous by television shows like *The O.C.* and *Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County* that glamorize the lifestyles of Orange County’s wealthy white population. Santa Ana is only nine miles from Newport Beach, the backdrop for *The O.C.*, and only 15 miles from Laguna Beach, but the city is an entirely different world (Arellano, 2004). As Table 1 demonstrates, Santa Ana evinces glaring inequalities in housing, income, and education compared to Orange County as a whole. For example, Santa Ana’s residents have attained significantly lower levels of education than the average Orange County resident. Less than half of Santa Ana’s residents over 25 have graduated high school, as compared to 80 percent of Orange County, and only 9 percent hold a college degree (U.S. Census). Orange County’s poorest ZIP code is located in Santa Ana (where the median household income is only one-third of that of the county) and many neighborhoods are marred by high levels of poverty and ruled by gangs, notorious for the sale of narcotics and weapons (Bridenball and Jesilow, 2005; Gittelshon, 2008). Housing density is greater than in any Orange County city and as 2007 drew to a close, Santa Ana had the highest ratio of foreclosed homes in the county (Gittelshon, 2008).

Santa Ana’s relatively low median income, high housing density, and low rates of education are exacerbated by the generational status of the city’s residents. Santa Ana’s population is 76 percent Latino (65 percent ethnically identify as Mexican), as compared to 33 percent of the county, and over half of the city’s residents are foreign born (U.S. Census). Santa Ana has experienced a substantial amount of white flight over the last 40 years. The non-Hispanic white population decreased from 70 percent in 1970 to 12 percent in 2000 (U.S. Census; Agius and Lee, 2006). Despite Santa Ana’s largely immigrant population, the median household income among Latino residents in 2000 is $42,000, just under the median income for the U.S. population, but nearly 25 percent lower than the median income of Orange County (U.S. Census). On the surface, the median household income of Santa Ana seems on par with the rest of America, especially considering that the poverty line for a family of four in the United States is $21,200. However, the United Way of Orange County estimates that a family of four needs to bring in at least $135,000 to meet their basic needs.
$51,000 annually to make basic ends meet because the cost of living in Orange County is so high (Gittelshon, 2008).

The stereotype that Santa Ana is a poor immigrant city reigns supreme in Southern California, but the community is an interesting study in contrasts of socioeconomic difference. Unlike some inner-city business districts, downtown Santa Ana, where the offices of the ALB are located, does not lack for a busy consumer community, thereby creating a steady and reliable business climate derived from a socioeconomic and ethnically diverse cast of patrons (Venkatesh, 2006). For example, downtown Santa Ana features a fusion of businesses that cater to the professionals who work in the city, to those that attract a young and hip crowd drawn to the Artists Village, to enterprises aimed at more recently arrived immigrants (see Photos 1 and 2). As the county seat housing the Orange County courthouse and District Attorney’s office, it is not uncommon to see men and women in business suits walking the streets and dining at expensive restaurants scattered about the area. Downtown Santa Ana has also experienced a significant amount of gentrification with the opening of the Artists Village that caters to an urban crowd with its work/live lofts, trendy lounges, and monthly art exhibits. While this newly “revitalized” area seeks to draw more affluent patrons, recently arrived immigrants can also fulfill their needs in a Spanish-speaking environment at the various ethnic businesses and sidewalk vendors that line the adjacent streets.

The multilayered social spaces of Santa Ana provide a unique opportunity to examine the nuances of class and ethnicity and the importance of the ethnic community among 1.5- and second-generation Latinos who now belong to the middle class. There is a large population of accomplished Latinos who live in ethnically diverse middle-class neighborhoods in north Santa Ana and invest their time and energies in the Latino community. For example, the city council is made up entirely of Latinos, three of whom are Mexican immigrants, and the chancellor of Santa Ana City College is a Latino. Moreover, many affluent Mexican Americans, who grew up in Santa Ana but now live elsewhere, return to the community to shop in the ethnic grocery stores and businesses and to participate in community events, such as yearly Mariachi, Cinco de Mayo, and Día de los Muertos Festivals. Downtown Santa Ana is a class-diverse social space where one can dine at a hip restaurant, wire money to Mexico, buy a book from the only Spanish bilingual bookstore in the county, get fitted for a quinceañera dress, peruse one-of-a-kind works of art at expensive art galleries (many owned by Latinos), and purchase refreshing frutas and refrescos from street vendors.

While Santa Ana’s neighborhoods and businesses provide a supportive point of entry for the large immigrant population and a cultural-social space for middle-class Latinos, Orange County evinces a long history of institutionalized discrimination and exclusion of the Mexican-origin and Latino population. For example, the Mexican-origin population historically experienced de facto segregation with “Mexican seats” in movie theaters and “Mexican Day” at the public swimming pool, and de jure segregation, as each school district had its own “Mexican” school until the historic Mendez v. Westminster decision in 1946, which desegregated Orange County schools and set a precedent for Brown v. Board of Education (Arriola, 1997). During the 1990s, the majority of California’s population voted for Propositions 187 (initially drafted by an Orange County resident), 209, and 227. These antiimmigrant initiatives largely targeted the Mexican-origin population and were intended to restrict state services and outlaw bilingual education (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Garcia-Bedolla, 2005).
More recently, Jim Gilchrist, a retired accountant from Orange County, founded the infamous Minuteman Project, “a citizen vigilante organization monitoring illegal immigration,” and unsuccessfully ran for State Assembly on the platform of “securing America’s borders.” A number of cities in Orange County have also passed ordinances prohibiting day laborers from congregating in front of home improvement stores and have successfully lobbied to shut down day-labor sites throughout the county. And in 2006, the City Council of Costa Mesa, the municipality sandwiched between Santa Ana and Newport Beach, blamed rising crime rates on unauthorized migrants and approved a plan to allow police officers to enforce immigration laws while conducting their everyday duties.

The social and historical context of Orange County has led journalist and pundit Gustavo Arellano to time and again refer to Orange County as the Mexican hating capital of the United States (Arellano, 2006, 2008). The cultural landscape of the community, combined with a historical legacy of exclusion and a negative context of reception in Orange County more generally, provides the backdrop that affects how upwardly mobile Mexicans Americans negotiate their racial/ethnic and class identities.

BUILDING A MIDDLE-CLASS LATINA ORGANIZATION

The founders of the Association for Latinas in Business were originally members of a different organization, The Society of Mexican Business Women (SMB),^3 also headquartered in Santa Ana. Although the SMB is similarly geared toward Latina professionals and

PHOTO 1. Restaurants line the plaza of the Artists Village in Downtown Santa Ana.

Source: Author’s photo.
business owners, the ALB’s founders feel that the SMB’s model is ineffective in promoting mobility and that the SMB’s members are not serious businesswomen. They explained that the SMB is predominantly social and does little to educate business-oriented women or provide them with resources that help take their businesses to “the next level.” Laura, a founding board member, explained,

A: When I was asked to launch the Orange County chapter I was hesitant but I felt like there was a big need to bring information and resources for women in the community who are starting their businesses could really walk away with and not just make it a social *comadre* thing. There is another organization in the community for women and I support them, I just think their focus is different.

Q: They are more social?
A: If you ask me for my opinion, yes. That’s what it is. I saw it more as really strictly a networking group, more socializing, not as a business group that benefits the community. You can join both of them but I think that we both bring different things to the plate.

Lydia, another founding board member, recalled,

There was some confusion at SMB about the definition of a business woman. They just thought that if you are employed in any job you are a business woman. A lot of
these women had day jobs but wanted to start hobby jobs, like selling Tupperware for example. Just informal, not even registered. We wanted to take our businesses to the next level and were not getting the information to do it.

Laura had contacts within the original chapter of The Association for Latinas in Business, located in Los Angeles. Several women jumped ship from SMB and attended a few meetings of the ALB Los Angeles before deciding to collectively start the Orange County chapter in May 2004. The ALB is based in Santa Ana but aims to serve members throughout Orange County. A few of the founding members looked perplexed that I would even question why they decided to headquarter the Orange County chapter in Santa Ana rather than a more affluent city like Newport Beach. One woman said that “Anything Latino happens in Santa Ana.” The historical presence of Latinos in the city, the current concentration of Latino residents, and the cultural memory of those who grew up or still live there (even if they live in the most exclusive neighborhoods), make Santa Ana a natural choice for the Association of Latinas in Businesses, even if many of the members must venture to Santa Ana to participate in the ALB’s monthly events.

The ALB sets their organization apart from the SMB through their monthly breakfast meetings, professional mixers, and extensive business training programs that educate women in financial literacy and provide step-by-step training in starting a business from the ground up. In fact, the board members brand their community activism by saying things like “the ALB does things differently in the community” in order to distinguish themselves from the SMB, which primarily raises money for scholarships and does not offer educational, financial, or business programs. Lydia estimates that 20 percent of the ALB’s current members overlap with SMB’s membership. She was quick to add that “Our members are more focused on taking their businesses to the next level” than visiting with friends.

The ALB continuously advertises a pragmatic business focus to members of the middle-class Latino community. One of the ways they educate members is through monthly breakfast meetings. They decided to hold breakfast meetings, rather than lunch meetings like the SMB, “As a way to start your day off right, before you go to work.” The breakfast meetings are held at a local hotel and begin at 7:30 in the morning with anywhere from 60 to 100 people in attendance. Members are encouraged to arrive on time and network until breakfast is served at eight. There is always a table set up where members can lay out their business cards and marketing materials for others to gather. Attendees sit at round tables in groups of 10 people by 8:00 in the morning. Laura, the founding president, leads the members in the pledge of allegiance, thanks the sponsors, and then introduces the guest speakers. The first topic the organization presented was How to Build Your Business Team, which was followed by subjects like The ABC’s of Marketing, The Art of Negotiation, and Business Etiquette: How to Outclass Your Competition. In addition to the breakfast meetings, the organization puts on one additional event a quarter, such as an evening networking mixer, where members are encouraged to meet and exchange information with at least three new people in order to extend their professional contacts.

While the ALB strives to present a professional façade, their common rhetoric works to reinforce a sense of community and ethnic identity that revolves around their class status. The group’s slogan is Si Se Puede, or “yes we can,” and the board members refer to themselves frequently as Latinas or Mexicanas. These “code words” and slogans help
distinguish the ALB from the largely white professional organizations in the community. While they may be middle-class professionals, these Spanish words work to generate and sustain a sense of empowerment that revolves around a salient ethnic identity (Snow, 2001). For example, when the board posed for a formal portrait, the photographer, a Latino male in his late twenties, instructed the women to pose like the white supermodel, Cindy Crawford. Laura, the president of the organization, looked at the photographer with disdain and replied loudly, “Cindy Crawford? Ladies, pose like Eva Longoria. Latina power!” The board members echoed her cry to arms by replying, “Latina power!” as the photographer snapped the photo. As this incident illustrates, the affluent board members of the ALB strongly identify as an ethnic minority rather than white, invoking the image of a successful Mexican American actress and businesswomen to distinguish themselves from a white supermodel. While previous research predicts that upwardly mobile immigrants and their children will shed their ethnic identities and incorporate into the white middle class, the members of the ALB take pride in and actively reinforce a distinct class-based ethnic identity.

Even though the members of the ALB retain a salient ethnic identity, the board understands that their constituents must be socialized to normative business standards in order to succeed in Orange County’s largely white middle-class business community. An example of how the ALB attempts to promote normative business standards was particularly evident during one breakfast meeting. The title of the meeting was *Etiquette Is Power: How to Outclass Your Competition and the Art of Knowing How to Relate to Others in the Business World*. Brenda, the speaker, owns a professional development organization that trains Latinas in how to interact in high-powered corporate environments. She emphasized to a rapt audience that proper business etiquette and table manners are vital in forming lasting business relationships and can make or break a business deal. She spoke about the importance of a firm handshake and making eye contact, and relayed tricks for remembering names. Brenda’s discussion of table manners received the most attention. She demonstrated which forks to use for different dinner courses, instructed the audience to never dig in before everyone at the table is served, and she made clear that mopping up sauce with your dinner roll raises an immediate low-class red flag. Some of the women at my table reacted in surprise to Brenda’s tips. One board member responded to the embarrassed murmurs by saying, “That’s why we are here. To provide you with this information so you can make these contacts and shatter the stereotypes of us in this community.”

The theme of another breakfast meeting, this time held at an affluent country club in a neighboring beach city, revolved around the subject of how to conduct business on the golf course, which was followed by a hands-on golf clinic that taught fundamentals in swinging and putting. Business golf was frequently a subject of hot debate, as many of the board members lamented that Latinos are not brought up playing golf because of their marginalized economic positions as children, which puts them at a distinct disadvantage as professionals when trying to negotiate large business deals that are informally consummated on the golf course. The first speaker, a male member of the organization who is president of another Latino civic group, explains to the ALB’s members that the “Latino community is missing the boat with their lack of interest in golf,” and that playing golf has doubled his organization’s revenues in the last year. As Laura concludes the meeting, she reiterates that the golf clinic is a “great opportunity” not only for the members but also the larger Latino community and that the ALB “does things differently in the way that
they create opportunities for Latina entrepreneurs to get ahead in business. Today, I am going to learn how to play golf. That’s because women, Latina women in the community, have a direction and a goal and we go after what we want.”

As these examples illustrate and as the minority culture of mobility proposes, the board members of the ALB make a concerted effort to espouse their ethnic identity and they rely on a salient middle-class-based ethnic identity to recruit members. But at the same time, the board clearly communicates to the members through their monthly breakfast meetings that in order to be a successful entrepreneur or professional in Orange County’s white business world, they must shed behaviors that signal a lower-class status. A successful Latina should approximate a normative image that revolves around a carefully constructed middle-class persona—business education and networking skills alone are not enough to secure mobility or “shatter stereotypes” in Orange County. The board members know from experience, and from their own faux pas, that middle-class leisure activities such as golf, styles of dress, and etiquette are just as essential for mobility. As Light and Gold argue (2000, p. 107), “Studies of minority men and women have consistently found that competence in the folkways of the male white Protestant upper middle-class are vital to success, even if such skills are unrelated to actual job performance.” Through a combination of business education, presentation of business etiquette, and learning how to play golf, the form of community activism exhibited by middle-class Latinas is to create and transmit “middle-class ethnic capital”—by socializing Latinas to partake in middle-class business culture—so that they can generate social and economic capital (Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998; Zhou and Kim, 2007). Instead of formally challenging the racial/ethnic hierarchy in the community by demanding more representation for professional Latinas in Orange County, the ALB encourages individuals to achieve mobility by adhering to conventional business standards in order to cross ethnic boundaries in the white upper-class business world (Alba, 1999; Marquez, 2003; Lee and Bean, 2004).

In addition to cultivating social capital and promoting skills that will allow an individual to excel in business, the members of the ALB, especially those on the board of directors, constantly talk about the necessity of working for the collective good of the greater Latino ethnic community. The idea of giving back to poorer coethnics is especially salient among members of the Mexican-origin middle class who preserve an “immigrant narrative” and are one generation removed from poverty (Agius Vallejo and Lee, 2009). Laura reinforces this idea as she closes each board meeting by saying, “We are here not for ourselves but for the community. . . . You are here because you care, you want to give back, and you want to be a part of it.” During one board meeting the group discussed the opportunity of promoting the ALB’s celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month on a daily news show on Univision, a television channel that broadcasts in Spanish. One of the members mentioned that she would like to see their membership materials printed in Spanish, so that they could reach a larger segment of the Mexican-origin population, not just those with some economic resources. Laura, the president, agreed.

Spanish language information is really important to me as I want everyone to continually reflect if they are doing everything possible to bring resources to all segments of the Latina population. Speaking Spanish is a trust thing, an acceptance thing, and will allow us to continue bringing resources to help our people.

The board maintains that giving back to poorer and more recently arrived coethnics is a priority, but they have yet to actively reach out to or create programs that directly
target these lower-class groups. One reason may be that the ALB recruits a majority of its members through the networks of current members and through other professional associations and business mixers. As a result, the membership is biased toward those who are already upwardly mobile and who have some resources. Another explanation is that the board members, who are all volunteers with careers and families of their own, need to direct the organization’s limited financial resources and their limited time toward one slice of the community in order to be the most effective. As one board member countered to Laura’s reminder,

It would be nice to help those who don’t speak English, but we can’t do everything and there are organizations that help immigrants and the poor. We need to keep our focus on the business people and give back to the community by educating women.

Even though they are not directly giving back to poorer and more recently arrived co-ethnics through the ALB, the role this ethnic organization plays in providing resources to a traditionally marginalized community is extremely important for two reasons. First, the ALB increases social and human capital by fostering extensive networks and providing business training for an upwardly mobile segment of the community that has generally lacked ethnic institutions. As Lydia, the president-elect, proudly informed me as we observed the ALB’s members networking at an evening mixer held in the courtyard of the Artists Village in Downtown Santa Ana, “There was a huge void in the Latino community before we came along—a huge void. There was absolutely no organization that supported business education for Latinas.” Lydia makes clear that the ALB acts as a resource within the ethnic community for Latino adults, especially women. Second, while the ALB does not officially give back to less advantaged members of the community, most of the organization’s members have not severed ties with their poorer counterparts. Recent research demonstrates that middle-class Mexican Americans, especially those who grow up poor, offer extensive financial and social support to poorer coethnics (Agius Vallejo and Lee, 2009). Therefore, we can expect that many of the social and financial resources gained through membership in the ALB will trickle down to less-affluent coethnics. In fact, a number of the Latinas who belong to the organization similarly provide financially and socially for family members who have not experienced comparable patterns of mobility. The successful Latinas of the ALB not only help provide financially for poorer coethnics, they also inadvertently serve as role models in the community, demonstrating to an economically marginalized community what is possible to achieve.

In sum, “high-quality resources” in the form of ethnic, social, and human capital are not lacking in Santa Ana, an immigrant city, despite the largely Latino immigrant population and the obvious inequalities that Santa Ana evinces relative to cities in Orange County. Upwardly mobile Latinas collectively harness “middle-class ethnic capital” to promote the mobility of adult coethnics. This finding contradicts previous research that maintains that Latino ethnic communities are class homogenous and lacking ethnic resources that can promote upward mobility among immigrants and the second generation. A thriving middle-class Latina community in Santa Ana helps to promote and secure upward mobility among adults one generation later than it does for Asian- and African-origin immigrant children.
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CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES

THE IMMIGRANT SHADOW

The ALB’s founders created the organization with the pragmatic focus of fostering networks with other successful Latinas, building leadership skills, and providing business training to a population they maintain has historically lacked professional resources. My research also reveals that the board members believe that Latinas must be socialized to normative standards of business in order to be accepted into Orange County’s professional milieu outside the ethnic community. This understanding is borne out of their everyday interactions with white professionals who view middle-class Latinas through a derogatory lens. Similarly, in her study of Mexican American women in the white-collar work force, Segura (1992, p. 172) found that professional Latinas understand that “Employers, co-workers ... and society itself maintain pejorative, stereotyped images of Chicana and Hispanic women.” The board members of the ALB feel that the organization promotes a more positive image of the Latino community in Orange County, especially among the white business class. They hope that a Latina business organization can help combat the “immigrant shadow” or the idea that Latino immigrants and their children are unassimilable, poor, uneducated, and unauthorized, stereotypes that continue to follow them despite their mobility (Zhou and Lee, 2007). This objective is not something that is explicitly stated in the organization’s membership materials but it is frequently discussed informally at board meetings and events. As Beatriz, a second-generation Mexican who was raised in a low-income community in north Orange County, explained during our interview,

> If we as a community are going to prove to everyone that we are here not because we are lazy and that we just want to speak Spanish and take over the country and make it our own little country, that’s all I ever heard. And I say that the ALB has a responsibility to show the real side of our community where business owners are educated and we are lucky enough to share two cultures, the heritage of our parents and the country we are born in to.

Beatriz feels that the ALB helps to counteract the commonly held belief that Latinos are not incorporating culturally and economically into the fabric of American society. She does not disparage immigrants as individuals and feels “lucky” to share the “heritage” of being Mexican with her parents. However, Beatriz hopes that the ALB’s successful members counteract the idea of a monolithic Mexican population by demonstrating “the real side” of the Mexican community, where “business owners are educated” and savvy enough to navigate the white business world without relinquishing their ethnic identity.

But just being a member of an ethnic professional association does not automatically shield one from an “immigrant shadow.” The name of the organization, the Association for Latinas in Business, clearly connotes that its members are business professionals, yet a stigma remains because the word “Latina” figures prominently in the title and immediately signals a lower-class status to white professionals. For example, at one board meeting, Lydia, the president-elect, explained that she originally desired to hold the golf clinic at Green View, a public golf course in Orange County. She tells the other board members that she will “never set foot in Green View again,” and that if the group decides to go
forward with the breakfast there she will “absolutely not be a part of it.” She continues, “I felt very discriminated against when I spoke to the managers about the breakfast. They felt that our group was not the caliber of people to bring to the golf course.” Lydia, a successful entrepreneur in her early forties with light brown hair and fair skin, is college educated but speaks with a discernable Spanish accent. She mentioned to me later that her accent must have served as a marker for the characteristics of the entire group, especially because she wore her best business suit and introduced herself as the president of a Latina business organization. As Lydia suspects, the managers at Green View engaged in statistical discrimination, “the practice of using group membership as a proxy in the absence of clear information about individuals” (Phelps, 1972). Green View's managers seemed to associate Lydia’s ethnic background, her accent, and her affiliation with a Latina organization with low-class Latinos. The other board members were not shocked by Lydia’s encounter. One person suggested that they hold the golf clinic at a country club that has hosted events for the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, because the white managers at this club would know that “not all Latinos in the community are illegals who only speak Spanish.”

I personally encountered how an “immigrant shadow” eclipses class when I worked at the ALB's booth during Orange County’s Largest Mixer, a yearly business networking event held in Costa Mesa. Orange County’s Largest Mixer is touted as the “ultimate business networking event” and brings together hundreds of corporations, small businesses, and business associations under one roof. I managed the ALB’s table along with four professionally dressed female members with the goal of signing up new members or sponsors. When an older, well-dressed white male approached our table, I handed him a membership brochure and inquired about his line of work. He replied that he is a cosmetic surgeon in Laguna Beach, an affluent city located in South Orange County, and that he specializes in working with women professionals who may not have a lot of time to go under the knife for lengthy procedures. I suggested he join the Association for Latinas in Business as it might be a good opportunity to obtain new clients because a majority of the ALB’s members are female entrepreneurs and professionals. He promptly handed back the membership brochure and exclaimed, “This is a Latina organization? I don’t think your members are my caliber of people. I usually deal with the Newport Beach type of ladies.” As the comments from this cosmetic surgeon indicate, for most whites, “Latina” connotes something of a “caliber” other than middle class and professional, even when followed by the word “business.” Like middle-class blacks, who cannot escape the poor and uneducated stereotypes associated with their racial background, Latinas cannot escape the “immigrant shadow” when interacting with whites in their everyday lives, even when they display clear markers of class mobility (Feagin, 1991; Feagin and Sikes, 1995; Lee, 2000; Zhou and Lee, 2007).

Besides providing business education, one additional focus of the ALB is to combat the “immigrant shadow” that remains significant in the everyday lives of Latinas despite their class mobility. A professional Latina business organization is a way to publicly show the “other side” of an ethnic community that is often touted as being poor, unassimilable, and uneducated, while at the same time providing an avenue for middle-class Latinas to signal their more affluent class positions to the white majority. However, it is clear through my interviews and observations that affluent whites do not view all middle-class Latinas as members of the professional business class, especially those who have achieved their mobility in one generation. As this research demonstrates, ethnic stereotypes and
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a negative context of reception do not vanish just because immigrants and their adult children become upwardly mobile and middle class. The reasons for this are twofold. First, continuing migration from Mexico and Latin America, or immigrant replenishment, reinforces an “immigrant shadow” (Jiménez, 2008). And second, middle-class Latinas’ mobility experiences are embedded in a city and county that has a long history of discrimination and social exclusion toward the Mexican-origin population. Even though they are middle class, their ethnic identity is not symbolic and still poses consequences for their successful incorporation into a business milieu dominated by whites (Gans, 1979; Waters, 1990). But just because they self-identify, and are identified by others, as non-white does not mean that they have not incorporated into the middle class. Quite the contrary: Orange County’s 1.5- and second-generation Latinas are accomplished middle-class professionals whose identity intersects with their racial/ethnic background, gender, and class status as they attempt to create a social space in the ethnic community where middle-class Latinas can thrive.

THE “LATINA STEREOTYPE”

The board members hope that the ALB and its successful members will provide an alternative to the poor and uneducated stereotype that follows them despite their class. However, Latina professionals and entrepreneurs must also deal with gendered stereotypes that whites hold of Latinas (Segura, 1992; Pessar, 1999; Marquez, 2003). They might be middle class, but their race/ethnicity, combined with their gender, automatically makes them victims of the stereotyped Latino machismo (Villenas, 2001). Whites rely on cultural stereotypes to define what it means to be a middle-class Latina, assuming that Latinas live within a patriarchal ethnic community where early childbearing, motherhood, and large families are valued over education or professional success (Zavella, 1997).

Scholars have consistently deconstructed the macho Latin male stereotype. For example, González-López (2004) demonstrates that Mexican immigrant fathers want their teenage daughters to postpone sex not because they are controlling but because they understand that teenage pregnancy might mean “not completing high school or attending college, becoming poor, being abandoned, and encountering social stigma and sexism as a single mother.” Scholars have also demonstrated that differences in education can be explained by socioeconomic status, rather than a macho and familistic culture that Latinas are socialized into. For example, Zhou et al. (2008) find that limited economic resources means that Mexican-origin young adults must frequently forego college in order to earn wages to help support the family financially.

A small minority of the Latinas I studied bore children in their teenage years and roughly 35 percent have only completed high school. This means that a majority of the ALB’s members were not teenage mothers, completed trade school, have some college, or earned college degrees. Some of the members have delayed marriage and childbearing, while others are married with children. For example, many of the women I interviewed said that they made an explicit decision to postpone marriage or childbearing until they graduated from college or started their careers. One of the most successful members of the organization owns several retail outlets and openly talks about her decision to forego marriage until her early forties in order to develop her businesses. Conversely, some of the members are starting businesses now that their children are older or in school. Many
of the successful members deal with the challenges of balancing their families and careers; something that women of all racial ethnic backgrounds must manage (Moen, 1992; Roehling, Jarvis, and Swope, 2005). As one of the members stated:

As Latinas, we will not relent on our wanting that traditional home and being a mom and being a wife but at the same time we don’t want to have to give up being career women and we started this organization and we said that we need to start a program for emerging Latinas, women who are just starting off, and help them find the resources and educate them so that they can grow because we don’t have the history [in the community] so we need to provide that.

While the women I studied do not fit the socially constructed Latina stereotype, I frequently overheard the ALB’s members complain that their white coworkers are surprised to learn that their fathers or husbands support their education or amazed that they do not have a brood of children waiting for them at home. Like middle-class African Americans who participate in black social clubs, the ALB provides a supportive social space where middle-class Latinas can talk openly about these encounters with coethnics who relate to their experiences (Lacy, 2004).

I personally experienced the stereotype that Latinas have high fertility rates when I worked at Orange County’s largest business mixer. A white woman, dressed in a three-piece suit and heels, said to me, “Good for you Mexicans. Usually people take over countries with wars but you Mexicans are doing it by having lots of babies.” Even after explaining that the goal of the ALB is to “empower Latinas through business education, referrals, and networking,” the white woman relied on gendered and racialized stereotypes about Mexican women to interpret what it means to be a professional Latina. When I relayed this conversation to the ALB’s members working the mixer, Rosa replied, “Obviously we are not just staying home and having babies. We are Latinas in business! That’s why we are here, because we want a career.”

While my observations and interviews reveal that one informal purpose of the ALB is to counteract derogatory immigrant and gender stereotypes, my participant observation substantiates the idea that professional Latinas experience a negative social context in Orange County’s larger business community where whites continue to conflate class, ethnicity, gender, and generation when interpreting what it means to be a professional Latina. It is not only difficult for Latinas to thwart the “immigrant shadow,” they must also deal with gendered stereotypes resulting from negative perceptions of Mexican immigrant women. Despite these hurdles, middle-class Latinas do not utilize the ALB to formally challenge and systematically deconstruct ethnic hierarchies and class and gender stereotypes. Instead, membership in the ALB is seen as a medium to promote the mobility of Latinas in the community individually, so that successful members can cross rigid ethnic and class boundaries on the merits of their own accomplishments.

INTRACLASS CONFLICT AND SOCIAL DISTANCING

The ALB believes that success in the business world is twofold. First, Latinas must be educated in financial literacy, negotiating, networking, and starting a business from the ground up. Second, Latinas must approximate a normative middle-class image in
terms of etiquette, styles of dress, and speech patterns in the larger professional community in order to deligitimize racialized and gendered stereotypes. This does not entail shedding your ethnic identity or becoming white, but rather, learning the skills that will “shatter” the immigrant stereotypes that Latinas are low class and uneducated or value family over their careers. The board members never disparage immigrants directly, especially because they or their parents are immigrants, and also because some retain ties to poorer coethnics. But they do feel it is important to demonstrate that Latinos are not a monolithic population in terms of educational background and class status.

The board of directors are the public face of the ALB, leading some of them to believe that the entire board of directors should personify the middle-class Latina image they carefully attempt to craft among their larger membership. Some view those board members who do not evince middle-class cultural cues as detrimental to the organization’s image because they reify immigrant and gender stereotypes among affluent whites. While a majority hail from less advantaged backgrounds, the board members who have college educations and/or some of those who are employed in corporate settings actively attempt to distance themselves and the organization from board members with high school or trade school educations or those who were teenage mothers.

This intra-class conflict became clear when a less polished Latina applied for a vacant position on the board of directors. Adriana is second-generation Mexican and a real estate broker in her early twenties whose target market is the Latino community. She dropped out of college after one semester, but her profession requires a significant amount of expertise. She has completed numerous trade courses and holds specialty brokerage licenses, yet a majority of the board members do not view these qualifications as equivalent to a college degree. More important, her inexperience in the business world, unrefined manners, and speech patterns set her apart from the more polished board members. Roughly half of the board members have accents, but the East Los Angeles like lilt to Adriana’s less articulate speech and her out-of-turn outbursts instantly expose her low-income background. For example, Adriana’s preferred greeting is “Girl! You look hot!” and she frequently peppers the conversation with “Damn Girl!” A majority of the board members feel that these phrases are unprofessional and that they do not belong in business spaces.

After one meeting where Adriana gave a lengthy presentation, I joined three of the board members for dinner at a local restaurant. Much of the conversation revolved around the ALB’s upcoming events and potential sponsors, until the talk turned to Adriana’s presentation. In a frustrated tone Lydia said, “Adriana has no class! Can you imagine her pitching to Mercedes Benz? (a potential corporate sponsor). They won’t take us seriously.” Laura, who does not have a college degree but is a successful corporate executive, chided Lydia by saying, “Everyone deserves a chance. She is young but willing to work hard and we can teach her how to be more professional.” While the college-educated board members do not dislike Adriana, she does not bring “middle-class ethnic capital” to the board of directors. Despite her professional accomplishments, they feel that her demeanor marks her, and potentially the organization, as low class and uneducated, stereotypes they constantly contend with as they negotiate their place in Orange County’s professional community. The board members employed several strategies behind the scenes to prevent Adriana from meeting with potential corporate sponsors alone or representing the organization in the larger community. The president-elect would
often accompany Adriana to meetings or encourage her to join committees that do not require face-to-face contact with sponsors.

More of the board members, and members of the larger organization, distanced themselves from Adriana after she was interviewed for an article published in an Orange County business newspaper. The article highlighted the stories of successful Latina entrepreneurs and professionals. Adriana relayed that her family was more concerned about marrying her off than her career and emphasized that they would not consider her fully successful until she was married with children. The writer, a white woman, maintained that these gendered cultural expectations and “old-fashioned gender roles” are common in the Latino community. Two of the board members were incensed by the article and furious with Adriana for legitimizing in writing the stereotype that Latino parents privilege domesticity over professional success for their daughters. They were also distraught that the article briefly mentioned Adriana’s affiliation with the ALB because they feared that readers, and potential sponsors, would view Adriana’s personal experiences as representative of all the organization’s members, and thus make the organization’s business programs less worthy of investing in.

The newspaper article did seem to reinforce the gendered stereotypes that white professionals in Orange County hold of Latinas. Shortly after its release, I attended a cocktail reception with Lydia and Rosa, thrown by a prominent Orange County women’s business organization. The cocktail reception was held at a private estate located in an exclusive neighborhood of South Orange County. A majority of the women at the reception were white, with a small proportion of African Americans, Asians, and Latinas in attendance. Rosa and I followed Lydia, who is very well connected in the larger business community, as she networked with a range of people in the resort-like back yard. About a half hour after we arrived, Lydia introduced us to Megan, a white woman who owns a well-known marketing firm in Orange County. After chatting for a moment about each other’s businesses, Megan said, “It’s sad to hear that Latinos still don’t support their daughters’ careers.” For the first time that night, Lydia was speechless. Her face turned red and she sputtered, “Well, that’s not really true.” After Megan walked away Lydia said, “I know she read that article! This is terrible. Everyone here probably read it and thinks that we are all the same, that our parents didn’t support us.” After relaying this incident to the others after the next board meeting, Gina, another board member, initiated a letter-writing campaign to the newspaper among her successful Latina colleagues in an effort to do “damage control” for the middle-class Latina community. Gina, Lydia, and others wanted the public to know that Adriana’s comments represented her personal experiences, not the experiences of a majority of professional Latinas, especially those involved with the ALB. They wanted the newspaper to offset the potential damage done to middle-class Latinas by running a follow-up article spotlighting Latinas whose families support their education and careers. Conversely, most of the board members whose businesses serve the ethnic community did not agree with Lydia and Gina’s persecution of Adriana. Because they interact primarily with coethnics, rather than the larger white business community, they felt that Adriana’s comments would not affect them personally and some did not understand how Adriana’s comments might affect middle-class Latinas in general.

The more class-conscious board members also distanced themselves from those whom they believe reify the stereotype that Latinas are likely to be teenage mothers. Angelica is a prosperous owner of two small businesses who is vocal about the challenges to mobility she has overcome, such as growing up in the “barrio,” being a teenage mother, and being
a high school dropout. Although they openly admire Angelica for overcoming numerous mobility obstacles, the more class-conscious board members were apprehensive about allowing her to represent the organization in the larger business community. They did not want her to bring up the fact that she was a teenage mother when interacting with sponsors for fear that this would reify negative stereotypes of Latinas and mark the larger membership as likely to be teenage mothers. They constantly scrutinized her actions and attributed any mistake she made, from misplacing a file to showing up late, to her lower level of education.

Adriana’s comments in *The Review* and Angelica’s background support whites’ pejorative stereotypes of Latinas and overshadow the more socially acceptable traditional path to mobility others have followed. The more class-conscious board members do not want Adriana and Angelica’s circuitous routes to mobility and personal experiences to become stock stories for Orange County’s upwardly mobile Latinas (Yamamoto, 1999; Lee, 2002). Stock stories can be constructed from a combination of “direct experiences, written word, rumor and media” (Yamamoto, 1999, p. 181). In other words, whites might use stock stories, influenced from media depictions of Latinos combined with personal experiences, to explain socioeconomic inequalities between Latinas and whites. For example, when white professionals meet a middle-class Mexican American woman who was a teenage mother and high school dropout, they may adopt the stock story that Mexicans view early childbearing and having a family as more important than obtaining an education, something that is also reinforced through the media with headlines like, “Pregnancy Rates Up for Hispanic Teens, Numbers Decline for Black and Whites.” The Latina’s background reinforces the stock story and “becomes symbolic of the power, class and status distinctions between two ethnically distinct groups” (Lee, 2002). With stock stories, differences between whites and Latinas due to socioeconomic background become racialized, especially in the social context of Orange County.

The ALB’s members and board members are immigrants or the children of immigrants and do not vilify the immigrant generation or reject their ethnic background. However, they face an immigrant shadow as they climb the mobility ladder and feel that they must distance themselves from negative perceptions of immigrants to achieve upward mobility. One strategy is to cultivate a middle-class presentation of self that contradicts the idea that Latinas are uneducated or focused only on being wives and mothers. Ironically, while the board members work hard to instill these middle-class cultural cues in their members, they distance themselves, and attempt to distance the organization, from board members whom they feel reinforce pejorative stereotypes, even though they might be economically successful. In other words, it is acceptable for the general membership to display markers of lower-class status, but the board members are held to a higher standard because they represent the ALB within the larger non-Latino business community in Orange County. Since they interact more frequently in Orange County’s business scene outside the ethnic community, the more class-conscious board members know that not having a college education or being a teenage mother overshadows professional accomplishments for all. Despite their class, they fear that whites will use stock stories to explain inequalities or engage in statistical discrimination when middle-class Latinas evince markers of a lower-class status (Moss and Tilly, 2001; Lee, 2002). These fears are born out of everyday experiences, as Lydia’s encounter at the golf course and my participant observation illustrate.

It is important to note that not all of the board members distanced themselves from Adriana and Angelica. Those who can easily fit into a white middle-class business world,
but who lack a college education, were less likely to draw boundaries with those whom the college educated sometimes disparaged. For example, Laura, one of the founders of the Orange County Chapter who does not have a college education but worked her way up to become vice president of a major corporation, regularly comes to the defense of the members without college degrees. I often heard her respond to complaints by saying that professional grooming takes time and that no one should be penalized because of their speech or behavior around sponsors. She would often invoke an immigrant narrative of struggle and sacrifice, reminding the women of the barriers they have all overcome to achieve mobility (Agius Vallejo and Lee, 2009).

This within-group social distancing demonstrates the nuances of class and identity among middle-class Latinas, something that has been studied with middle-class African Americans and middle-class whites, but not with middle-class Latinos (Lamont, 1992; Hyra, 2006; Lacy, 2007; Pattillo, 2007). Those with college degrees view the opportunities of upwardly mobile Latinas as inextricably bound to the ability to fit in to a business sphere dominated by whites, especially in Orange County, where Latinos are constantly “othered” through the media, laws, and in their everyday life. Like middle-class blacks, middle-class Latinas who move more regularly in white social worlds are more likely to experience discrimination than those who mainly work with coethnics. Outside the ethnic community, their race/ethnicity and gender frequently becomes more salient than their class (Feagin, 1991; Segura, 1992; Feagin and Sikes, 1995; Lee, 2002). Hence, while they maintain a salient ethnic identity, some of the members of the ALB erect intragroup boundaries as a strategy to unambiguously define the organization and themselves as nothing less than middle class. Middle-class Latinas do not advocate becoming white to get ahead; in fact, they enjoy being Latina and middle class. However, they make a concerted effort to ensure that the organization projects a polished middle-class image in the hopes that they will be buffered from discrimination and also so they do not lose out on opportunities in Orange County’s business community. As the minority culture of mobility proposes, ethnic spaces are especially important as Latinos become upwardly mobile and enter the professional economy.

CONCLUSION

Previous research on the Mexican-origin and Latino population largely focuses on poor and unauthorized migrants and their children who remain in economically marginalized ethnic communities. These studies maintain that Mexicans are at prime risk for downward mobility into a minority underclass culture, in part because they experience a negative context of reception and also because their ethnic communities are touted as deficient in the “high-quality resources” that can promote upward mobility. However, by moving beyond adolescents, my findings reveal that Mexican communities, and Latino ethnic communities more generally, are neither class homogenous nor are they lacking in social and human capital resources that promote upward mobility. Previous studies of incorporation ignore variations with the Mexican-origin population, treating immigrants and their children as a poor and underachieving monolithic group. By focusing on adults, rather than youths, this research challenges segmented assimilation theory by demonstrating that the prospect of downward mobility among the Mexican-origin population is overestimated and that there are multiple paths of incorporation into the middle class.
for immigrants and second-generation adults. The members of the ALB are economically assimilated, but incorporating into a Latino middle class and community, rather than the white middle class (Neckerman, Carter, and Lee, 1999).

My research reveals that middle-class Latinas face unique challenges stemming from their minority and middle-class status as they enter Orange County’s business community that is largely white and affluent. Many upwardly mobile Latinas have achieved their mobility in one generation and lack the social and human capital resources that middle-class whites take for granted. Therefore, the first challenge is to promote the mobility of individuals by introducing and instituting the professional resources the ethnic community has traditionally lacked, such as business education, financial literacy, and networking opportunities. Affluent Latinas thus engage a minority culture of mobility and draw on a class-based Latina identity to assemble “middle-class ethnic capital” to create institutions in Orange County’s Latino community that advance the mobility of coethnics.

The second challenge that upwardly mobile Latinas face is managing cross-class and interethnic relationships with whites. Latinas, especially those who do business outside the ethnic community, are keenly aware that whites hold racialized and gendered stereotypes, especially in Orange County where Latino immigrants have historically been marginalized through laws and the media. They know that they must construct a normative middle-class business image among their members so that they can be accepted in Orange County’s larger professional milieu. They hope that professionally polished Latinas will counteract immigrant and gender stereotypes one by one and that a successful Latina business organization will provide a more positive image of Latinas in general. Instead of directly challenging the racial/ethnic hierarchy in the community, evincing an educated and professional middle-class Latina persona is a strategy employed to negotiate a variety of social and professional contexts.

This study provides an understanding of how upwardly mobile Latinas navigate and negotiate their sense of place within and outside the ethnic community. The Latino ethnic community acts as a resource to upward mobility for adults one generation later than it does for Asian and black immigrant adolescents. Because of the marginalized economic context of Mexican immigration, it takes an extra generation to produce and harness “middle-class ethnic capital.” Even though the ALB only officially helps those with a certain level of human and social capital at this point in time, this study provides a more complex picture of the Mexican-origin population, and Latinos in general, by demonstrating the ways in which ethnicity, gender, and class are marshaled to empower and promote the economic success of Latino adults as class status changes. The form of activism exhibited by this organization is different from the grassroots organizing identified among low-income and working-class Latinas, and demonstrates the different resources Latinas mobilize as class status changes. Further studies should examine how upwardly mobile middle-class immigrants and succeeding generations engage a minority culture of mobility by organizing “middle-class ethnic capital” as a resource to create social spaces that are springboards for socioeconomic advancement.

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Notes

1“The Association for Latinas in Business” is a pseudonym.
2Although 22 percent of the organization’s members are males, this research focuses on Latinas because all of the board members are females, a majority of the members are females, and the ALB’s outreach efforts and educational programs are specifically geared to Latinas.
3The Society of Mexican Business Women is a pseudonym.

References


