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SWIMMING AGAINST THE CURRENT: LATINX DOCTORAL STUDENT EXPERIENCES THROUGH A BIOECOLOGICAL LENS

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	This study investigates how Latinx doctoral students in the Southwest region of the United States experience and navigate doctoral education at a historically white institution (HWI), with attention to the social contexts and systems that shape their persistence and belonging. Despite growing interest in diversity in graduate education, the structural and relational challenges faced by Latinx students remain underexamined.
Background	This article addresses a gap in the literature by applying Bronfenbrenner and Morris's expansion of the bioecological model, traditionally used in child development, to understand Latinx doctoral students' experiences. It also incorporates Latinx critical race theory (LatCrit) to examine how racism, power, and intersectionality influence academic life.
Methodology	This qualitative study used narrative inquiry and counterstorytelling to collect and analyze the experiences of Latinx doctoral students. The collaborators were selected through purposeful sampling, and data were analyzed through iterative coding across Bronfenbrenner and Morris's expansion of the five ecological systems and LatCrit's focus areas.

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Contribution	This article uniquely contributes to the body of knowledge by using a bioecological lens to map how Latinx doctoral students' development is influenced across micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystems. It reframes doctoral persistence as an ecological and sociopolitical process, while keeping in consideration the interplay of Process–Person–Context–Time (PPCT).
Findings	Faculty relationships often lacked culturally sustaining mentorship. Students experienced tension when cultural identities clashed with academic expectations. Family, home communities, and sociopolitical climates indirectly influenced their academic engagement. Institutional norms often reinforce whiteness and meritocracy, undermining Latinx knowledge and presence. Over time, student-led organizations provided belonging and resistance amid shifting political contexts.
Recommendations for Practitioners	Educators and institutional actors must consider the whole student, beyond the classroom, by incorporating faculty advisor training grounded in the focus areas of the bioecological model and LatCrit's frameworks. They should design culturally affirming peer mentorship programs, implement policies addressing racial profiling, and ensure campus environments are inclusive of students' cultural identities. Training faculty and staff in culturally sustaining advising practices and supporting Latinx research agendas is crucial for promoting retention and fostering a sense of belonging.
Recommendations for Researchers	Future studies could pursue longitudinal work to evaluate long-term academic and professional outcomes in addition to expanding the use of the bioecological model in graduate education research, exploring cross-racial comparisons, and assessing how intersecting identities (e.g., gender, class, im/migration status, and experiences) shape Latinx doctoral students' experiences.
Impact on Society	The findings emphasize the urgent need for higher education institutional actors to create culturally sustaining environments. By considering the full ecological contexts of Latinx doctoral students, institutions can more effectively support underrepresented populations and dismantle harmful norms that inhibit authentic identity expression.
Future Research	Future studies could examine how cultural and academic identities intersect in doctoral programs, how students manage cultural dissonance, and how institutional practices either support or hinder identity-centered scholarship. Longitudinal studies are also needed to track the impact of these dynamics over time.
Keywords	Latinx doctoral students, bioecological model, higher education in the United States

INTRODUCTION

Historically, white institutions in the United States have often been influenced by legacies of Western colonialism and exclusionary practices rooted in whiteness (Cole, 2020; Quaye et al., 2019; Tachine, 2022; Wilder, 2013). As a result, students who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), including Latinx students, are often reminded that these ivory tower spaces were not built with them in mind (Cole, 2020; Santa-Ramirez & Wallace, 2022). According to Morales (2023, p. 210), "In the U.S., the term 'Latinx' is an identity term, derivative from the term 'Latino,' used by a growing number of individuals whose ancestors descend from Latin America to be inclusive of non-binary and LGBTQIA+ individuals." Although we recognize that these communities are not monolithic, the term *Latinx* will be used as an umbrella term throughout this article for the reasons outlined above.

Although Latinxs are the fastest-growing population in the United States, Latinx student retention and graduation rates remain low (Elliott & Parks, 2018), often combatting challenges to complete their respective degree programs due to historical systemic inequities and a lack of supportive and inclusive campus environments (Cole, 2020; National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2023).

According to data from the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (2023), in 2023, Latinxs comprised only 8% of earned doctorates (i.e., 4,815/57,862) in the United States, a slight increase from 6% in 2020. Furthermore, doctoral student attrition rates for students from underrepresented backgrounds have been reported at higher rates than those for other student demographics across all disciplines, indicating an unequal experience for these scholars (Gardner & Barker, 2019). In many cases, this can be attributed to inequities in the quality of education at the elementary and secondary levels, which deny underrepresented students access to salient educational opportunities prior to entering higher education.

Latinx students face complex challenges in doctoral education, often contributing to low enrollment and graduation rates (Elliott & Parks, 2018; Pagan et al., 2022)). For example, many Latinx doctoral students frequently encounter racial microaggressions as they navigate academic spaces and the doctoral socialization process (Espino et al., 2010; Pagan et al., 2022; Santa-Ramirez, 2022; Santa-Ramirez et al., 2024). Additionally, the anti-im/migrant sociopolitical historical landscape in the Southwest (where our study took place) toward Black and Brown communities has overlapped with the hostile campus racial climate toward Latinx students, which often impacts their educational experiences and trajectories (Cole, 2020; Espino et al., 2010). In 2010, Arizona enacted Senate Bill 1070 (SB 1070), also known as the "Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act," but commonly known in the Latinx community as the "show me your papers law." SB 1070 enabled legal racial profiling by law enforcement officers of suspected undocumented Latinx immigrants. In the same year, House Bill 2281 (HB 2281) was enacted, banning the Mexican American Studies program in Tucson, Arizona. HB 2281 sparked a national debate about whose histories are told in schools and became a symbol of the politicization of ethnic studies in the United States. Although HB 2281 was overturned in 2017 by a federal judge for being discriminatory toward Mexican American students and educators, both bills intensified hostility toward Latinx communities in the state (Joseph & Soto, 2010).

The aforementioned has prompted our study's investigation, where we explored the following research questions:

RQ1: How do specific systems, spheres, and contexts inform the educational experiences of Latinx doctoral students at a historically white institution (HWI) in the southwestern United States?

RQ2: How do the convergence and interaction of students' different bioecological systems influence their doctoral experiences?

It is essential to note that we chose to use the phrase "historically white institution" rather than "predominantly white institution" because several colleges and universities in the U.S. now have a designation as Hispanic-serving institutions, among others; however, most were initially established for and predominantly enrolled by white students.

In this article, we present a literature review that highlights existing scholarship on hostile campus climates in US higher education settings, doctoral student socialization, and the role of faculty advising and mentoring in doctoral education. Next, we present the theoretical connections (bioecological model for human development and Latinx critical race theory) and our research design, which includes a qualitative narrative inquiry methodology using counterstory as a method, allowing us to ef-

fectively investigate the research questions and center the voices and lived experiences of the doctoral student collaborators. We then present our findings and end with our discussion and implications for research, policy, and practice.

Our study contributes to the existing empirical literature on Latinx doctoral students by employing Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) bioecological framework, which offers a more comprehensive view of how their experiences from childhood to adulthood have influenced their doctoral journeys. Furthermore, no previous study has explored childhood-to-doctoral pathways using a bioecological and Latinx critical race theory (LatCrit) framework; thus, our study makes a unique contribution to the scholarship on Latinx doctoral students. Additionally, the results and implications from this study will provide additional knowledge for higher education agents and aid in understanding the complexities of doctoral education for Latinx students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

BIPOC DOCTORAL STUDENT EXPERIENCES

In addition to facing gaps in degree attainment due to historical oppressive policies and practices barring or limiting access and opportunities for racially minoritized communities, many Latinx and Black doctoral students encounter numerous and complex challenges related to the overall hostile campus climate (Cole, 2020; Israni, 2022; Museus, 2014; Santa-Ramirez, 2022). Many Latinx students must grapple with white students who behave condescendingly toward them and repeatedly challenge their intellect. In addition to being questioned about whether they were recipients of affirmative action, these students report having their place in their respective programs challenged and being called offensive racial slurs (Pifer & Baker, 2014; Taylor & Antony, 2000). In addition to their peers, existing research shows that faculty members regularly question Latinx students' academic abilities (Espino et al., 2010; Patterson-Stewart et al., 1997; Santa-Ramirez, 2022; Truong & Museus, 2012; Williams et al., 2018), leaving them feeling that specific comments and actions are not only highly insensitive but also racially motivated (Patterson-Stewart et al., 1997; Truong & Museus, 2012; Williams et al., 2018).

Further, Latinx doctoral students have reported that, when called on by their professors in class, it is often to speak to their racial and ethnic backgrounds to advance the class discussion at their expense (Gay, 2004; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Moyer et al., 1999; Pifer & Baker, 2014). Existing scholarship highlights that Latinx and other BIPOC students often face isolation and detachment in their academic communities (Espino et al., 2010; Santa-Ramirez, Wells, et al., 2022), which can hinder their progress due to the critical importance of feeling connected to their programs and departments in doctoral education (Museus, 2014; Santa-Ramirez, 2022). A growing body of research has examined the impact of racial experiences on BIPOC graduate students through various frameworks (Breeden et al., 2024; Espino et al., 2010; Felder et al., 2014; R. M. Johnson & Strayhorn, 2022; Santa-Ramirez et al., 2024). For example, through a critical race mixed-methods analysis, R. M. Johnson and Strayhorn (2022) investigated how race, racism, and other factors influence Black men's academic and social experiences in graduate school and the meaning they made of these racialized experiences. Their findings revealed that Black men perceived graduate school as unsupportive and unwelcoming, frequently encountering discrimination and racism from institutional actors. Felder et al. (2014) recognized that race influences the academic processes associated with socialization. In this study, Felder et al. also identified the importance of effective faculty–student interactions and having faculty members who validated their research agendas rooted in racial or cultural topics (e.g., a scholarly agenda on hip hop) versus stifling or belittling these areas of research, as some of the students in the study described.

Other scholars have highlighted that historically, minoritized doctoral students have encountered multiple challenges, including isolation, tokenism, and microaggressions (Breeden et al., 2024; Huggins de Murzi, 2023; Santa-Ramirez, 2022). Huggins de Murzi's (2023) investigation, conducted through the lens of situated expectancy–value theory and the graduate socialization framework,

found that Latinx students in the study were motivated to pursue their terminal degrees due to their sense of self, the attainment value of the degree, and the importance of family and community. These factors led to their pursuit of a doctoral degree, encouraging them to pay it forward by serving as role models for those aspiring to higher education, including graduate-level studies.

Digging deeper into tokenism and microaggressions experienced by BIPOC doctoral students, various scholars have examined these phenomena related to equity, diversity, and inclusion dialogues and training on campus (Griffin et al., 2020; R. M. Johnson & Strayhorn, 2022; Perez et al., 2020). Perez et al. (2020) found that academic departments rarely discuss issues related to equality, diversity, and inclusion, and when they do, they often highlight the need for increased compositional diversity. Subsequently, collaborators with minoritized identities expressed feeling marginalized, tokenized, and targeted. Other scholars have identified that doctoral students experience marginalization in areas such as socialization, faculty mentorship, professional involvement, and environmental support (Blockett et al., 2016; Espino et al., 2010; Pagan et al., 2022; Santa-Ramirez & Vargas, 2024; Santa-Ramirez et al., 2024). Santa-Ramirez and Vargas (2024) and Santa-Ramirez et al. (2024) have highlighted the systemic racism and economic disparities faced particularly by Latinx doctoral students who were first in their immediate families to pursue higher education and from working-class backgrounds. These studies emphasized the importance of culturally affirming mentorship in supporting their journey into the professoriate. Additionally, existing scholarship emphasizes the pivotal role of faculty advising and mentoring in the socialization process and experiences of BIPOC doctoral students (Breeden et al., 2024; Griffin et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2024; Williams et al., 2018).

Role of Faculty Advising and Mentoring in Doctoral Education

Given the high level of guidance and support students receive from members of the faculty, literature on doctoral education has underscored that the most significant relationship for doctoral students is with their faculty advisor, dissertation chair, or other faculty (Barnes et al., 2010; Holley & Caldwell, 2012; Ku et al., 2008). Faculty mentoring is especially critical to the success of racially minoritized and other underrepresented students, as they must navigate racist and whiteness ideological departmental and disciplinary cultures, along with adverse institutional climates (Tierney & Bensimon, 1996; Truong & Museus, 2012; Williams et al., 2018). Existing scholarship has shown that faculty mentors, including those identifying as BIPOC, must humanize and validate their advisees' individual experiences and goals while incorporating a holistic approach to advising and mentoring (Felder et al., 2014; Pagan et al., 2022; Santa-Ramirez, 2022).

However, having faculty with whom to connect has proven challenging for graduate students who need it most. Unequal experiences for BIPOC students related to mentoring, support, treatment, and grading have also been shared in the literature. For example, existing studies have highlighted that a common experience for BIPOC doctoral students is not receiving support for their research interests, particularly those involving the examination of marginalized communities (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Israni, 2022). Furthermore, Williams et al.'s (2018) study highlighted that BIPOC students often do not receive the critical and constructive instruction they need from faculty to develop their research, writing, intellectual, and teaching skills. To address the aforementioned topic areas, scholars have explored ways in which faculty can facilitate these relationships with underrepresented graduate students by implementing relational strategies, such as guidance and care (Griffin et al., 2020; Santa-Ramirez, 2022; Santa-Ramirez & Vargas, 2024).

Graduate students of color require specialized mentoring and advising, including consideration of the impacts of vicarious trauma, the vigilance of microaggressions, and mentoring competence (Boyce, 2021; Israni, 2022; Santa-Ramirez & Vargas, 2024). For graduate students writ large, there is a consensus on the attributes that make for positive mentoring experiences (e.g., accessibility, care, and socialization) and negative ones (e.g., inaccessibility, unhelpfulness, and disinterest) (Barnes et al., 2010; Pagan et al., 2022). However, when examining the advising experiences of minoritized students, in addition to those mentioned above, a separate set of challenges specific to them emerges. Some of

these challenges include the need for specialized strategies due to the institutional location of universities, which are often sites of deeply rooted racism that inform how Latinx students, in particular, receive support from formal institutional sources (Alamillo et al., 2025; Santa-Ramirez & Wallace, 2022).

Mentoring Models and Characteristics and Digital Learning Environments

In recent years, several scholars have highlighted the emergence of collective, culturally sustaining mentoring models that affirm the identities of Latinx students and support community-engaged research agendas (Castellanos et al., 2005; Espino et al., 2010; Santa-Ramirez & Vargas, 2024), challenging hierarchical and one-dimensional faculty-student relationships by fostering mentoring networks that acknowledge the intersectional realities many Latinx students navigate. Existing research underscores the importance of culturally responsive and holistic mentoring practices in supporting Latinx and other BIPOC doctoral students. Effective mentorship is grounded in honesty, relational authenticity, and understanding of students' intersecting identities. This approach is particularly valuable as mentors who eschew academic jargon and political correctness are often better able to connect with their mentees (Luedke, 2017, 2023; Salazar, 2021). Latinx doctoral students value mentoring relationships that acknowledge the whole person, beyond their scholarly identity and academic performance, and encompass cultural sensitivity, advocacy, and shared experiences (Harris & Lee, 2019; Israni, 2022). Moreover, reciprocal mentoring, which includes research collaboration, conference participation, and engagement in professional associations, can foster academic success, a sense of belonging, and critical consciousness for both doctoral student mentees and their mentors (Aguayo et al., 2023; Griffin, 2012; Griffin et al., 2020; R. M. Johnson & Strayhorn, 2022).

Contemporary structural and technological shifts in higher education have presented various challenges and opportunities that shape the experiences of doctoral students. The rise of digital learning environments, accelerated by the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, has exacerbated existing educational inequities, particularly for students from working-class backgrounds who may face limited access to high-speed internet, digital infrastructure, economic and food insecurity, and culturally responsive online instruction (Barber et al., 2021; Montes, 2024; Natal et al., 2021; Santa-Ramirez, Block, et al., 2022). These digital barriers often contribute to academic isolation and hinder community-building opportunities, which are critical to persistence in doctoral programs, especially if they are predominantly online (Kiebler & Stewart, 2022; Santa-Ramirez, Block, et al., 2022; Santa-Ramirez & Vargas, 2024). Furthermore, digital platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), LinkedIn, and Instagram are increasingly utilized by Latinx graduate students to access academic resources, mentorship, and peer support, often forming virtual counterspaces that alleviate institutional marginalization (Gomez & Cabrera, 2023). However, these platforms also carry risks of surveillance, trolling, and digital racial profiling (Cyphert, 2019; Eschmann, 2020; Jones & Mendoza, 2021). These emerging issues underscore the need to contextualize Latinx doctoral experiences within the broader sociopolitical and technological landscapes that shape educational access, belonging, and success.

Theoretical Connections

This study was guided by Bronfenbrenner's development of the ecological systems theory (1979, 1993), the bioecological model for human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), with a focus on culture because it is "an intricate part of proximal development processes" (Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017, p. 900), and Latinx critical race theory (LatCrit). The bioecological model is "an evolving theoretical system for scientific study of human development over time" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 793). This theory does not aim to examine "the forces that have shaped human development in the past, but … those that may already be operating today to influence what human beings may become tomorrow" (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000, p. 117). Key concepts to the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006)–embedded within the various systems described below–are

proximal processes (i.e., the engine of development), personal characteristics (e.g., resources and dispositions), context (within the nested systems), and time (e.g., moments and historical context). This is also referred to as Process–Person–Context–Time (PPCT). Bronfenbrenner's earlier conceptualizations of the ecological systems theory (1979, 1993) view child and human development as a complex system of relationships affected by various levels of the surrounding environment, which may include family and school settings, as well as broad cultural values, laws, and customs. This model consists of an individual's environment divided into five different systems: micro, meso, exo, macro, and chronosystems. The *microsystem*, as defined by Bronfenbrenner (1993, p. 15), is a:

> pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing persons in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment.

Mesosystems represent the interaction of multiple microsystems, where "special attention is focused on the synergistic effects created by the interaction of developmentally instigative or inhibitory features and processes present in each setting" (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 22). The *exosystem* considers other formal and informal social structures that do not directly involve the person. In other words, interactions occur that are external to the person but still affect them, such as mass media, the person's neighborhood, and their parents' workplace. The *macrosystem* encompasses how cultural elements influence a person, including socioeconomic status and ethnicity. Lastly, the *chronosystem* refers to the environmental changes that occur over a person's lifetime and influence development, such as historical events and significant life transitions (Guy-Evans, 2023).

Several scholars have employed Bronfenbrenner's (1993) ecological model, as well as its subsequent developments (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), in their studies. For example, Suárez-Orozco et al. (2015) used the model to interpret the experiences of undocumented undergraduates on college campuses, specifically how their interrelated contexts of youth development shape their opportunities and have important implications for educational and well-being outcomes. Stern et al. (2021) applied the model to focus on the development of Black youth, highlighting the central role of attachment within a child's microsystem. Furthermore, by examining the ecological systems of LGBTQ+ STEM students, Linley et al. (2018) explored how these students experienced their collegiate environments. Renn (2003) also applied this model in a study focusing on the identities of mixed-race college students. In this study, Renn described exosystems, for example, that could impact the identities of mixed-race college students (e.g., academic majors, financial aid awarded, parental income). With a focus on Latinx collegians, Guardia and Evans (2008) employed Bronfenbrenner's (2005) five systems in the bioecological model to explore factors influencing the ethnic identity development of Latino fraternity members at a Hispanic-serving institution. The researchers found, for instance, that the microsystems that impacted the students' experiences the most included their home family, Latino fraternity, and Hispanic-serving campus.

Since the bioecological model can be used to investigate the experiences of all individuals, we recognize that humans are not monolithic. Therefore, we also employed notions of LatCrit as a complementary framework, which centers specifically on the experiences and lived realities of Latinx communities. Over the years, various branches of critical race theory (CRT) that address racism and accompanying oppression beyond the Black/White binary have been developed, including LatCrit (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). In addition to CRT challenging colorblindness and meritocracy, which assumes that the education systems in the U.S. are neutral and function the same for all student communities (Pérez Huber, 2010), LatCrit extends CRT to include a more complex intersection of layered subordinate identities and multi-identities and experiences Latinx persons hold and have, including areas such as accent, language, im/migration status, sexual orientation, gender, language rights, ancestry, phenotype, culture, and surname (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; K. Johnson, 1999; Pérez Huber, 2010; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). A LatCrit framework emphasizes

the impact of stereotypes on Latinxs with multiple overlapping identities, including those of oppression, familial migration experiences, and survival as assets (Lara & Nava, 2018; Yosso, 2005). Further, LatCrit examines how marginalization and oppression are perpetuated through hegemonic educational structures and discourses (Bernal, 2002).

Although Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework (1979, 1993) and its developments (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) have been widely applied across various populations, to our knowledge, our study is the first to employ this model with Latinx doctoral students, making an important contribution to the existing literature. Applying the model, in community with LatCrit, allowed us to investigate how Latinx doctoral students' characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, culture, family, socioeconomic status), spatial and temporal contexts (e.g., places of residence and university setting), and historical time (e.g., lived experiences from childhood to adulthood) mutually influence and are influenced by their overall environments (Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

RESEARCH DESIGN

As critical theorists and researchers, it was salient that we interrogate and bring to the forefront how racism and additional oppressive forces are deeply ingrained in society. We employed a narrative inquiry methodology and enacted counterstory, also known as counterstories and counterstorytelling (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). This method involves a commitment to centering minoritized experiences and voices while challenging dominant narratives (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015). Narrative inquiry entails that humans lead and share their lives via stories; thus, personal stories, including centering cultural, social, and historical contexts, serve as the primary data source (Clandinin, 2016) and allow researchers to center how sociality, temporality, and place intersect (Clandinin et al., 2007; Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022) for the collaborators in the study. *Sociality* refers to personal conditions (e.g., aesthetics, feelings, interactions, and hopes) and social conditions, such as environment, surrounding forces, and existential conditions (Clandinin et al., 2007). *Temporality* encompasses stories about people transitioning between the past, present, and future. *Place* considers the environment where experiences unfold and may impact events in each setting (Clandinin et al., 2007).

Counterstory branches from critical race theory and is embedded within LatCrit, with researchers aiming to challenge and disrupt dominant ideologies and narratives (i.e., rooted in whiteness), often further marginalizing historically oppressed groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Counterstory involves the telling of stories from the experiential knowledge and perspectives of those who have been historically marginalized or oppressed (e.g., BIPOC communities, LGBTQA2S+, and women) to reveal and challenge dominant societal narratives, assumptions, and power dynamics in and outside of educational settings (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Dominguez-Whitehead et al., 2021). Personal and collective storytelling are significant aspects of counterstorytelling. Such stories communicate the lived experiences of minoritized people through their bodies and are aimed at resisting oppression and oppressive systems. Furthermore, such storytelling can help build solidarity among underrepresented communities.

Our study involved students from a university in the southwestern United States. Their stories acted as our unit of analysis (Clandinin et al., 2007). Guided by the theoretical frameworks, we investigated how specific systems, spheres, and contexts inform the educational experiences of Latinx doctoral students at an HWI in the Southwest and how the convergence and interaction of students' different bioecological systems influence their doctoral experience. Counterstory acted as a valuable tool in our design and our implications to inform institutional actors on hidden truths, to challenge the status quo in higher education as it pertains to the experiences of Latinx doctoral students, and to promote educational equity in an imagined postracial environment through the sharing of the collaborators' stories and implications for institutional actors at all levels.

DATA COLLECTION

Narrative inquiry favors depth over breadth, aligning with interpretivist and constructivist traditions. While we use narrative inquiry, counterstory complements it by adding a critical race lens centering a historically minoritized population. Narrative inquiry entails "listening to individuals tell their stories … using methods such as conversations, oral histories, and interviews" (Clandinin & Caine, 2008, p. 543) and counterstory method (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) centers on the lived experiences and voices of minoritized communities and is collaborative and reflective (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Thus, we employed in-person, in-depth, dialogic, informal interviews lasting 75–120 minutes with 8 Latinx PhD students representing various ethnic identities (see Table 1 for collaborator profiles). Collaborators were identified through purposeful sampling, via outreach to members of a registered student organization for Latinx graduate students at the research site. The site was chosen due to its historical reputation of implementing discriminatory policies, mainly targeting Latinx students. After obtaining IRB approval, verbal consent was acquired prior to the start of interviews, and pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity. The aforementioned features in the research design made the study more inherent and intrinsic to specific campus and state politics. At the time of the study, although it was not an eligibility requirement, all the students were pursuing degrees within the social sciences and humanities, which research has found to be the most prominent enrolled graduate school majors for Latinx students (Kamimura-Jimenez & Gonzalez, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano, 1993).

Table 1. Collaborator profiles

Name (pseudonym)	Race/ethnicity	Education level/ PhD program	Residency status	Age/gender identity (pronouns)
Annie	Mexican	1st year/Public Relations	International	29/woman (she, her, hers)
Armando	Afro-Latino/ Puerto Rican	3rd year/Education	In state	38/man (he, him, his)
Bianka	Mexican/Chicana	2nd year/Cultural Studies	Out of state	24/woman (she, her, hers)
Elvira	Chicana	4th year/Education	In state	35/woman (she, her, hers)
Jessica	Mexican/Chicana	5th year/Cultural Studies	Out of state	31/woman (she, her, hers)
O'Neil	Latinx/ Indigenous	1st year/Cultural Studies	In state	28/man (he, him, his)
Raul	Afro-Latino	2nd year/Education	Out of state	30/man (he, him, his)
Sammy	Chicano/Chicano	2nd year/Sexuality Studies	Out of state	28/man (he, him, his)

The following are some examples of the interview protocol questions:

(1) Can you describe the relationships that have most shaped your experience in your doctoral program, such as with faculty, peers, or family, and how these relationships have supported or challenged your sense of belonging (capturing the microsystem's immediate interactions and mesosystem's interactions while also allowing LatCrit in for dialogue surrounding identity-based dynamics in relationships talked about)?

(2) How have larger social or cultural forces – like race, language, immigration policy, or socioeconomic status – influenced your experience as a Latinx doctoral student (to encompass

macrosystem's cultural norms and policies and LatCrit's concerns, e.g., linguistic marginalization and intersectional oppression)?

(3) Thinking back to earlier parts of your educational journey, how have your experiences over time – from childhood to now – shaped how you navigate academic spaces and define your identity as a scholar (highlighting the chronosystem's life transitions and historical change, as well as LatCrit's attention to familial knowledge, resistance over time, and migration histories)?

Analysis

We engaged in systematic steps to ensure intercoder reliability (Miles et al., 2014). First, we individually read all the transcripts line by line and employed an open-coding process, which led to the development of an initial list of codes (Burmicky et al., 2022). Then, we met and discussed our initial list of codes and data interpretations, which led to consensus-building and refinement of our codebook. We employed deductive coding because we had well-established theories, specific research questions, and objectives. This top-down approach involved reviewing the fundamental concepts of the bioecological model and LatCrit and our research questions, as well as creating a targeted codebook that defined and described each code. For example, we identified every instance when the collaborators spoke about a microsystem in the data. Some of the codes included "family dynamics," "migration stories," "advising experiences," "race," "sociopolitical climate," and "K-12 educational experiences." Lastly, we employed Polkinghorne's (1995) paradigmatic mode of narrative analysis to group codes with patterns and commonalities across stories, which aided in developing themes highlighted in the findings. The original interview transcripts were sent to all collaborators, who engaged in member checking for trustworthiness and validity. Through this process, we offered the collaborators the opportunity to edit any parts of the transcript that had been applied before the commencement of the analysis, in addition to providing their preferred pseudonym.

Limitations

Although we included efforts to ensure trustworthiness and validity, we have identified some methodological limitations. First, although not a concern in narrative inquiry methodology, the sample size and collaborators from only one institution affiliated with that university's Latinx graduate student organization may have been expanded to include additional students beyond the sole student organization and from other higher education institutions. This selection bias does not incorporate the narratives of additional students across the institution, state, or nationwide, which limits generalizability (although generalization was never the aim of this study). Furthermore, we did not conduct a thorough analysis of the collaborators' intersectional identities (e.g., gender and sexual orientation) and how they are reflected in their experiences as doctoral students.

POSITIONALITY

I, Stephen, identify as a first-generation college student, a cisgender man, and a Latinx individual (of Puerto Rican descent) who grew up in a high-need family in an economically disadvantaged neighborhood in the Northeastern United States. I attended HWIs, including for my terminal degree in the southwestern United States, which is analogous to the doctoral students in this study. My research and service involvements center on the experiences of racially minoritized communities, with a particular focus on Latinx collegians at the undergraduate and graduate levels. As a result of my personal experience with racism and microaggressions as a visibly nonwhite student at HWIs and navigating the academy in climates that often perpetuate whiteness ideologies, my work has further investigated how race and racism impact (a) the college experiences of these scholars, (b) exclusionary campus racial climates, and (c) places where these students find or create spaces of belongingness. Although I shared commonalities in social identities and experiences with the collaborators in this study, I worked to alleviate biases and privileges while collecting and analyzing data. For example, I wrote

down biases before and during the research design and implementation process to ensure I was sharing their stories and not my assumptions about what collaborators experience, based on my own lived experiences. Furthermore, during data collection, I ensured that it was dialogical and that we spoke in a conversational tone, laughing, crying, pausing, and validating each other. This style of "interviewing" allowed me to build greater trust and rapport with the collaborators while also humanizing the research experience for all parties involved.

I, Venus, am aware of how my accumulated experiences, diverse relationships, and prior knowledge influence my engagement with various aspects of the research process. I also must acknowledge that I do not identify as Latinx, as I am a woman of Indian descent. My situatedness is vastly different from that of the collaborators in this study. The preexisting knowledge I carry about the experiences Latinx individuals face has been ascertained secondhand through college courses, texts authored by Latinx individuals, and hearing about the lived experiences of my friends, peers, and former students. Therefore, I cannot assume I fully understood everything on which the collaborators reflected. Instead, I deferred to them to explain, clarify, and expand on their different accounts. Although my experiences, perceptions, and situatedness have been inextricably linked with my role as a researcher, I worked to ensure I accurately represent the accounts of the student collaborators.

I, Iman, am a Black cisgender woman raised in a sports-centric, middle-class family. By embracing an insider–outsider role within the research population, my insider position affords me a particularly compassionate and intersectional perspective. I am an insider in the sense that I, myself, am a racially minoritized graduate student who was/is often reminded that these spaces in the ivory tower were not built with me in mind. The many intersections of my identity compel me to approach my analysis with simultaneous consideration of gender, race, and the implications and experiences of attending universities with larger historical systemic inequities embedded in their systems. I also acknowledge my outsider status as a non-Latinx person who did not attend school in the southwestern United States. Despite shared commonalities, some facets of identity may differ, such as sexual orientation, class background, regional upbringing, ethnicity, parental education level, and life trajectory after undergraduate studies. Balancing this insider–outsider duality is an ongoing consideration at the forefront of my research approach.

FINDINGS

Findings align with the research questions and are categorized based on Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) articulation of the five bioecological systems, keeping in consideration the interplay of Process–Person–Context–Time (PPCT): (a) microsystem, (b) mesosystem, (c) exosystem, (d) macrosystem, and (e) chronosystem.

Table 2. Research questions and theme alignment

Theme	Research question alignment
Microsystem	RQ1: Shows how immediate systems (faculty, peers, family) shape Latinx doctoral student collaborators' experiences.
Mesosystem	RQ2: Illustrates how conflicts between microsystems influence doctoral persistence and authenticity.
Exosystem	RQ1: Highlights external community and family influences on the collaborators' educational journeys.
Macrosystem	RQ1: Demonstrates how societal ideologies around race, language, and meritocracy shape institutional interactions.
Chronosystem	RQ2: Explains how shifts across time, including migration and sociopolitical change, impact development and belonging.

Microsystem: Navigating Relationships and Identity Development

The mesosystem encompasses the interactions between a person's microsystems (i.e., the things that have direct contact with the person in their immediate environment, such as teachers and school peers). Collaborators discussed essential relationships in their microsystems that informed their experiences in doctoral education. Prominent individuals in the microsystem included faculty and advisors, their families, the respective home communities, and peers. Although other relationships existed in students' overall microsystems, the aforementioned relationships were brought to the forefront by the collaborators; these supportive relationships impacted the collaborators' sense of racial and ethnic identity, playing a salient part in how they navigated their terminal degree programs.

Faculty

The relationships with faculty were a predominant part of the collaborators' microsystems. Throughout the study, they discussed their interactions with faculty and how they positively and negatively influenced their experiences as doctoral students. The collaborators reflected deeply on the lack of holistic support from faculty, alluding to the underlying culture of doctoral education that often reinforces independent work, isolated learning, and peer competition over collectivist efforts. They desired the practical and hidden agenda items in academia that would allow them to navigate their doctoral studies successfully. Unfortunately, the collaborators spoke in depth about how this necessary guidance was not always shared freely.

Sammy expressed his frustration with the lack of guidance and mentorship from his faculty advisor. When reminiscing on his experiences, he stated, "How the hell do you expect us to know what to ask for when we [Latinx doctoral students] don't know it for ourselves? … So, I think to fundamentally ignore someone's humanity in that sense, you really can't understand that." Here, Sammy underscored the importance of mentoring, especially for individuals with multiple marginalized identities; however, his remarks suggested that he was not even given a basic level of guidance by his advisor. Collaborators also highlighted negative interactions that, in turn, made them feel incapable or inferior. For example, when speaking about his advisor, Sammy shared, "If I have any questions, I can seek [faculty members] during office hours. But when I have … he basically looks at me like I'm stupid for not knowing the answers to things." In line with this theme, Elvira recalled how her professor responded after she asked a question about the quantitative practice data set during a class discussion. Elvira said:

> *He made a really snarky remark. I was like, "Oh, whatever. I just won't ask those types of questions anymore." After class, I got a two-page email about how PhD students need to be more responsible and how I wasn't demonstrating the characteristics of a quality graduate student who does their work ahead of time.*

The strained faculty interactions described by collaborators (e.g., Sammy and Elvira) illustrate proximal processes that negatively shape development, particularly when institutional gatekeepers fail to provide basic guidance to their Latinx doctoral students. These missed mentoring moments interrupt developmental scaffolding and instead reinforce feelings of inadequacy rooted in structural inequalities. Moreover, the assumption that Latinx doctoral students should arrive already knowing "what to ask for" reveals an embedded institutional meritocracy, one that privileges white, middle-class socialization over culturally diverse knowledge systems. This aligns with LatCrit's assertion that educational systems often disregard or invalidate Latinx forms of cultural capital, such as collectivism, bilingualism, and experiential knowledge.

On another note, some collaborators highlighted how faculty helped them feel like they were part of the community. Annie's early relationship with her advisor (the only Black female-identifying professor in the department) was incredibly positive and felt like the "safest space," where she felt affirmed and supported. Another collaborator, Jessica, noted how helpful it was to hear her mentor, a faculty member of color, bring up the prevalence of code-switching in academia and what it meant for her, stating: "She provides it for me without me even knowing that that's what I need. And I think that is

what's hard because we don't even know what we need." It is essential to note that while these two collaborators benefited from culturally responsive mentors, such relationships were rare and can be viewed as outliers. The presence of these mentors emphasizes the broader systemic absence of faculty equipped to support students from racialized backgrounds.

Family, home community, and racial identity

Collaborators felt a sense of responsibility to give back to and honor their communities, especially given their privileged roles as doctoral students, as some referred to it. Their sense of home, community, and racial and ethnic identity were at the center as they navigated their doctoral programs; their respective identities were inseparably tied to the communities in which they were raised and surfaced constantly in their everyday lives as doctoral students. Several collaborators spoke at length about how they would not be where they are today without the support and guidance they received from their families and communities. Their sense of community and racial identity was centered as they navigated their doctoral programs.

Some collaborators also expressed gratitude for the support they received from their home communities, which ultimately allowed them to access and persist through doctoral education. Sammy recalled seeing his mother face racial microaggressions as a native Spanish speaker who did not speak English, as she cleaned houses to make ends meet, and how she endured challenging situations. As a result, Sammy learned how to navigate hostile spaces in academia when he faced harmful comments about his writing abilities as an English as a second language (ESL) student. He noted, "So, I guess for me, I've had to rely on the growing-up experiences, the strategies I've learned, to be able to navigate these different spaces, and like not to survive because that takes a toll, but like thrive."

Collaborators' desire to incorporate the views, challenges, and experiences of Latinx people in their research efforts was also prominent. For example, O'Neil shared that his primary goal in pursuing a PhD was to center Latinx experiences and to use his skills and knowledge to give back to the community where he was raised and educated. Further, they noted in the classroom that it was critical to speak up when the curriculum and discussions undermined, disparaged, or completely ignored the views of Latinx individuals and other BIPOC communities. It is important to note that collaborators also surfaced perceptions of how others in and around campus held negative opinions of them, given their Latinx identities.

Across interviews, collaborators highlighted the fact that they had faced harsh treatment on campus, including microaggressions, racial profiling, and racist behavior. For example, Sammy noted one evening, when trying to access his office after hours, a janitor told him, "You don't belong here; what are you doing here?" During the same semester, he was followed by a campus police officer as he walked to his office on campus. Sammy shared:

> *The entire time, he had his hand on his gun. Um [very long pause – holding back tears], my program responded that they were more concerned with whether I told someone if I was in the program or not, because they didn't want to look bad [the program's reputation]. Um, and that if I am to come after hours into the building, I should just be very aware of how I behave so that those things don't happen. These are people who also study race, class, and gender. When I go to different offices and stores [on campus], like the disability resource center, the fucking bookstore, and Starbucks, I have always been looked at and ignored by whoever's at the front, which is predominantly white folks. Occasionally, it has been people of color, too, which is more unfortunate.*

Students' sense of home community and Latinx identity were part of their overall microsystem as they moved through different aspects of their doctoral programs. Students drew on these systems, often learning from their earlier life experiences and the many challenges their family members endured to draw inspiration and work against a system that isolated them. Conversely, themes also illuminated the consistent and negative treatment students received based on how campus members perceived them and members of their race/ethnicity. Analogous to the collaborators' family and home community, as well as their Latinx identity, students' peers were also an essential facet of their microsystem environment.

Peers

The collaborators spoke a lot about their relationship-building and frequent interactions with their peers both on and off campus, which had a profound impact on how students experienced their programs. Notably, the collaborators mentioned how challenging it was to work within HWIs with their peers who did not share their cultural backgrounds. Taking part in Latinx student organizations was significant for students because they could form and be part of a "mini" community within an environment that was not always conducive to their progress. For example, Bianka stated, "I knew they were important … I just feel a lot less anxious, and I feel there's a lot less isolation in terms of being at [university] as a whole." Although students were able to build a community at times, they also noted how they faced various aggressions from fellow students. Sammy shared, "You can still see in their eyes, they never have to tell you, but you see in their eyes that they think less of you."

This theme highlights the significant impact of immediate relationships (faculty, family, community, and peers). While some aspects of their campus experiences and faculty interactions were discriminatory and unfavorable, lacking cultural awareness and useful mentorship, the collaborators' family and community ties were affirming, helping them stay grounded in their racial and ethnic identities. The collaborators sought connections and solidarity through peer relationships, particularly within their Latinx graduate student organization. These culturally sustaining relationships helped shape their sense of belonging on campus. Next, we considered how the collaborators' microsystems interact with one another to help inform the collaborators' overall experiences.

Mesosystem: Intersecting Roles and Conflicting Expectations

Again, the mesosystem comprises the interactions between the person's microsystems. A fundamental commonality throughout the data was the way collaborators clashed and were significantly at odds with one another. For example, Annie was influenced heavily by two competing microsystems: (a) her identity as a Latina and an overall sense of pride and gratitude to her community, and (b) her relationships with her students and other faculty. As an instructor, Annie expressed a sense of responsibility to honor her community and herself while teaching, alluding to the importance of authenticity. She shared, "It's really important that I'm constantly keeping my community in mind ... and then I bring that knowledge into the classroom." However, Annie highlighted that doing so often caused problems and created discomfort for her, her students, and her professors. Annie stated:

> *I think being a Brown person in the classroom is political. And I think I must lean into that rather than try to assimilate or not cause any problems. I think it's really important to bring up the things that are uncomfortable. And so, I'm constantly trying to figure out how to do that.*

Annie was influenced by her relationships within the microsystem (e.g., students, faculty, and perhaps even the overall culture of her institution), and as a result, experienced difficulties openly centering her identity and community as an instructor. Of critical importance is that Annie was also able to impact those in her microsystem by striving to be her authentic self, even after being challenged by her students. Whether centering her Latina identity as an instructor caused discomfort for her students and other faculty members, Annie was acting in response to her environment and influencing others within her microsystem.

Another example is the use of the Spanish language. The simple act of the collaborators speaking their home language also conflicted with the institutional environment. Sammy shared:

> *Sometimes I've made it a point when I'm speaking in class to use Spanish first, or use a mix of Spanglish, and then have folks in the class look at me like, "Oh my God, he actually said something smart."*

For certain peers and faculty in students' microsystems, speaking in Spanish – an inherent part of students' community and racial identity – was associated with a lack of intelligence or belonging in doctoral education. Similarly, the collaborators' sense of self in relation to their home community and racial background also collided with the views of faculty members in the classroom. In one course

that required students to provide feedback on discussion boards, Annie expressed that specific readings by prominent women of color in her community were missing. A peer shared their professor's Facebook status with Annie, where the professor highlighted, according to Annie's recollection:

> *Sometimes I feel like I'm really failing our millennial doctoral students. They're so confident in the knowledge that they carry, and when I was their age … I was just so concerned about getting things right, and they're just all about challenging.*

Although it is not certain whether Annie's reaction to the curriculum triggered her professor's reflection and could be a critique of the millennial generation of students, we have chosen to honor how Annie felt about the situation. Annie shared, "So, I felt like in some ways my presence or my questions made her have to confront something she didn't want to." As much as students are influenced and shaped by faculty members who carry significant authority, Annie's response to her faculty member's choice of readings may have triggered a reaction, possibly leading her faculty member to reflect on this event. This example highlighted an essential aspect of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) original ecology of human development: relationships are bi-directional.

Collaborators also noted some faculty members did not support their research interests, which focused on examining, bringing attention to, or uplifting their communities. Sammy highlighted, "I was constantly told that Latino men are not a legitimate subject of study, and I was constantly told you need to change your dissertation topic." He continued:

> *My professor basically said that. Well, that's something you just need to learn how to deal with because you're going to get it all the time. I understand that when you're, quote on quote, studying vulnerable populations, you're going to be told that shit doesn't matter.*

This interaction, in turn, reinforced the narrative with which Sammy was all too familiar. He noted, "I fucking get it. We live in a world that constantly tells us we don't matter." Similarly, Raul recalled that after reaching out to a white faculty member with whom he had a sense of rapport about his research interests, the faculty member noted, "We don't have similar research agendas, so I don't think I can help you," and referred Raul over to two faculty members of color. Building from LatCrit, these examples demonstrate how institutional norms, rooted in whiteness and monolingualism, cast Latinx doctoral students' cultural expressions (e.g., bilingualism and community-focused research) and ways of knowing as intellectually inferior, reflecting broader systemic marginalization and positioning these students' presence as inherently political. These experiences raise critical concerns about the preparedness of doctoral faculty to support culturally sustaining scholarship. An absence of training in equity and racial literacy may perpetuate environments where Latinx epistemologies are silenced, and these doctoral students are forced to self-censor or advocate in isolation.

These stories highlight the significant challenges that some Latinx doctoral students encounter when navigating academic spaces marked by inadequate support, biases, and dismissiveness, which hinder their personal, academic, and professional development. This also highlights how the collaborators navigate some of the tensions within their microsystem – specifically, their cultural identity and academic roles. Classroom environments repeatedly became spaces of conflict where the collaborators' expressions (e.g., racial, linguistic, or cultural identity) clashed with the institutional norms and faculty expectations. Despite these challenges, students took action in their environments by advocating for their communities and asserting their authenticity. These bi-directional influences highlight the complexity of existing within multiple, sometimes conflicting, educational and cultural spheres. The mesosystem is not just a "conflict zone," but rather a space where development occurs through tension, negotiation, and resistance.

Exosystem: Indirect Influences and Community Shaping

Again, the exosystem encompasses other formal and informal social structures that indirectly influence the person. Doctoral students in this study discussed occurrences and experiences in various so-

cial settings that do not directly involve the collaborators individually but are still linked to their doctoral educational experiences. This study's elements of the students' ecosystems included community and family.

Community

For many collaborators in the study, their neighborhoods were mentioned as a factor of relatively strong influence on them academically. For example, Bianka described the cultural transformation that accompanied her move from California to Arizona for school as less than ideal due to the campus's communal demographics. Bianka continued, adding:

> *When I came here, I saw a lot of white people, which was very surprising to me, just because I was expecting a lot of Latinos as well. The fact that there is kind of a lack of Latino presence in general, which is a little bit difficult for me to adjust to.*

The community backdrop made her stand out in comparison. Bianka illustrated that her discomfort was cultivated in an environment that did not directly involve her when she declared: "Sometimes I feel out of place when I'm wearing my Mexican shirt, typically, because if it's like an odd thing to see here, back home it really wasn't." Bianka's campus community had a lasting impact on how she navigated campus spaces and expressed her cultural identity. The perceived whiteness of Bianka's new academic space highlights higher education as a racialized organization. These settings often covertly mark Latinx identity, and visible cultural markers like language and clothing are often marked as deviant. Such perceptions align with LatCrit's focus on how structural racism and cultural erasure are prolonged through normalized institutional aesthetics and spatial dynamics.

O'Neil offered another dimension to the element of community in his recollection. His home neighborhood in Arizona was the center of political contention and attention surrounding the United States' relationships with Latin America and im/immigration policy. Over time, the contention and attention wore down on O'Neil and impacted his university choice. He shared:

> *If I'm being honest with myself, [it] factored heavily in my decision to leave the state for my undergraduate studies because I think I believed that I could sort of disassociate myself from the ongoing [issue] that my position in Arizona was always going to be politicized by virtue … the fact that both of my parents are Mexican im/migrants and that I grew up in a largely African American and Mexican neighborhood.*

It was an environment from which O'Neil needed a break. This example involves the exosystem component of the broader ecological system: the political environment. The political environment did not directly involve O'Neil; however, it impacted him personally, affecting his educational experience. It cultivated an atmosphere of arguably high stress, considering it was one from which he needed a break. Thus, this environment compelled him to choose a school he viewed as far removed from the political turmoil of his home state.

Family

Collaborators in the study noted various instances in which a family member's interactions with others, whether at work or in the community, impacted their educational trajectory and experiences. Sammy, for example, described his mother's job as a housekeeper and how he internalized her role, particularly when he helped her out during breaks from school and witnessed how she was treated when cleaning affluent white families' homes; he shared:

> *In order to be able to provide for my brothers and me, my mom had to clean houses during school breaks and weekends. My brothers and I would go with her to clean houses. That's how we survived. Even as a PhD student, I've gone back and helped her. In that process of working with her, it was kind of like learning how to navigate hostile spaces. Sometimes I'd be cleaning the toilet, even when I went back as a PhD student over break, and I was cleaning the fucking toilet, and the white woman comes up to me and is like, can you go clean that too? I'm like, "This girl" [rolled eyes]. But it taught me how to speak to these folks in their big ass mansions.*

Carrying these moments with him back on campus, Sammy frequently tied his experiences on campus to the experiences he witnessed of his mother and how employers and others in their community treated her. He mentioned witnessing employers speak to his mother—and to him in some instances—in condescending, demanding, and dismissive ways. Sammy also shared how hurtful it was to see his mother physically walk with her head down and silence herself around white people. The inner dissonance with which he had toiled was evident through his reflection. However, he attested to flipping those negative experiences into weapons to combat any issues on campus, stating, "I guess I've used those strategies, and the reason I bring that up is because I've seen how my mom is treated as a Mexicana who can't speak English." For Sammy, these moments fueled his fire. He understood the nuances and possessed an awareness of how some white people viewed him and people who looked like him, who were visibly Brown and Indigenous Mexican.

Often devalued, ignored by society at large, and regarded simply as laborers, Sammy watched his mother be mistreated by the white people for whom she worked. Similarly, when comforted by hostility about how he must navigate as a Latinx man in a space designed for white men (e.g., college settings), he drew on his mother's experience as an example of how to navigate such an environment. Sammy's internalization of his mother's experience with her white employers shaped how he navigates predominantly white academic spaces as a doctoral student. His recognition of condescension – first observed in domestic labor contexts and then reproduced in academic advising – demonstrates the convergence of exosystemic and microsystemic oppression, reinforcing patterns of racialized devaluation across multiple systems.

Although Sammy's instance was internal and less tangible, Annie provided an example of how a family falls within the exosystem model for her. Annie attributed her move to the United States from Mexico directly to her father's employment. She described this period and said:

> *My dad got a job offer, and they sponsored us to move to the States … and the plan was that my family would stay here for 2 years so that my brother and I could learn to speak English and then return to Mexico. And so, it's been like 22 years now or something to that effect.*

Annie's environment and *educational* trajectories were directly affected by and correlated to her father's and employer's social links. Out of young Annie's control, her father packed up his family and moved to the United States for work. What she thought would be a brief period turned into over two decades. Her father's move had clear implications for Annie's educational trajectory. She would likely not have considered attending a U.S. university without her father and his employer's social link.

Although not directly involved in their academic institutions, external systems – such as family members' workplaces, neighborhood dynamics, and broader community settings – shaped the collaborators' educational trajectories and doctoral experiences (RQ1). Additionally, these systems intersect with microsystem-level settings (e.g., campus interactions), exemplifying how indirect social structures converge with daily academic life (RQ2). The collaborators internalized lessons from observing how their families, particularly im/migrant parents, navigated marginalization, and they used these experiences to develop strategies for surviving and resisting exclusion in academia. This theme highlights how external and indirect social structures profoundly influence students' sense of purpose, resilience, and educational decision-making. Rather than being shaped by exosystemic forces, the collaborators engaged in critical meaning-making. For example. Sammy's ability to reframe his mother's oppression into motivation demonstrates a refusal to internalize inferiority. This form of counterstorytelling aligns with LatCrit's emphasis on experiential knowledge and cultural intuition as sources of epistemic strength.

Macrosystem: Cultural Ideologies and Institutional Norms

Shifting outward in the bioecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), collaborators discussed essential cultural elements that influenced their educational experiences. All collaborators were dedicated to working with and enhancing the experiences and knowledge of Latinxs broadly.

These elements within the macrosystem included, but were not limited to, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and geographic location.

Cultural elements

Returning to Bianka's example in the exosystem, she described her feelings about arriving at the university and being surprised by the sea of white people she saw. The juxtaposition of her home community and her culture shock and discomfort on campus can be attributed to her ethnic identity. Bianka was privy to the nuance of her ethnicity when she acknowledged, "the fact that I think the way I think because of who I am and how I identify." Her identity led her to participate in the Latinx graduate student organization, where she sought to gain a sense of community and belonging.

Sammy echoed this difference in thinking that Bianka hinted at through a more internalized means. Sammy described an issue with a professor after sharing that he wanted to focus his research agenda on "Latino men who are gay." Sammy expressed to the faculty member, "I understand that when you're studying 'vulnerable populations,' you're going to be told like 'that shit doesn't matter.' I fucking get it. We live in a world that constantly tells us we don't matter." This "we don't matter" sentiment is unique to Sammy's ethnic identity, in addition to his sexual orientation and the societal messages associated with it. Annie expanded on the concept of thinking differently by highlighting several classroom instances in which the professor missed the cultural mark due to assumptions and insensitivity. An example of this insensitivity occurred during a moment in the semester when the professor initially identified as white but later identified as Mexican. According to Annie:

> *He [the faculty member] was trying to connect with me, and I was just uncomfortable with how he went about how he was in the classroom. And he's like, "Oh, I thought of you because I was watching this [show] and it was Mexican." And it was just these very poignant moments where he felt like he could say that because, at that point, he had claimed to be Mexican. But there was no real political investment in what that [identifying as Mexican] means.*

The faculty member's claim to a Mexican identity lacked critical consciousness, illustrating the performative nature of "diversity" in many academic spaces. Annie's difference in thinking and ethnic identity is also attributed to a lack of exposure to faculty who are used to having various ethnicities represented in their classroom spaces, especially, in her case, Latinx or "Brown" people. In the same conversation, Annie shared that her faculty in the doctoral program do not know, as she described, "how to manage someone who might think differently and how that's connected to my experience. I think part of it is that there aren't many students of color."

In this theme, the Latinx doctoral students encountered the persistent influence of societal ideologies, such as white normativity, meritocracy, and colorblindness, that framed their academic and personal identities as less valuable. These messages were often embedded in curricula, faculty interactions, and everyday campus culture. The collaborators often challenged or reworked these narratives, reflecting their agency in resisting systemic marginalization. Their efforts to center on Latinx communities in their research and praxis, question curricular gaps, and create spaces of belonging exemplify how they enacted resistance and fostered what LatCrit identifies as epistemic justice. This theme also highlights how racial and cultural ideologies continue to shape institutional climates in ways that exclude or silence students from historically underrepresented backgrounds. The collaborator's interactions reflect how the macrosystem's dominant ideologies – white normativity, heteropatriarchy, and epistemic exclusion – are operationalized within seemingly neutral academic settings. The collaborators' cultural ways of knowing were often unrecognized and delegitimized through curriculum design and faculty discourse. Furthermore, meritocracy assumes that educational success is merely a function of effort and ability, concealing how structural barriers (e.g., exclusion from mainstream research topics or hostile classroom climates) are unfairly distributed. Colorblind teaching refuses to recognize how cultural identity informs learning for Latinx doctoral students, effectively rendering their lived experiences invisible.

Chronosystem: Time, Transitions, and Resistance

Collaborators discussed their experiences in relation to the chronosystem, which encompasses their experiences related to environmental changes over time and the influence of when events occurred. The specific aspect of time in this study includes significant life transitions and historical events.

Life transitions

Major life transitions, as they occur over time, can occur at either the individual or societal level. It is the individual case of Sammy, who initially began his PhD at a different university located in another state, with the hope of working with a particular advisor. This marked a significant transition in his life when he moved to Arizona for his academic program. Over time, his moves (across the country to different institutions) and sacrifices to pursue a PhD proved financially taxing, having mentioned struggling to pay for food and even evoking pity from his advisor. Sammy shared:

> *I remember my 1st year in [previous doctoral institution], I ran out of money at the end of the semester … I know I can't ask my family for money because they're broke as fuck. And I think that the culture of professionalism teaches us not to ask for help in these ways.*

Sammy battled with whether it was professional to ask faculty for help during these times of need in his PhD career. His narrative reflects the ongoing impact of class-based exclusion in doctoral education. His fear of "unprofessionalism" in requesting help stresses how neoliberal academic norms discourage vulnerability during difficult times. These norms, rooted in meritocratic ideologies, converge over time with individual hardships, demonstrating how chronosystemic and microsystemic interactions (RQ2) underscore the disparities faced by Latinx students and other scholars, such as those from high-need financial backgrounds.

Major life transitions over time looked different for Annie. As mentioned, her family moved to the United States due to her father's job opportunities. Annie stated:

> *Having been here for more than 2 decades, I've kind of seen how the sociopolitical climate has changed significantly, and what it has meant to see is a different piece of legislation that targets specifically our community, or that targets migrants, or targets Brown people.*

Over the past two decades, noticeable legislative changes stood out to Annie, particularly those targeting Latinxs and im/migrants. These targets on im/migrants and Brown people put into perspective for her how the campus climate was reminiscent of the overall state and federal-level hostile climates. Annie's reference regarding legislation that targets Brown people alludes to the broader framework of racialized state violence. LatCrit highlights how these legal shifts are strategic moves to restrict access and belonging for communities of color; thus, shaping Latinx students' sense of safety and educational legitimacy.

Transitions over time, with critical impacts on student experiences, are addressed through the involvement and development of relationships while participating in various student groups. Multiple collaborators mentioned how they felt a greater sense of belongingness once they found a student community on campus, such as the one catered to Latinx graduate students. Armando shared:

> *[The organization helped me] meet other people and get involved in some activities that I probably would never have gotten involved in that had to do with my ethnicity and the Latinx community at [university]. And I think organizations outside of my [PhD] program have done a lot to meet other Latinos and Latinas and Latinx people, which kind of have allowed me to feel more at home in Arizona and have allowed me to find that fraternity and community that I didn't have my first 2 years in the [PhD] program.*

Once Armando and others joined these campus organizations, they quickly felt a greater sense of belonging and a supportive and culturally validating counterspace at their university. Arguably, due to the increased racialized tensions linked to recent legislation (e.g., reversal of race-conscious admissions policies and anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives across various states and via executive orders from the 47th President of the United States), the necessity of these Latinx communities is

vital to the holistic success and persistence of Latinx graduate students. These types of student organizations function as vital counterspaces that resist erasure and help cultivate community among collaborators amid a racially hostile sociopolitical climate. Amidst political rhetoric and legislation that target and weaponize DEI, the necessity of validating and culturally affirming spaces for collaborators stresses the need to offset the lack of institutional support for inclusion.

Over time, personal milestones, migration histories, and evolving political climates influenced how students perceived themselves and their academic environments. Some major transitions (e.g., relocating for graduate school, coping with financial insecurity, or finding community through their Latinx graduate student organization) were identified as critical moments for the collaborators. Their narratives reveal that time is not just a backdrop, but a force that transforms students' relationships into identity, advocacy, and a sense of belonging. The chronosystem theme highlights the cumulative and shifting nature of the experiences of Latinx doctoral students in the study. Their life transitions go beyond personal challenges – they are situated within historical and political shifts that disproportionately affect Latinx communities. For example, Annie's observation of evolving anti-im/migrant policies points to how the chronosystem intersects with the macrosystem, revealing how broader sociopolitical contexts directly inform the experiences of Latinx doctoral students (RQ1).

DISCUSSION

Our study focused on the holistic environmental scans of Latinx doctoral students, encompassing their experiences from childhood to graduate school. These dynamics, while not universal to all HWIs, were salient in the collaborators' experience. While beyond the study's primary scope, we acknowledge that the findings may apply to other minoritized doctoral students who do not identify as Latinx, particularly in the doctoral socialization process (R. M. Johnson & Strayhorn, 2022). We focused on the often-overlooked experiences of Latinx doctoral students, including various aspects highlighted in LatCrit (e.g., familial background, migration backgrounds, language), and is the first, to our knowledge, to employ the bioecological framework (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) with Latinx doctoral students, extending the existing literature on this topic. For instance, Suárez-Orozco et al. (2015) employed the model to examine the experiences of undocumented undergraduates on college campuses, focusing on how various factors in their youth development contexts influence their opportunities and impact their educational and well-being outcomes. Stern et al. (2021) employed the model to examine the development of Black youth, emphasizing the critical role of attachment within a child's microsystem. Linley et al. (2018) investigated the ecological systems of LGBTQ+ STEM students to gain insight into their collegiate experiences. Renn (2003) used this model in a study centered on the identities of mixed-race college students. Our application of the bioecological framework differed from previous uses in higher education by focusing on Latinx doctoral students, thereby making a unique contribution to the existing literature on this topic.

Specifically, our study successfully drew out findings categorized based on the five bioecological systems (i.e., microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem). To link the findings to the research questions (RQ1: How do specific systems, spheres, and contexts inform the educational experiences of Latinx doctoral students at a HWI in the southwestern United States? and RQ2: How do the convergence and interaction of students' different bioecological systems influence their doctoral experiences?), refer to Table 2 for research questions and theme alignment). The following discussion is organized into subsections by bioecological system, with an emphasis on the significance of the findings and how they expand on existing literature. We also included some critical reflection on alternative interpretations and broader implications to enhance the critical depth and practical application.

Microsystem: Navigating Relationships and Identity Development

Our first theme revealed the importance of relationships. The collaborators emphasized the pivotal role of key individuals before and during their doctoral studies (faculty, advisors, family members, home communities, and peers), describing how these relationships assisted with their racial and ethnic identity development and how they played significant roles in how the collaborators navigated their academic programs. They also noted the positive and negative effects of their encounters with various faculty members. These sentiments are analogous to Felder et al.'s (2014) study findings, which included the importance of having faculty members who validated their doctoral students' research agendas rooted in racial or cultural topics. However, like Felder et al.'s (2014) and Huggins de Murzi's (2023) studies, many collaborators expressed frustration over the lack of readily available guidance. Our study expands the conversation by showing how these relationships intersect and compound across systems. This sentiment was echoed by Sammy, a first-generation student, who criticized the insufficient mentorship from his faculty advisor, stating, "How the hell do you expect us to know what to ask for when we [Latinx first-generation doctoral students] don't know it for ourselves?" This is an area faculty can be more intentional about, such as developing a "doctoral student milestones" document with salient competencies, research skills, and experiences their advisees should hit prior to graduation (e.g., publish a book review and present at a regional or national conference by the end of year two). This document can guide their conversations with advisees as they progress through their programs.

While the collaborators described affirming relationships, especially with mentors who shared their racial or cultural backgrounds, most also expressed disappointment with the institutional culture that prioritized independence over collective knowledge sharing. These findings suggest a need for reimagining doctoral education environments that center care, community, and relational mentoring. Critically, the study could consider that some of the frustrations with faculty may stem not only from cultural disconnects but also from broader structural limitations, such as overburdened faculty, cultural taxation placed upon faculty of color (Padilla, 1994), or unclear departmental expectations. Future studies could investigate how embedded structures at the institutional level stifle or support mentoring practices and relationships that extend beyond interpersonal dynamics.

Mesosystem: Intersecting Roles and Conflicting Expectations

The findings in the mesosystem section illustrate how the collaborators navigated conflicting roles and expectations in their cultural and academic domains. This theme discovered instances where the collaborators' mesosystems conflicted, which encompasses interactions of multiple microsystems. Different relationships within the collaborators' mesosystem sometimes clashed, creating significant tension. For instance, students like Annie confronted tensions between being an authentic Latina instructor and fitting into predominantly white academic norms. Annie actively decided not to assimilate into what she perceived as the dominant institutional and academic culture. Instead, she embraced her identity as a "Brown person" in the classroom as an instructor and a student. Annie did not withdraw from discussing topics that might have made others around her uncomfortable. Another example is the use of the Spanish language. The collaborators' home language created conflict with some of their white peers. These moments illustrate how the Latinx identity becomes politicized in academic settings, challenging the assumptions of neutrality in education. A key insight here is bi-directionality (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006): while institutions shaped students' behaviors, students also reciprocated by provoking reflection and change among faculty and peers. Still, it is necessary to explore whether these bi-directional influences led to sustained institutional change or simply momentary discomfort.

Exosystem: Indirect Influences and Community Shaping

Collaborators' experiences were also shaped by contexts beyond their direct control, such as family workplaces, neighborhood demographics, and political climates. These influences were deeply internalized – illustrated by Sammy's stories about his mother's labor or O'Neil's decision to leave Arizona due to anti-im/migrant policies and hostile sociopolitical climate toward others with whom he identifies. Another example was from Bianka, who described her cultural adjustment from California to Arizona to pursue her doctoral studies. She noted the surprising lack of Latino presence on campus, stating:

> *When I came here, I saw a lot of white people, which was very surprising to me, just because I was expecting a lot of Latinos as well. The fact that there is a kind of a lack of Latino presence in general, which is a little bit difficult for me to adjust to.*

This reinforces the notion that higher education institutions do not operate in isolation – they reflect and perpetuate societal inequalities. As such, practitioners must understand how systemic racism outside the academy affects student engagement within it. This exosystemic awareness can inform more compassionate advising and resource provision. This finding, which extends Espino et al.'s (2010) study, highlights experiences within social settings that do not directly involve the collaborators individually but are still connected to their doctoral educational experiences. These experiences may have a profound impact on them in numerous ways, such as the development of mental health issues and safety concerns, as seen in Blockett et al.'s (2016) study, which found feelings of marginalization due to a lack of environmental support. Furthermore, they may impact their research and scholarship, with many seeking to conduct work that directly enhances the knowledge and lived experiences of other Latinx students.

Macrosystem: Cultural Ideologies and Institutional Norms

Our fourth theme falls under the macrosystem, encompassing society's overarching cultural patterns, values, laws, customs, and resources that shape and influence the other systems. The macrosystem findings highlight how dominant ideologies like whiteness, meritocracy, and colorblindness permeate campus norms, curriculum, and interpersonal interactions. Collaborators expressed a deep sense of being "othered," even when institutions claimed diversity and inclusion as values. Lara and Nava's (2018) and Cole's (2020) studies highlight the significant impact of how laws, policies, and political landscapes shape the decisions and experiences of racially minoritized students (e.g., undocumented students' post-graduation choices). Our study extended this concept by incorporating geographic location, laws, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, all of which are vital cultural and societal components that impacted the collaborators' educational experiences.

For example, Bianka's story illustrated her awareness of the nuance of her ethnicity when she asserted, "acknowledging the fact that I think the way I think because of who I am and how I identify." Her identity led her to participate in the Latinx graduate student organization, where she sought to gain a sense of community and belonging. Faculty often misunderstood or minimized the collaborators' identities, lived experiences, and contributions, with multiple collaborators reporting microaggressions and tokenism. These findings support LatCrit's assertion that institutions marginalize racialized epistemologies (Bernal, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Still, not all faculty are adversarial – more attention could be paid to how culturally responsive educators resist these systems.

Chronosystem: Time, Transitions, and Resistance

The chronosystem findings demonstrate how collaborators' experiences were shaped over time through transitions, such as migrating with their families or navigating legislative shifts. The specific dimension of time in relation to this study includes major life transitions and historical events. For example, Annie reflected on significant life transitions that occurred over time. When her family moved to the United States due to her father's job opportunity, she stated:

> *Having been here for more than 2 decades, I've kind of seen how the sociopolitical climate has changed significantly, and what it has meant to see is a different piece of legislation that targets specifically our community, or that targets migrants, or targets Brown people.*

Annie's reflection on 20+ years of anti-Latinx policies demonstrates how personal and political histories converge to shape educational pathways. These targets on im/migrants and Brown people put into perspective for her how the campus climate was reminiscent of the overall state and federal-level hostile climates. An additional topic identified in this theme was the importance of membership in a Latinx graduate student organization and how this group and its affiliated members acted as counterspaces that resisted exclusion and fostered a sense of belonging. This underscores the temporal nature of institutional adaptation: Latinx doctoral students create resilience and change over time, even when institutions are slow to evolve. Given the current political climate in the U.S. (e.g., anti-DEI policies, anti-Latinx im/migrant deportation practices, and race-neutral admissions), the role of time and shifting cultural contexts deserves deeper exploration in future studies.

The benefit of using Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) expansion of the bioecological framework is its ability to highlight that proximal processes are the core of human development (i.e., PPCT), examine multiple levels of influence, from individual characteristics to broader societal factors, providing a comprehensive understanding of phenomena, its emphasis on the importance of context in shaping human development, its interdisciplinary approach, integrating concepts from psychology, sociology, biology, and other fields to under-stand human development holistically. Also, it allows researchers to consider the dimension of time in relation to this study, including major life transitions and historical events (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Some limitations of this framework include the ambiguity or convoluted nature of the boundaries between different levels (e.g., microsystem, mesosystem), making it challenging to define and measure these concepts precisely. It has also been criticized for its heavy focus on context over individual agency and for failing to adequately consider historical and political contexts, which we aimed to do with our study by accompanying it with LatCrit (e.g., we conceptualized how the racist and anti-im/migrant political and historical landscape in the Southwest has impacted the collaborators' educational and lived experiences). Despite these limitations, the bioecological framework remains valuable for understanding the experiences of Latinx doctoral students, particularly in its emphasis on the interaction between individuals and their environments. Thus, we suggest pairing it with other frameworks intentionally designed for and/or applicable to Latinx student experiences (e.g., LatCrit).

IMPLICATIONS

Our study's findings have significant implications for marginalized students, particularly Latinx doctoral students. Although the collaborators were all enrolled full-time and in-person on their respective campuses, educators must consider the whole student, both inside and outside the classroom, regardless of the instructional modality (face-to-face, hybrid, or online). As highlighted in our findings, it is vital to consider the whole person, including their family and cultural backgrounds, as well as the inputs, outputs, and ecological spheres (e.g., racist and xenophobic sociopolitical climates) that influence and impact their experiences in and outside doctoral education. Institutional agents and researchers must account for comprehensive environmental assessments from childhood to graduate school experiences and acknowledge the role of faculty and educators in creating an environment that considers these principles.

Additionally, the bioecological model should not be limited to the experiences of Latinx doctoral students but should be applied to all student groups who do not align with the traditional demographic of educational institutions in the U.S., which were primarily designed to serve white, male, heteronormative individuals (Cole, 2020; Wilder, 2013). For educators, this means regularly considering the local, state, and broader contexts in which they teach and work and recognizing the heightened racialized tensions associated with recent legislation. If institutions continue to actively recruit talented and

brilliant Latinx and other students of color, considering external factors that may negatively impact their students' experiences, and implementing solutions, is critical. Possessing this understanding, reflexivity, and contextual knowledge will enhance the overall experience and retention of Latinx doctoral students.

Educators can develop doctoral student faculty advisor training rooted in the bioecological model and LatCrit's focus areas to increase awareness of students' complex and multifaceted contexts, designing culturally affirming peer mentorship programs, and advocating for institutional policies informed by the macrosystem and exosystem influences (e.g., hiring diverse faculty, addressing harmful campus policing practices). Employing the aforementioned lenses can help lead a pragmatic approach to evaluating the whole student, which can include their peers, families, social and political landscape, and the scopes of time and space. The connection and consideration of these factors can contribute to a richer understanding of how youth development impacts the educational outcomes of Latinx doctoral students. Moreover, the frameworks can assist higher education actors with analyzing multiple levels of influence, ranging from individual traits to larger societal elements.

Future research may explore how the techniques and practices above can be operationalized in program design, beyond their use as a conceptual lens. We also recommend that future research studies examine how Latinx doctoral students navigate complex institutional environments, particularly at the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and academic and educational identity, to gain a deeper understanding of how these scholars navigate conflicting microsystems in academic settings as they pursue their degrees. The experiences of several collaborators, including the examples shared by Sammy and Annie, highlight the need for further examination of how Latinx doctoral students integrate their community and cultural identities into educational spaces and how these identities impact their experiences in academic programs and doctoral studies more broadly. For institutional actors to better understand how to support doctoral students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, future studies could focus on the ways Latinx doctoral students at HWIs manage cultural dissonance. Furthermore, researchers could evaluate the effectiveness of mentorship programs that support underrepresented groups at the graduate level. Finally, longitudinal studies are warranted to investigate the long-term impacts of these experiences on students' academic success, well-being, and career trajectories.

For policy, institutions could invest in culturally affirming, responsive, and sustaining mentorship training for staff and faculty. Moreover, because of several collaborators' experiences, intentionality regarding policies to address racial profiling and discrimination should be established. Additionally, no matter the U.S. Presidential Administration (Democrat or Republican), institutional policies that foster inclusive classroom and campus environments must be implemented. All Latinx doctoral students should be empowered to unapologetically express their identities authentically. Annie shared some of her experiences with discomfort when centering her Latina and cultural identity while a teaching assistant and not being taken seriously or seen as a credible source by students, predominantly those who are white men. Ensuring the overall campus culture is a brave space for minoritized students, including at the graduate level, is critical.

From a practice perspective, institutions must critically assess their practices and address the lack of faculty and staff training and skills regarding culturally affirming advising and mentoring practices. It is essential for faculty and staff training to include best practices for engaging with Latinx doctoral students, who bring diverse perspectives and research interests. Institutional actors must be equipped with the critical consciousness necessary to ensure postgraduate students are not discouraged from pursuing a research agenda centering on underrepresented populations that often align with their identities (e.g., Sammy's PhD advisor telling him that Latino gay men's experiences are not a legitimate research focus area). A mentoring empowerment model could focus on building relationships that serve as supportive counterspaces, fostering a humanizing, culturally affirming, and loving environment that inspires, encourages, and validates advisees' interests, goals, and aspirations (Santa-

Ramirez & Vargas, 2024). Ultimately, institutional actors in higher education must prioritize developing campus spaces and organizations that foster a sense of community. An example mentioned by multiple collaborators in the study was creating – or promoting, if it already exists – a Latinx graduate student organization. Collaborators mentioned that these organizations included the people and spaces that provided vital support to them as they navigated the challenges they faced as doctoral students. We wholly acknowledge there is no one-size-fits-all model; however, we hope the implications shared can assist in creating inclusive and equitable campus environments, which may improve the sense of belonging, retention, and satisfaction rates for Latinx doctoral students.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore how specific systems, spheres, and contexts inform the educational experiences of Latinx doctoral students at an HWI in the southwestern United States and how the convergence and interaction of students' different bioecological systems influence their doctoral experiences. Using the bioecological model in tandem with LatCrit, our study highlighted the multilayered, evolving nature of Latinx doctoral students' experiences. The microsystem highlighted the critical role of relationships with family, faculty, and peers in identity development and belonging. In contrast, the mesosystem emphasized students' tensions when navigating multiple, sometimes conflicting, cultural and academic expectations. The exosystem emphasized the influence of community, family dynamics, and external sociopolitical climates, and the macrosystem demonstrated how ideologies, such as whiteness and meritocracy, shape institutional practices and perceptions. Last, the chronosystem centered on how personal and political changes over time influence students' identity formation and advocacy.

This study makes a distinct contribution to the existing literature, which has applied the bioecological framework, traditionally used in child and youth development, to Latinx doctoral students. This approach enabled a holistic analysis of students' lived experiences across interconnected ecological systems and temporal shifts, revealing how power, race, and resilience converge in graduate education. A limitation of the study is its small, context-specific sample, which is not generalizable to all Latinx or BIPOC doctoral students. Additionally, while the LatCrit framework helped center race and intersectionality, more attention could be paid to the experiences of students with additional intersecting marginalized identities beyond ethnicity and class. Future research should continue to utilize and refine the bioecological model in graduate education, particularly in comparative studies across diverse racial and institutional contexts. Scholars might also explore how this framework can inform program design, faculty training, and institutional policy in ways that are both theoretically grounded and practically impactful. Ultimately, our study confirms that the doctoral journey for Latinx doctoral students is not monolithic and is shaped by various factors, including environmental factors both on and off campus, in classrooms and advisor meetings, as well as the ongoing interplay of history, home, campus community, identity, and systems of power. We call on institutions to do a deep dive into how they may be perpetuating whiteness ideologies and discriminatory practices and recognize and respond to these complexities with greater nuance, equity, and care.

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