

Equity in Graduate Education Virtual Journal Club

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Exploring the Role of Community Cultural Wealth in Graduate School Access and Persistence for Mexican American PhDs

By Dr. Michelle M. Espino

[Manuscript](#)

Abstract

“This article focuses on the extent to which devalued forms of capital along with limited access to valued cultural capital facilitated the access and persistence of 33 Mexican American PhDs who earned their doctorates in a variety of disciplines at 15 universities across the United States. Using the framework of community cultural wealth, this study uncovered and contextualized the ways that Mexican American PhDs activated navigational capital, resistant capital, social capital, aspirational capital, and legitimated forms of cultural capital in order to access graduate school. In order to persevere in their doctoral studies, however, participants were often reminded that cultural capital was necessary for gaining access to socialization processes and support mechanisms that would lead to funding opportunities and faculty careers. This study illustrates the extent to which participants’ forms of capital (including cultural capital) were valued within hegemonic and oppressive institutions.”
Espino, 2014

Key Concepts Defined

Cultural capital

Cultural capital is part of what has been described as the “hidden curriculum” of higher education. It is privileged knowledge that affects who gains access and advances, and has therefore been described as important to understanding the perpetuation of inequality. There are three types of cultural capital, which can be thought of as standards which aspiring members of a group are judged:

- **Embodied:** Language, mannerisms, preferences, styles
- **Objectified:** Cultural goods, such as what a person owns, reads, drives, wears
- **Institutionalized:** Academic credentials and qualifications

Because elites run most institutions, when they judge who should get to become an insider, they tend to narrowly define the cultural stuff that should count as valued “capital” in ways that reinforce their own elite qualities. Knowingly or not, institutions set their rules (i.e., for access and advancement) to align with qualities found among those who are white, wealthy, and male. Does a person use the

speech/actions of elites? Does a person have the things that elites have? Do they have the credentials that elites tend to have? By baking expectations of having these biased forms of cultural capital into formal processes for access and advancement, institutions reproduce inequality. “By understanding the expectations, unwritten rules, and trade secrets valued most within the field of education (Carter 1997), members of the dominant culture learn how” to navigate educational and professional systems and make the systems work for them (Espino, 2014, p. 552).

Community cultural wealth

People don't only succeed by having elite cultural capital! Community cultural wealth is a set of “Assets and resources found in communities of color that [have] the potential to support students along their educational pathways (40). [Education researcher Tara Yosso] aggregated studies about these assets and resources into categories of capital that would “account for how students of color may simultaneously promote the practice of both dominant and transformative forms of cultural and social capital to achieve academic success” (Maldonado et al. 2005, 633).” (Espino, 2014, p. 554)

- **Aspirational capital:** the ability to maintain hope for the future in spite of barriers.
- **Linguistic capital:** the ability to use a variety of communication skills, including listening, storytelling
- **Navigational capital:** the ability to navigate institutional spaces, including maneuvering in unsupportive environments.
- **Social capital:** the ability to leverage networks, norms, and trust to facilitate social and professional connections
- **Familial capital:** strengths drawn from one's pre-college environment, including wisdom, values, and stories
- **Resistance capital:** strengths drawn from experiences of striving for equal rights and social justice, which enable many students of color to leverage their higher education to confront challenges such as inequitable education, health, and other systems

Selected Findings

- “Possession of valued forms of cultural capital in graduate school helps students navigate through academic conferences, craft research proposals and grants, and hone writing skills through publication opportunities.” (p. 552) However, students from minoritized backgrounds in the study also leveraged other forms of capital to do the same things.
- In the participants' experiences, authority figures (e.g., teachers, counselors, administrators) rarely nurtured students' forms of capital, and instead created obstacles to their pursuit of educational aspirations.
- The study found an intersectional pattern in which “intersections of race and social class can reward valued forms of cultural capital to some but not to others, even if they are part of the “elite.”” (p. 561)
- At times, previous negative experiences and limited access to valued forms of cultural capital made the journey to the doctorate incredibly difficult. Although marginalized capitals led many

of the participants to graduate from school, few had the currency to help participants cope with general challenges as well as racism.” (P. 565)

- Despite the various obstacles participants experienced along their journeys to the doctorate, few were prepared for the final obstacle that was described as “the wall.” Many participants described the last few months of working on their dissertations as more difficult than other obstacles they experienced. (P. 567). “Many asked for financial and emotional support from advisors and peers, and at least two participants requested medical and psychological assistance. In some instances, participants focused on the outcomes that would result from paving the way for others” (P. 567)

Implications

“The accumulation of various forms of capital can provide the springboard for Mexican Americans to navigate through educational systems,” (p. 554) Espino writes. Therefore, those concerned with equitable and inclusive graduate education can

1. Begin to notice the diversity of strengths students bring that contribute to their success
2. Take actions to increase the value attributed to community cultural wealth,
3. Call into question the valuing of elite cultural capital. Most of the time, these forms are not critical to success; rather, they are barriers to equity in education and academia.

The paper also points to the importance of advisors and other institutional agents in empowering students directly and nurturing their strengths. Espino writes, “Many of the participants’ life narratives highlighted the role of academic advisors who supported and empowered the participants during their graduate study.” (p. 562)

Discussion Questions

1. Espino makes a compelling argument that the Mexican-American participants in her study used not only elite cultural capital, but also forms of community cultural wealth (ie. aspirational capital) to navigate the system. These are assets that many people hold, and which can be more broadly valued toward creating diversity, equity, and inclusion. **Which forms of community cultural wealth have been important in your own journeys in higher education and science?**
2. Espino also demonstrates the value of community cultural wealth for both gaining access to graduate school and persisting in it.
 - a. **How could admissions committees systematically value community cultural wealth?** How do these forms of capital align with non-cognitive competencies?
 - b. **What practical things can teaching assistants, advisors, dissertation committees, and others do to help “decipher the hidden curriculum** so that participants underst[and] what is implicitly and explicitly expected of them throughout graduate school” (p. 562)?

