



2020

Underestimated Erasures: Central American Undergraduate Student Public Invisibility at the University of California, Irvine

Keanu Hawk Gallardo

University of California, Irvine, khgallar@uci.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://www.mackseyjournal.org/publications>



Part of the [Ethnic Studies Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Latina/o Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gallardo, Keanu Hawk (2020) "Underestimated Erasures: Central American Undergraduate Student Public Invisibility at the University of California, Irvine," *The Macksey Journal*: Vol. 1 , Article 188.

Available at: <https://www.mackseyjournal.org/publications/vol1/iss1/188>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Johns Hopkins University Macksey Journal. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Macksey Journal by an authorized editor of The Johns Hopkins University Macksey Journal.

Underestimated Erasures: Central American Undergraduate Student Public Invisibility at the University of California, Irvine

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to extend my gratitude to my mentor Professor, Dr. Ana Rosas, as without her guidance and support, this project would not have been possible. I am absolutely grateful for being blessed with such an amazing mentor who actively pushed me to research a topic very close to my heart. I would also like to thank my mother for having inspired me to essentially focus on the underestimated obstacles that many enterprising Central Americans face in everyday life.

Underestimated Erasures: Central American Undergraduate Student Public Invisibility at the University of California, Irvine

Keanu Hawk Gallardo

University of California, Irvine

Abstract

Previous literature on identity expression and identity erasure often showcase a lack of specificity in terms of ethnicity oftentimes choosing to focus on Mexicans and Latinos as a whole, rather than Central Americans. Through the use of interviews, I interviewed a total of 7 Central American students who are currently attending a University of California institution or have graduated from the University at least 1-2 years prior. Recruitment was done through the use of snowball sampling, which allowed me to interview 5 male students and 2 female students. Central American erasure can be defined as the dismissal, degradation, or literal erasure of Central American students' ethnic identities according to nationality, race, ethnic, and language group assumptions made by others. Central American erasure is becoming a more prevalent topic due to the idea that the dismissal, degradation, and the misassumption of one's Central American identity has unforeseen consequences on identity expression, which can result in feelings of anger, depression and the outright assumption of a new identity that can be used strategically depending on the environment. The findings revealed that there is forms of Central American erasure occurring at the University of California, Irvine that take shape when students often express themselves as Central American amongst Non-Latinos and other Latinos as well, but also due to vulnerability of expressing one's Central American identity, it leads to the

development of coping methods to onset the effects of identity erasure. The implications for the pursuit of bringing awareness to this social issue are the fact that there is little research done on Central Americans and the topics of identity expression, identity erasure and identity formation as Central American students at the UC Irvine campus actively face these concepts on a daily basis.

Keywords: Central Americans, Identity Erasure, Transnational Imaginary, Identity Expression, Identity Code-Switching, Assimilation, Discrimination

Introduction

Having grown up in Pico-Union, a big Central American community in Los Angeles, I became in touch with my own Central American identity due to my Nicaraguan descent. Having then come to the University of California, Irvine was so difficult on my identity in terms of expression as there wasn't that many Latinos or even Central Americans on campus. This led to my research being focused on the Central American erasure of identity that is currently being experienced by Central American students at the University of California, Irvine (UCI) and what emotions form due to these transitions of identity upon entering UCI. The over-generalization of the term Latino, and therefore the people in which this term encapsulates, has urged me to conduct my research on Central Americans at the University of California, Irvine. The problem with the lack of awareness towards the Central American identity does not begin at UCI but it is important to note how this problem is affecting Central American UCI students as they attempt to graduate, and especially what stigmas or misperceptions they face from other students. Especially due to the fact that these stigmas and misperceptions tend to be difficult, I believe this project that I am undertaking is very valuable to everyone in the UCI community and can be

generative in other campuses as well, due to the lack of representation of Central Americans in public media and even in the Latino identity; therefore making Central Americans a minority group within a minority group. Arias (2003) explains that the expression of identity is linked to its erasure in the sense that “If we are tempted at times to run the risk of reifying the Central American identity, it is because the Latino identity is often constructed in areas of the United States like Los Angeles through the abjection and erasure of the Central American-American...” (Arias 172). The main question guiding my research is: In our contemporary moment, how do Latinx undergraduate students who assert a Central American ethnic identity face adversity and silence at the University of California, Irvine?

The major themes in the literature I reviewed, involved ideas of Central American Erasure, Central American Transnational Imaginary, and Identity Code-Switching. The literature was absolutely helpful in identifying gaps that my research would fill by supplying a deeper understanding of what emotions are born out of the dismissal and misperception of one’s Central American identity. My research was mainly focused on Central American students ranging from the ages of 18 - 25 while also being an undergraduate student’ at the University of California, Irvine. After conducting my interviews, the themes of my findings were: The effects of expressing Central American identity amongst Latinos, The Assumption of the Central American Identity among Non-Latinos, and Coping with the Erasure of Identity. I found that the effects of expressing one’s Central American identity amongst Latinos at the University of California, Irvine were generally met with acceptance and a sort of community bond but there were some instances in which they experienced tension because of their identity. Another finding was that the assumption of the Central American identity amongst non-Latinos led to more sheltered and guarded attitudes about one’s identity and in some cases caused the constant change of ethnic

identity in certain environments. Lastly, a theme in my findings that stood out to me was the coping with the erasure of identity that my interviewees expressed as they announced that expressing one's Central American identity at the University of California, Irvine does have a mental toll as well as a social toll as it can be argued that there are bigger roles of discrimination at work that causes the erasure of identity. Overall, my findings were reflective with what I was expecting to find in terms of the emotions that are brought forth from the erasure of identity and what parties are influencing the erasure of the Central American identity at the University of California, Irvine

My research question is: In our contemporary moment, how do Latinx undergraduate students who assert a Central American ethnic identity face adversity towards their identity that may result due to public perceptions of their ethnic differences at the University of California, Irvine? The following three sub-questions that I have created for my research project were: How do Central American students from the University of California, Irvine experience their own ethnic identity through interactions with non-Latinos and other fellow Latinos? As identifying as Central American in higher institutions of education such as the University of California, Irvine, are there any stigmas, misperceptions, or tension that may result from these interactions? How do Central American students cope with the negative experiences that are brought forth through the erasure of identity in certain social spaces? The reason why I chose these sub-questions is that I feel that it is important to understand how other Latinos socially receive Central American Latinos in order to visualize how this relationship affects the expression of one's identity. I also wanted to gauge how one's personal acceptance of their identity as a Central American college student can lead to either academic, social, and mental benefits while maneuvering through the difficult landscape that is higher education. Overall, it became clear that a review of past

literature on the topic of Central Americans facing the erasure of identity and other topics that are relevant was in order.

Literature Review

A strong sense of self-identity is ultimately crucial to allowing for the expression of identity at the University of California, Irvine as it can be argued that one's formation of their Central American identity can further empower them culturally. Chinchilla and Hamilton found that "[c]entral American-Americans have generally thought about issues related to identity. They do not necessarily see themselves as bound by a single identity, but generally claim multiple identities which they can invoke according to the situation" (Chinchilla & Hamilton 30). This fluidity of identity allows Central Americans to claim more than one identity and influenced my further research into identity code-switching. Identity code-switching is similar to code-switching, but it acknowledges the fact that a person can switch between multiple ethnic identities depending on the scenario. In "Identity Formation Among Central American Americans" both Norma Stoltz Chinchilla's and Nora Hamilton's main goal is explaining multiple social and economic factors that are influential in identity formation among Central Americans in California. This allowed me to realize that values such as migration status, education level, wealth, and class were very pivotal in influencing Central Americans to choose certain identities that would allow them to better fit into the U.S. society. Chinchilla & Hamilton (2013) found that "[f]requently it was in college where ethnic and in some cases other identities became solidified. Courses on Central America or reaction to the presence of other ethnic groups led them to seek answers to questions regarding their own ethnic identities" (Chinchilla & Hamilton 30).

One thing that became clear during my literature review was the idea that there must be some way of coping with the erasure of one's Central American identity which can manifest in a shared community of Central Americans that can actively bond and form connections with those who share similar experiences. I took inspiration from Yajaira Padilla's idea of the Central American imaginary that allows Central Americans to bond over the shared similar experiences that they may have encountered during normal everyday life. Padilla (2013) introduces a very thought-provoking concept in the form of a Central American transnational imaginary, which is an "imaginary social space consisting in transnational communities of shared fates" in which the politics of identity and questions of subjectivity are at play in diverse ways and at various levels" (Padilla 153). While reading "The Central American transnational imaginary: Defining the transnational and gendered contours of Central American immigrant experience", it becomes evident that Padilla (2013) is arguing that a social space can be made for Central American communities given that their "shared fates" have been heavily influenced by the experience of civil war and US intervention, by differing contexts of reception and immigrant integration into US society, and by precarious crossings through Mexico" (Padilla 153). This set a precedent of the idea that there is this Central American transnational imaginary that exists in many communities and it may be an even better way of representing Central Americans in the United States compared to the recently ineffective way that is becoming the Latino identity as it built out of false misconceptions. By applying this information to my research, I discovered that UCI's diverse Central American students come from everywhere in the world and the small Central American community on campus is built on the idea of the Central American Imaginary, where students can share their similar experiences as being a minority group within a minority group. It became clear that many Central American students are ultimately looking to establish a sense of

community with people who they can relate to whether it be fellow Central Americans or other Latinos as long as they have similarities that they can connect over. But in the midst of this search for a community, it leaves the question of what this can mean for Central Americans who seek this solace in a Latino community that may not be all that receptive to them.

The idea that the term “Latino” is becoming the new norm unrepresentative of Central Americans at the University of California, Irvine was formulated when I read “Fragmented Ties: Salvadoran Immigrant Networks in America” by Cecelia Menjivar. According to “Fragmented Ties: Salvadoran Immigrant Networks in America”, it states “Salvadorans working in community organizations to aid newcomers were once new immigrants themselves. They, in turn, organized the reception for those that followed, with little or no assistance from longtime Salvadoran residents, who are in positions to mobilize resources for the rest of the community” (Menjivar 105). This is relevant to my own research project given that it touches on the concept of Central American imaginaries that exist for certain types of Central American identities. By applying this knowledge to my research, I will be able to see if Central American UCI students are able to build off of their experiences while at the university and thus be able to build this stronger form of community, based off of their Central American identity. This ties into the idea that there is a coping method against the erasure of identity, and it is the role of the Central American transnational imaginary to help provide this safe space for Central American students at the University of California, Irvine. Overall, this article was central to understanding that erasure of identity is a very real discussion to be had especially when Central Americans students are facing stigmas, misrepresentations or even dismissal of their own identity, but I believe that the overarching Central American community at UCI can be a sort of solution to the problem of

the stigmas around the Central American identity that are being experienced by Central American students.

The idea that identity is a fluid concept that can constantly change depending on different circumstance is well composed in “Who Are You Trying To Be?: Identity Gaps Within Intra-racial Encounters” as it becomes clear that identity formation is affected by different relationships that individuals make and hope to adhere to. Drummond and Orbe (2009) make it clear that language definitely has an effect on the formation of identity as “Many Hispanic participants also discussed the comfort of speaking their native tongue with others who shared a similar culture. For others, not being fluent in Spanish was at the core of identity gaps experienced by Hispanics” (Drummond and Orbe 81-87). Going into the idea that language has an effect on identity gaps that already exist between Latinos, it becomes clear that because Central Americans and other Latinos speak Spanish, the public perception is that you must speak Spanish in order to lay claim to your identity as a whole. Drummond and Orbe (2009) address the importance of fluency in Spanish reflecting one’s own claim to their Central American or Hispanic identity by stating that “Negative stereotypes, or feelings of inadequacy in asserting one’s true ethnicity, often initiate attempts to hide one’s true ethnicity while asserting through both words and behaviors a more ‘socially acceptable’ one” (Drummond and Orbe 81-87). By applying this notion to my findings, it became clear that negative stereotypes based on Latinos can often push Central Americans to often want to engage in “identity code-switching” in an effort to become accepted socially by their fellow peers, which by extension is a form of identity erasure and can be seen a severe case of such a phenomenon. So due to the fluidity of identity, it can be argued that stereotypes often have an influence on one’s own choice to identify as a Central American or to avoid the topic of identity altogether. As language is perceived as a key

identifier in determining one's own ethnic identity as a Central American at the University of California, Irvine, it can also be argued that skin color plays an equal role in affecting the expression of the Central American identity on campus.

Throughout my literature review, it became clear that one way in which misassumptions of identity are usually cast towards Central Americans is based on the color of one's skin, which can either cast them in the eyes of non-Latinos as either Mexican or something else. It became clear that through my reading of "Prevalence and Correlates of Perceived Ethnic Discrimination in the Hispanic Community Health Study/Study of Latinos Sociocultural Ancillary Study", that there is a link between the phenotype of one's skin color and the erasure of one's ethnic identity but one limitation that was obvious was the fact that the author "did not assess characteristics associated with phenotype (e.g., skin tone) or culture (e.g., accented speech), which influence exposure to discrimination (2006; Arredondo et al., 2014; 2008; Espino & Franz, 2002). Therefore, the degree to which phenotypic or cultural characteristics exert effects independent of background group is unknown" (Arellano-Morales et al. 2015). Having read the limitations of this study was important to my own research in the sense that it allowed to me focus on the exact effects of the erasure of identity given that misassumption of identity can happen through phenotypical discrimination. The effects of phenotypic discrimination being used to cast assumptions of Central Americans at the University of California, Irvine was something that was touched upon by two of my interviewees in the sense that it may cause internal conflicts within one's own expression of their ethnic identity and ideally cause jadedness over questions of identity. The consequences of the erasure of the Central American identity were feelings of jadedness and frustration, internal conflicts about identity, and the general disenfranchisement that causes Central Americans to eventually avoid the discussions of identity amongst non-

Latinos mostly. The erasure of the Central American identity through assumptions and stigmas can affect a college student's undergraduate experience was addressed in "Latino Phenotypic Discrimination Revisited: The Impact of Skin Color on Occupational Status". This study focused on how phenotypic discrimination can affect a Latino's workplace status, which got me to look at how exactly one's skin tone can affect perceptions of one's ethnic identity in a similar enterprising environment to the workplace, which would be college. This study was successful in proving that phenotypic discrimination does take place in the workplace even stating that "despite efforts to rid the workplace of discrimination, many darker-skinned Latinos continue to experience more discrimination in the labor market than their lighter-skinned counterpart" (Franz 620). This is reflective of my findings in which assumptions of identity are usually based on judgments of one's visual appearance, but I found it interesting that the interviewees who were of a lighter phenotype expressed more internal conflicts over their own identity as a Central American student. Overall, it was illuminating to my research to view what feelings and emotions were born out of the erasure of identity through phenotypical discrimination.

Assimilation and the erasure of identity are very complicated topics as both concepts can have similar effects but oftentimes, we can see that the erasure of identity ultimately leads to assimilation based on circumstances such as social acceptance and personal acceptance. Linking the idea of assimilation to the idea of erasure of identity was very well done by Arturo Arias when writing "Central American Americans: Invisibility, Power and Representation in the US Latino World" because it really gave me the inspiration to look into the possibility that the Central American identity can be erased at the University of California, Irvine. Connecting it to my own research, I found that through the interviews that I gathered that there was a sense that assimilation was needed in order to better fit in socially and avoid problematic interactions that

can result due to expressing one's identity as a Central American undergraduate student. Arias (2003) argues this notion further by stating that the term "‘acting Mexican’ is just another counter-performance for Central Americans in the United States which, contradictorily coherent, ultimately becomes only a parody of ethnic stereotypes" (Arias 2003). Arias (2003) also sought to explain the notion of identity having a performative aspect in the sense of expression that is tarnished when undergoing the constant placing of ethnic stereotypes pertaining to Mexicans or Mexican Americans, while actually identifying as Central American (Arias 2003). Through my interviews, it became clear that Mexican stereotypes are shown to be a constant obstacle to the expression of one's identity as a Central American student at the University of California, Irvine, which correlated with the research made by Arturo Arias.

Methods

My research project was focused on the idea of Central American identity erasure having an active role in college, which came to fruition after I interviewed a sample of 7 Central Americans who are currently attending UCI and/or recently graduated from UCI. The requirements for participation were being a student at UCI or having recently graduated 1-2 years ago and identifying as Central American or having ties to Central America. At the center of my research project are current Central American UCI students, transfer students, and Alumni from the age of 18-25. I recruited participants who identify as Central American through prior academic experiences at UCI and snowball sampling. I felt like this group should be at the center of my research project due to how little information is actually gathered on Central Americans especially those that are currently creating their own path towards graduating college and about to be thriving adults in society. The majority of students that I interviewed established that they did indeed have some sort of connection to Central America whether it be from having one

parent from a country in Central America and one parent from Mexico or having parents with ties to different countries in Central America. Out of the eight individuals I interviewed, five of them identified as men while the rest identified as women, which shed a light on different stigmas that affected my sample group. By using the snowball sampling method, I found that it was much faster to recruit more participants who wanted their voices heard on this delicate topic of identity. My strategy for the anonymity of the participants that I used in order to give my participants a name during my transcripts was the use of letters of the Greek Alphabet. I used a snowball sampling method, which allowed participants to suggest possible interviewees, as I was conducting my interviews in order to work on the collection of data for my research by getting student recommendations from other Central American students. My application of this method was built on knowing who to ask in a sense as some people had no interest in discussing this as later addressed in the limitations section.

Having pursued a qualitative method of research was ultimately instrumental in allowing for me to be have been able to conduct interviews with my sample study, in order to gather new perspectives on the erasure of identity of a specific identity group of individuals in which not a lot of information is gathered on. I conducted my interviews asking questions regarding terms such as “Identity Code-Switching” and “Latino threat” as recently it has become an umbrella term that is increasingly becoming more of a way of non-Latinos trying to find the commonality between Hispanics and forming a perception on Latinos based on this commonality instead of actually acknowledging the diverse identities that make up this term that many use to identify as. Each participant was asked a total of 12 open-ended questions that are related to the sub-questions and main research questions that touched on topics of expression of identity amongst other Latinos, Non-Latinos, whether students have ever experienced any assumptions or

dismissals of identity at the University of California, Irvine, as mentioned previously the terms above, and Central American identity erasure. Each interview was between 30 to 40 mins and was recorded either through phone or by meeting with the participants in person. Each question was recorded with their consent to begin the interviews as it was necessary to coordinate how to meet with the participants. To maintain anonymity, I made sure to change the names of participants as I wanted to protect them from any unwanted exposure, and I used a coding system that consisted of naming the participants after the letters in the Greek Alphabet. The meetings were held in isolated study rooms provided by the University of California, Irvine for every interview no matter the form in which they were received. There was no required prior study experience that the participant needed to meet in order to participate in my research study. One way of building rapport, that I effectively utilized while interviewing the participants in my sample, was that I made sure to keep them engaged with the questions that were asked and feel comfortable enough to actually want to share their own experiences with identity erasure at the University of California, Irvine.

Based on a preliminary analysis of my data, I identified 3 themes that addressed my research question, which were: vulnerability through expression, difficulty navigating the undergraduate experience, and the assumption of ethnic identity. I selected these themes because these overarching themes were essential in understanding the expression of one's Central American identity can be vulnerable as well as liberating and that this expression can lead to difficulty in relating to others who may not be Central American. The assumption of identity is something that can be characterized as the erasure of identity because through my data, it has become evident that the term "Latino" is being used more and more to group up various Hispanic

groups together, which presents a problem when this term may not be representative of those who identify as Central American or Indigenous to Central America.

Findings

Entering the data analysis of this paper, it can be said that I was able to find a verifiable amount of evidence to support the claim that there Central American students that are facing stigmas and misperceptions of their character in relation to their ethnic identity being automatically assumed as Latino without any informed confirmation. The majority of the students that I interviewed about the idea of the erasure of their Central American identity through the use of already established stigmas against Latinos, each expressed that while the stigmas may not always be clear in use, the effects it has on their expression of their ethnic identity are those of anger, denial, and frustration. It is important to note that many of my interviewees were students who expressed a tie to El Salvador in some sort of context, while some were from different Central American countries. A comparison that I made that was very interesting is that many of the participants that identified as half Central American indicated that there are times in which they tend to use their central American identity and Mexican identity interchangeably similar to identity code-switching. One finding that I found to be surprising is that 4 of my participants said that they feel that everyone sees only Salvadoreans as the main representative of Central Americans on campus, which is far from the truth. I identified 3 themes that addressed my research question, which were: vulnerability through expression, relationship tensions amongst non-Latinos, and the coping skills that are used against the erasure of identity. The assumption of ethnic identity was found to be the linking factor between all of my interviews as many reported that their identity was either presumed to be Mexican or Caucasian based on the color of their skin at least one time during their college experience, when in reality,

they identify as Central American. Another common theme that was found after conducting my data analysis was vulnerability through expression, this theme was a very sensitive topic when brought up by one of my interviewees as it very much leans on the notion that to be expressive of one's identity leads to unnecessary criticism by others.

The Assumption of the Central American Identity Among Non-Latinos

After conducting my data analysis of interviews, it becomes clear that there is some sort of erasure of identity that is associated with this assumption of identity that is directed towards Central Americans by non-Latinos. Using codenames based on Greek Letters of the alphabet that I have designated for my interviewees, I was able to effectively allow anonymity for my interviewees. Having interviewed a 4th-year male student who identifies as Central American and shall be known as Alpha, it was very insightful in understanding how one's identity can be perceived by others. When asked "Have you experienced any assumptions or misperceptions about your Central American identity from unknowing UCI students who assume that you are Latino? If yes, what are these assumptions or misperceptions?" Alpha replied that:

"Yes, they lump us together as Mexican, I am half Mexican and Half Guatemalan though. It makes you feel divided because you want to represent Central America but also you don't want to be seen as a common Mexican or Latino which is becoming the rhetoric nowadays for Central Americans."

This is a rare look into the idea that the word "Mexican" has been a label used to categorize most Central Americans in the opinion of non-Latino individuals, which can lead to divisions of identity and uncertainties of how to avoid fitting into the rhetoric of being a common Mexican or Latino. In correlation with the idea that students are experiencing assumptions of

identity that have negative effects while under the scope of non-Latinos, Alpha expressed signs of genuine discomfort towards the idea of this as he stated:

“Generally, I get defensive because I feel I have to be aware of what is being said about my identity as it is something that is dear to me and I also don’t feel comfortable being quizzed like I know everything about Guatemala because I don’t know everything due to my identification.”

To understand that the assumption of identity is so much more than just than simple mislabeling but rather the birth of many assumptions of character and oftentimes, it leaves those who identify as Central American to feel that this act is reminiscent of a burden. The assumption that through the expression of one’s ethnic identity, Central American students are supposed to know about that specific country is often harrowing because it presents the controversial idea that without that knowledge, you can’t properly identify as Central American. After having interviewed more Central American identifying students at the University of California, Irvine, it became clear that this assumption of identity can lead to more adverse negative effects on students was a common theme in my sample study.

Through the expression of identity, many Central American students are able to claim their own security in the sense of knowing who they are and are able to advocate for themselves in a positive way. Another student that I interviewed that will be known as Beta, is 2nd-year transfer student from the University of California, Irvine, who happens to have indigenous ties to Guatemala, expressed how he uses his identity to advocate for themselves even amongst a group of non-Latinos. When asked “What emotions do you experience when expressing your Central American Identity amongst non-Latinos?”, Beta stated that:

“Whenever I am misperceived to be a Latino by non-Latinos, it becomes frustrating in the sense that it’s like your identity is chosen for you, which leads to deep meaningful conversations about what it actually means to be Central American, well in my case K’iche.”

Beta made it very clear that while yes there is a certain discomfort that comes from having one’s Central American identity assumed, this action leads to conversations whether they are good or bad. This conversation is crucial to opening up doors to exposure for the Central American identity, which can be seen as an agent of change as noted by another interviewee.

This interviewee, who is a female half Mexican and half Salvadoran 4th-year student at UCI, who shall be known as Gamma. Interviewing Gamma was an illuminating experience as she expressed the positive experiences that come from having conversations about identity such as being able to be an advocate for the Central American identity on campus. Gamma was transparent with the idea that she has had her identity assumed before by non-Latinos but this interaction always leaves you wanting to change the other person’s mind.

“Yes, I have experienced the assumption of my identity by non-Latino students at UCI. It makes you feel like you have to brush it off in order to open up the opportunity to advocate for the Central American community by just having a conversation about the Central American identity and its differences compared to the Latino identity.”

Through this interview, it became clear that while yes, it is impactful to one’s emotions as a Central American student as it can bring forth feelings of frustration and anger but it also brings an opportunity to allow for the learning of differences between both the Central American and Latino identities as it can be developmental in allowing for less and less people to assume one’s identity at the University of California, Irvine. The opportunity to self-advocate is something that

is considered a treasure by Gamma as it can lead to a deeper understanding of the two parties involved.

The Effects of Expressing Central American Identity Amongst Latinos

There is undoubtedly more positive reinforcement that comes from expressing one's Central American identity at The University of California, Irvine amongst other Latino students but there is some sort of tension that is brought forth between the interaction of these two identities. Through certain social spaces, it has become clear that Central Americans and those who identify as Central Americans often do so based on the hostility of the environment and sometimes will identify as some other sort of identity in order to escape any sense of un-comfortability or tensions that may arise. There was some tension that was attributed to interacting with other Latinos, but this isn't to say that Central American students that I interviewed didn't attribute to the Latino community at the University of California, Irvine to being the most welcoming social space for them to express their identity. Another interviewee who is of half Mexican descent and half Salvadoran descent, known as Delta, expressed his own feelings about the positive aspects of interacting with other Latinos in a space where both can learn about each other.

“The acceptance of my identity helps me move throughout the day without being ashamed for who I am. I'm able to keep that confidence when speaking to non-Central American Latinos and I feel like it doesn't hinder me that much. It helps me see things from a perspective many others may not see and sharing/talking with others about it helps them learn new things about my identity and maybe I can learn from them about their own identity too”.

Delta expresses an idea that is well known throughout the Latino community as the ability to communicate and relate with one another regardless of identifying as Central American, in a way that allows for the strengthening of relationships through shared understanding of one another's ethnic identity. This reported un-ashamedness that was referenced by Delta is enough to gather that through keeping that confidence in one's own ethnic identity, it allows for the opportunity to collaborate with, communicate with and understand other Latinos in a more intimate setting than what is usually allowed through just inhabiting the same social space as other Latinos. This aspect is a great way of understanding the positives that come with expressing one's Central American identity amongst other Latinos as it allows for the reinforcement of identity amongst the Latino community at the University of California, Irvine, and the opportunity to understand one another as individuals rather than subjective labels.

It is also important to note while there are positives to expressing one's Central American identity, there is some tension that occurs through the intersection of identities between other Latinos that can cause conflict. Alpha having lived with another Latino as his roommate, stated that this interaction was often strained at times due to his own nonsensical approach towards Central Americans.

“When I was living with my ex-roommate, he would call me ‘hybrid’ jokingly but I always felt that there was a reinforcement of cultural stereotypes between other Latinos and Central Americans due to his actions. It led to us arguing over ethnic identity multiple times. This interaction caused me to think; if he thinks like that, how many others think like him? Who do I have to prove myself to in order to express my own ethnic identity? This is just one example. I found that people tend to talk about Central

Americans like we are nothing. I'd rather say I'm American around other Latinos in order to avoid the cultural arguments that come with this topic.”

This speaks to a certain vulnerability that comes with the process of expressing one's ethnic identity amongst other Latinos as there are some that don't take Central Americans seriously in private spaces. Interactions like the one Alpha experienced with his roommate can ultimately be detrimental to one's own choice to identify as Central American and it can lead to Central American students to become aware that their own choice to identify as such can be disrespected by other Latinos. The term that Alpha's ex-roommate used is oftentimes used to confront Central Americans who may be mixed with some type of Mexican descent, it is important to understand that behavior that encourages the erasure of the Central American identity can have lasting effects such as depression and avoiding certain topics. This choice that is then made to avoid having such cultural arguments with other Latinos can be seen as the erasure of identity due to the impact that other Latinos have on the expression of identity of Central American students.

Coping with the Erasure of Identity

One coping method in which Central American students at the University of California, Irvine often admitted to doing was having to resort to strategically using their Central American identity depending on if the environment was hostile or not. Central American students have a tendency to choose carefully how to identify as in social spaces in a way that can be described as “identity code-switching” due to the idea that Central American students sometimes do feel that they have to act or identify a certain way in order to be accepted by other Latinx or non-Latinx students. This is a consequence that is contributed to the erasure of the Central American identity on the campus of the University of California, Irvine as it can lead to people feeling insecure or

frustrated in their own expression of identity. Central American erasure can be defined as the dismissal, degradation, or literal erasure of Central American students' ethnic identities according to nationality, race, ethnic, and language group assumptions made by others. In the context of Central American students on campus, it becomes clear that simple actions such as misassumptions of identity and misassumptions of character are based on identity and can influence Central American students to identify differently based on the social spaces they are inhabiting. Another interviewee who is half-Mexican and half-Salvadoran 3rd-year student known as Epsilon was very vocal in her own struggle to get recognition from others in sense of recognizing the Central American identity as something that should be respected as much as anyone's else ethnic identity even if it is a minority group with a minority group, in this case, the Latino identity. In response to my second interview question, Epsilon stated:

“Whenever expressing my identity to other Latino/as, it is difficult because I'm very light-skinned so I felt that I had to validate myself. I felt like sometimes I didn't belong to those who identify as Latino because I didn't look like them so it was like proving myself to everyone that I really was Central American. While non-Latinos made me feel like a new species because they didn't know where El Salvador was so it was them asking me a ton of questions or they would try to cover my identity by saying that I'm Mexican”

This search of validation of identity is shown to be something that can be self-perceived or in Epsilon's case, warranted due to lack of awareness of the Central American identity, which can be fundamental in allowing the growth of social and personal relations with those who are Latino or even non-Latino. Epsilon brought up the notion that this search of validation isn't something that is constantly looked for by all Central American students at the University of California, Irvine, but rather something that may pertain to the skin color of a Central American

in terms of being respected as a Central American and not perceived as anything else. Another idea that was expressed by Epsilon was the notion of feeling foreign to other Latinos and non-Latinos while expressing her Central American identity. This addresses one of the things I didn't focus on that may pertain to the erasure of identity, which is how much of a role skin pigmentation has in the role of assuming one's identity and how it can affect the ability to feel comfortable in expressing one's identity. Overall, these themes of experiencing assumptions and dismissals of the Central American identity by non-Latinos, experiencing a familial sense of community at the University of California, Irvine through other Latinos, and how these interactions allow students to cope with the negative consequences of identifying as Central American.

Coping with Central American Erasure at the University of California, Irvine has been shown to be accessible through actually going to communal spaces and attending university classes that often touch upon one's own culture. Delving into the notion that Central American students can actually cope with dismissals of identity by relying on the community to help them in terms of support as Delta discusses having always felt accepted by the Latino community at the University of California, Irvine. When asked about whether the expression of his Central American identity as a college student has affected his ability to thrive academically in college, Delta stated:

“Well personally it has helped me make friends and join organizations that cater towards Latinos. I've also been able to take part in events at the University of California, Irvine that highlight Latino/a culture Academically, I was more attracted to certain classes because of my Central American background and even attending Chicano/Latino studies classes has helped me determine what I wanted to major in.”

By understanding that Central American students such as Delta can identify as Central American but still feel welcomed by the Latino community on campus, it becomes clear that there is a shared interest in the betterment of one's education, which is seen as a support network for students facing a myriad of everyday college problems including identity erasure. By expressing his Central American identity, Delta found that it opened up opportunities for success for him as he ended up joining a Latino Fraternity on campus and has met fellow Central Americans through these pathways. Alpha also expressed similar notions that his Central American identity has helped him as he states,

“Yes, it allowed me to create connections with people in the Chicano Latino Studies department and be able to love my own identity much more instead of feeling like an outsider in college”

By relying on one's own expression of their Central American identity such as Alpha has and allowing for opportunities for collaboration and coping with identity erasure, it can be argued that students are focused on creating safe spaces for future Latino students. Chicano/Latino Studies classes are also becoming proponents for promoting inclusivity and the growth of ethnic awareness as Central American students like Alpha and Delta oftentimes feel closer to their own culture when being taught about it in college. We can also see that these classes can often be a therapy of sorts as it makes Central American students feel appreciated and recognized by their peers. By acknowledging that Central American students use these spaces to receive support from fellow Latino students who may be facing similar stereotypes and dismissals of their identity.

Conclusion

After having conducted my interviews, it became clear that there is some sort of erasure of identity that is happening to Central American students at the University of California, Irvine in the form of assumptions and dismissal of identity. While there is a Latino community on campus, it can be argued that there are tensions that erupt due to the lack of a proper Central American community that can truly be a safe space for fellow Central Americans, but nevertheless, the Latino community is receptive of them. The effects of Central American students constantly facing the belittling and assumption of their identity can lead to pretty hostile and frustrated attitudes and oftentimes, can lead to the unwillingness to discuss the topic of identity. We also see that Non-Latinos play a role in the erasure of the Central American identity at the University of California, Irvine as there was an undeniable report that upon expressing their Central American identity publicly, there were constant assumptions made about how much they know about their own country of origin and concerns with the over-generalization of the term Latino. The term Latino is objectively becoming the new norm to identify as but the truth is that some groups and individuals that may be of indigenous or other roots cannot fully be represented by this term due to its seemingly basic qualities of all Hispanic groups. It is important to expose the dangers of Central American Erasure at college institutions such as the University of California, Irvine because this could be detrimental to the growth of the Central American community and can lead to unprecedented attitudes towards Central Americans. In order to cope with these dangers, Central American students often look to Latino-serving organizations on campus as a way of connecting with others who may share similar experiences and identities.

I found that through the interviews that I conducted that there is an erasure of identity that takes place at the University of California, Irvine towards Central American students as it was reported that through assumptions of one's identity and misperceptions of character based off of ethnicity, can lead to feelings of inferiority and frustration. In regards to the literature that I reviewed, my study helped to expand upon ideas of identity code-switching and Central American erasure that were only theoretically presented but my findings really opened up the idea that there are Central American who are facing this type of erasure on college campuses. The Central American transnational imaginary was fundamental in understanding the bond that Central Americans can feel towards other Latinos as it is created through shared experiences and equal understanding rather than just the commonality of their culture. Identity Code-Switching was something that was fairly new that I had to build my own research on as there was very little research on the idea that certain environments cause for people to be cautious and strategic of which identities to employ especially if they are Central American. A strength that my research contained was the amount of questions that I had ready for my participants as I found it rather easy to keep my participants motivated to discuss their own experiences which may have been traumatic in its own right. Another strength that my study had was the idea that I was introducing and talking about topics such as Central American Erasure and identity code-switching, which were new to the participants but not foreign as they had experienced instances in which they did identify as something entirely different from their own identity due to certain environments.

The limitations that I encountered to my research in my opinion was the lack of a bigger sample, finding people who were confident in sharing their own experiences as a Central American student, and the lack of awareness of how skin pigmentation has an influence on how Central Americans identify and how it may affect their ability to express their own identity. In

terms of lack of a bigger sample, I feel that this study would be far more powerful in addressing the topic of Central American Erasure at the University of California, Irvine if it had a bigger sample consisting of 25-30 people as it would have more broad and complex ideas of how the erasure of the Central American identity. Another challenge to my research that I did not account for is that amount of people who did not feel comfortable discussing this topic, but I was still able to collect a good amount of information from the 7 interviews I did conduct. There was an unwillingness to arrange interviews with only a few students as they didn't feel comfortable discussing their own traumatic experiences with expressing their Central American identity amongst other students at the University of California, Irvine. Lastly, the challenge of not taking skin pigmentation into account in terms of erasure of identity was a big one for my study as I realized through my interviews that one's own skin color has its own type of erasing effects the Central American identity as it can cause others to assume your identity while also causing its own internal problems on the person within to not "look like a Central American". These limitations would ultimately prove helpful for future researchers as it will allow for them to take these into account and most likely create an even broader and more expansive form of this study in order to get a better picture of how exactly Central American Erasure is committed. For future consideration, I would argue that it is imperative that there is more studies to be done on the role that gender dynamics play in the expression of the Central American identity as it can ultimately shed light on the exact differences of erasure of identity that are expressed through different Central American students.

Overall, my research is a promising step forward to understanding how individuals are expressing their own Central American identity as they currently undergoing pursuits of higher education and other similar enterprising roles in society. I believe that there will be future

researchers who hope to explore Central American erasure further as currently, it is a seemingly obscure topic that isn't discussed as broadly as outright discrimination, but it can be just as damaging in the long run. This study was helpful to the participants. One thing that also became clear through my interviews and literature review is that Central American erasure is such a new concept in the sense that its' effects are beginning to be felt now especially during the political times of this era, but it is imperative to acknowledge that it is happening as ignorance to this problem can potentially lead to the alienation and dismissal of many Central Americans. These findings have important consequences for how we understand the expression of identity as we see that Central Americans are a minority group within a minority group, which can ultimately lead to people choosing to identify as Latino in order to avoid any conflict or tension regarding their true ethnic identity.

Bibliography

- Alvarado, Karina Oliva, Alicia I. Estrada, and Hernández Ester E. 2017. *U.S. Central Americans Reconstructing Memories, Struggles, and Communities of Resistance*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press.
- Arellano-Morales, Leticia, et al. "Prevalence and Correlates of Perceived Ethnic Discrimination in the Hispanic Community Health Study/Study of Latinos Sociocultural Ancillary Study." *Journal of Latina/o Psychology*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 8 Aug. 2015, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4610197/>.
- Arias, Arturo. 2003. "Central American- Americans: Invisibility, Power and Representation in the US Latino World." *Latino Studies* 1(1):168–87.
- Chinchilla, Norma S. and Nora Hamilton. 2013. "Identity Formation Among Central American Americans." Retrieved February 13, 2020

(https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/731/docs/identity_central_american_americans_web.pdf).

Darlene K. Drummond & Mark P. Orbe (2009) “Who Are You Trying To Be?": Identity Gaps Within Intraracial Encounters, *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, 10:1, 81-87, DOI: [10.1080/17459430903236098](https://doi.org/10.1080/17459430903236098)

Espino, Rodolfo and Michael M. Franz. 2002. “Latino Phenotypic Discrimination Revisited: The Impact of ...” Retrieved February 13, 2020
(http://www.bowdoin.edu/~mfranz/espinofranz_SSQ.pdf)..

Menjívar Cecilia. 2006. *Fragmented Ties: Salvadoran Immigrant Networks in America*. Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press.

Mcneill, L. S. (2018). Contemporary Ghost Hunting and the Relationship between Proof and Experience. *Legend Tripping*, 178–191. doi: 10.7330/9781607328087.c008

Padilla, Yajaira M. “The Central American Transnational Imaginary: Defining the Transnational and Gendered Contours of Central American Immigrant Experience.” *SpringerLink*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 9 July 2013,
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/1st.2013.2>.

CÁRDENAS, M. (2018). SUBJECTS IN PASSING: Central American–Americans, Latinidad, and the Politics of Dislocation. In *Constituting Central American–Americans: Transnational Identities and the Politics of Dislocation* (pp. 111-138). New Brunswick, Camden, Newark, New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press. Retrieved March 17, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1vw0rx3.7