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Latinx College Students' Strategies for Resisting Imposter Syndrome at Predominantly White Institutions

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, imposter syndrome is defined as feelings of inferiority regardless of one's accomplishments and experiences. Imposter syndrome is often viewed as an experience that racially minoritized populations in higher education *must* encounter. But these traditional understandings frame imposter syndrome as a personal flaw rather than a product of structural oppression. Consequently, these limited and deficit focused ideas of imposter syndrome urge scholars and practitioners to disrupt normative conceptualizations of imposter syndrome by examining the phenomenon from a structural lens and to expand the literature on the experiences of Latinx college students at PWIs. As such, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to illuminate Latinx students' strategies to cope with imposter syndrome within the hostile and unwelcoming environments of predominantly white institutions. Three major themes emerged from the data: a) code-switching, b) consejo de las personas más cercanas, and c) strategic consciousness: committing to survive the toxicity of imposter syndrome at PWIs; these findings highlight three major ways that Latinx students cope with feelings of imposter syndrome. Implications for future research and practice are outlined to further explore how institutions of higher education can dismantle structures, systems, policies, and procedures that perpetuate imposter phenomenon.

KEYWORDS

Imposter syndrome; higher education; Latinx students

Latinx college students' transition to and experiences in college are largely shaped by the campus climate and cultures of the institutions they attend (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Kiyama et al., 2015; Museus, 2014). As such, Latinx students who attend predominantly white institutions (PWIs), whose contexts and environments are deeply rooted in normative philosophies and ideologies of whiteness and white supremacy, find themselves on the receiving end of hostility, toxicity, and oppression that negatively shape their college experience (Hernández & Villodas, 2020; Linley, 2018; Sax et al., 2018). As a consequence of the principles of meritocracy, competition, individualism, and elitism rooted in white supremacy within higher education institutions, Latinx students, like many within academe, experience feelings of imposter syndrome. However, little is known about the specific ways in which Latinx college students counter and navigate their experiences with imposter syndrome at PWIs (Dueñas, 2021); rather, traditional understandings define imposter syndrome as inescapable and inevitable (Ramos & Wright-Mair, 2021). Therefore, the present study aims to convey urgency in disrupting normative conceptualizations of imposter syndrome by examining the phenomenon from a structural lens and expanding the literature on the experiences of Latinx college students at PWIs. Specifically, this research examines the strategies employed by Latinx college students to combat feelings of imposter syndrome and outlines helpful actions for institutional leaders to adopt, in order to address this issue at colleges and universities. The research question at the heart of

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this inquiry is: What strategies do Latinx students employ to counter imposter syndrome experiences at PWIs?

This contribution is significant to the field of higher education as it expands upon an emerging area of research pertaining to Latinx college students' critical awareness of the oppressive structures within PWIs in relation to their experiences with imposter syndrome (Dueñas, 2021). By illuminating the strategies Latinx students activate to combat imposter syndrome, this study advances anti-deficit research and highlights student agency and support structures present within the hostile campus environments of PWIs. Furthermore, this work counters traditional misconceptions of imposter syndrome that situate the issue within individuals and illustrates institutional negligence in disrupting systems and structures that sustain imposter syndrome among Latinx college students. Educational leaders must recognize how imposter syndrome manifests in the lives of Latinx students in order to understand how to dismantle the foundational structures maintaining and perpetuating a culture of imposter syndrome.

Origins of imposter syndrome

Imposter syndrome is an ongoing phenomenon that is experienced by people when they question their worth and accomplishments, and debate whether they truly deserve to be in the spaces they occupy (Clance & Imes, 1978). Imposter syndrome was first defined in 1978 by Clance & Imes as a strong sense of self-doubt experienced by individuals who do not feel as if they are enough, or have rightfully earned their place despite their achievements. While early research (Clance & Imes, 1978) first studied imposter syndrome in relation to high-achieving women, racially minoritized individuals experience a particularly heightened sense of imposter syndrome on a day-to-day basis based on the inherently racist foundations which undergird U.S. society (El-Ghoroury et al., 2000; Turner, 1983).

Understanding imposter syndrome has evolved since the term was first coined in 1978 (Clance & Imes). Initial conceptualizations accounted for the feelings associated with the phenomenon, specifically, common views framed the phenomenon as a personal flaw and deficit within the person themselves. In contrast, recent work portrays imposter syndrome as a result of oppressive societal systems, producing inequities negatively impacting the lives of people who are racially minoritized (Ramos & Wright-Mair, 2021; Dueñas, 2021). Within the context of higher education, research illuminates both structural inequities linked to imposter syndrome and consequences resulting from experiencing the phenomenon, with particular attention to the experiences of racially minoritized students (Dueñas, 2021; Peteet et al., 2015) and first-generation students (Inman & Mayes, 1999; Martinez et al., 2009).

Imposter syndrome in academic environments

The literature on imposter syndrome in academia is scant, but a growing body of scholarship indicates that imposter syndrome is a byproduct stemming from systemic racism, heteronormativity, sexism, ableism, classism and other hegemonic ideologies and systems of oppressions (Andrews, 2020; Ramos & Wright-Mair, 2021; Edwards, 2019; Mullangi & Jagsi, 2019). The extensive legacy of hegemonic ideologies primes academic environments to produce experiences of imposter syndrome. For instance, foundational research posits that normative notions of academic success have long been equated with whiteness (Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). As such, racially minoritized students are expected to code-switch to align with, and assimilate to, normative white college norms and detach from their cultures and communities as a requirement to experience success in college (Cokley & Moore, 2007; Heller, 1988). Consequently, when racially minoritized students enter college, their overall experiences are heavily impacted by the tensions that impact their academic achievements, relationships with others, and perceptions of self (Peteet et al., 2015). This results in these students exhibiting detrimental and overcompensating behaviors (e.g., over-extending oneself and minimizing or scrutinizing accomplishments) as well as withdrawal from campus involvement and experiences

because they feel as if they do not deserve to be there (Harvey & Katz, 1985; Parkman, 2016). Succinctly, imposter syndrome among college students manifests as a struggle between students' internalized deficit self-perceptions and deficit perceptions held by those around them (Arteaga, 2015).

Latinx students in higher education

As the Latinx population continues to grow in the U. S., it is no surprise that the Latinx college student population is also increasing exponentially across higher education (de Brey et al., 2019). In fact, Latinx undergraduate student enrollment increased by 134% between 2000 and 2016, growing from 1.4 million to 3.2 million (de Brey et al., 2019). Not surprisingly, literature on Latinx college students is concerned primarily with identifying factors negatively associated with their ability to succeed in college (e.g., Aguinaga & Gloria, 2015; Arteaga, 2015; Baker & Robnett, 2012; Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Castillo et al., 2004, 2006; Gloria & Kurpius, 1996; Kuh et al., 2008). A large part of this literature addresses Latinx culture to assess alignment between Latinx cultural values and white normative college values. Particualrly scholars examined Latinx students' transition to college, academic achievement, persistence and completion (Aguinaga & Gloria, 2015; Gloria & Kurpius, 1996).

Nevertheless, other scholars (e.g., Rendón et al., 2000) who study the experiences of Latinx students in college, problematize the literature (e.g. Gloria & Kurpius, 1996; Gloria & Pope Davis, 1997) on this population as narrowly focused on Latinx cultures, especially because much of the literature consistently presents those within this community from a deficit lens. This consistent deficit lens fuels the argument that Latinx students who embrace their culture and community are less likely to find common ground between their own cultural values and those present in higher education institutions, especially at PWIs. Referred to as cultural incongruity (Gloria & Kurpius, 1996; Gloria & Pope Davis, 1997), this phenomenon exists when racially/ethnically minoritized students, Latinx students in this case, are forced to choose between their own cultural values and the white cultural norms of PWIs. Latinx students are then caught in the middle as they struggle to retain the culture and values with which they were raised, while seeking a sense of belonging within the student body and culture of PWIs (Gloria & Kurpius, 1996). Specific feelings associated with cultural incongruity include, but are not limited to, feeling overwhelmed, helpless, powerless, inferior, and alone (Arteaga, 2015). All these emotions and more are associated with imposter syndrome. These studies however, dismiss the strengths and collective power that resides within Latinx communities by attaching blame to Latinx students for perceived misalignment of their culture with the normative cultures and contexts of PWIs.

These feelings of inferiority, helplessness, and isolation are shaped by circumstances and contexts connected to social inequality (Arteaga, 2015). Latinx students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as those who have experienced many hardships throughout their lives, share collective experiences of inequitable treatment in educational settings (Campa, 2013). Specifically, college personnel (e.g., instructors and student service professionals) frame Latinx students as deficient or failures which causes them to struggle to navigate systemic barriers in their education and generate feelings of imposter syndrome (Campa, 2013). The existence of inequitable treatment for racially minoritized students on college campuses is not surprising; this phenomenon is informed largely by campus demographics, including those of PWIs (Wilder, 2013). Current statistics show an imbalanced distribution of student demographics where racially minoritized students represent only a third of undergraduate college students (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). Sadly, their experiences are heavily influenced by those who dominate the college landscape, which is overwhelmingly white, and perpetuate deficit thinking around Latinx and other racially minoritized student groups (Harbour et al., 2003).

Examination of cultural incongruity (Aguinaga & Gloria, 2015; Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Castillo et al., 2004, 2006) explores its complexities from various angles to demonstrate stark dissonance. Specifically, studies around college persistence have found that Latinx students with higher

orientations toward their own culture experience lower adoption rates of PWI white values (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Castillo et al., 2004, 2006). Accordingly, Latinx students at PWIs have long experienced feeling like "guests in someone else's house" (Turner, 1994, p. 366). Being a guest indicates that Latinx student populations experience discomfort and often feel pressured to be performative and not their authentic selves. This conundrum sharpens Latinx student narratives around dominant ideologies and norms of PWI campuses, deeming historical inequitable practices and expectations as the mold in which Latinx students must fit to succeed (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007).

Latinx students navigate hostile PWI environments

Navigating the hostile campus environments of PWIs through the tension between students' cultural values and white norms represents an additional burden Latinx students must carry; one with a detrimental impact on their college experience. Several scholars (Hernández & Villodas, 2020; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Kiyama etal., 2015; Linley, 2018; Locks etal., 2008; Sax etal., 2018; Villalpando, 2010),have posited that the racial climate within a college campus is closely connected to the quality of Latinx student experiences at PWIs, especially related to how their intersecting identities are questioned and/or invalidated. For instance, Latinx students at PWIs are constantly faced with understanding, navigating, and negotiating their racial and ethnic identities and sense of belonging with relation to perceived proximity to whiteness and its privileges (Holguín Mendoza et al., 2021).

Importantly, Latinx students' perceptions of phenotypic differences with relation to whiteness play an important role in how these students experience the campus climate of PWIs and their sense of belonging with fellow Latinx students. Latinx students who phenotypically identify as students of color express a sense of otherness as shaped by feelings of invisibility and hypervisibility originating from the majority white student body of PWIs. Feelings of otherness, in turn, increase in-group sense of belonging and solidarity with fellow Latinx students of color and decreased affinity with white passing Latinx students (Holguín Mendoza et al., 2021).

Research on the experiences of Latinx students at PWIs also situates them and their experiences within the context of sense of belonging in relation to predominantly white campus environments (Gloria et al., 2005; Hernández & Villodas, 2020; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kiyama, Harper, et al., 2015; Sax et al., 2018; Villalpando, 2004). The literature reveals that campus environments, which are comprised of both campus climate and cultures, play a tremendous role in Latinx students' sense of belonging at PWIs and their journey navigating their unique racial, ethnic, and cultural identities (Hernández & Villodas, 2020; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kiyama et al., 2015; Rodriguez & Blaney, 2021; Villalpando, 2004). Frequently, features of predominantly white campuses send both explicit and implicit messages that Latinx students are not valued or welcomed. These environments undoubtedly impact not only Latinx students' college journey but also their mental health, which frequently is a challenge (Gonzalez, 2002), especially for racially minoritized students (Agbelese, 2019). In contrast to institutional environments at PWIs, research indicates that campus climates at MSIs provide more support and prioritize Latinx students' mental health and well-being (Chun et al., 2016; Kalkbrenner et al., 2022). These ideas are supported by research that asserts that a connection exists between social affiliation status and Latinx students' sense of belonging and mattering (Dueñas & Gloria, 2020).

Latinx students' support while navigating PWIs

While dominant narratives of Latinx students in college emphasize deficit views of students' families, culture, and communities in connection with college success (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Ogbu, 1987), some research asserts Latinx students draw motivation for navigating hostile college environments of PWIs from family, culture, and community (Arana et al., 2011; Nuñez, 2009). Specifically, scholars have conceptualized consejos (i.e., advice giving narratives) as key factors for Latinx students to develop

what they refer to as "pedagogies of survival" (Campa, 2013). Pedagogies of survival are "culturally and historically situated ideologies or ways of knowing that promote resilience. These life teachings stem from lessons learned from the participants' experiences and those of their parents, grandparents, and ancestors as raced, classed, and gendered selves" (Campa, 2013, p. 438). Pedagogies of survival then serve as support for Latinx college students to navigate socioeconomic, cultural, and personal barriers encountered at PWIs. Additional scholarship addresses how Latinx students navigate PWIs; for example, scholars demonstrate that Latinx students' family and culture (Kiyama, 2010) are sources of their increased beliefs in their own academic success, and the advantages of on-campus community building through culturally relevant programming (Kiyama et al., 2015).

In Latinx communities, consejos play an important role in the ability of families to convey messaging about education. Latinx parents, especially when they are unable to attain a high level of education, draw on their experience to encourage their children to pursue schooling beyond their own attainment (Alfaro et al., 2014; Auerbach, 2006; Delgado-Gaitan, 1994). Furthermore, consejos as advice and narratives encourage Latinx students to defeat obstacles by providing hope, purpose and educational ideologies (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994).

Latinx students at PWIs rely on family and familial connections to navigate the campus environment (Devall et al., 2005; Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Gloria et al., 2005). As such, researchers recommend the creation of family focused programs. Involvement occurs in a variety of ways including attendance of parents and other family members to advising sessions (Devall et al., 2005) and active outreach from student support services personnel to make family members part of the college experience. Family members who have attended college, whose experience and knowledge can be leveraged to support Latinx students in college (Gloria et al., 2005), are clearly an asset for PWI's wanting to support Latinx students. For this college student population, parents and families are valued partners in college success (Kiyama et al., 2015).

The combination of family, culture, and community results in significant advantages for Latinx students navigating the harsh contexts of PWIs. Furthermore, research asserts that Latinx students navigate PWIs by participating in culturally focused campus programs (Arana et al., 2011). For example, Latinx student participants allude to feeling comfortable and welcome on PWI campuses through the existence of Latinx sororities (Delgado-Guerrero & Gloria, 2013). Similarly, there have been calls for PWIs to offer more extracurricular engagement, including opportunities for Latinx students to participate in student organizations that allow them to connect with peers as they navigate the campus environment (Chang et al., 2014). Kiyama and colleagues propose the use of the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model (Museus, 2014) as a guiding framework to support Latinx students attending PWIs. In this schema, PWIs are encouraged to dedicate physical space for Latinx students to engage in culturally relevant interactions stemming from familism, add culturally relevant curriculum, and provide space for opportunities allowing students to give back to their community and feel culturally validated (Kiyama et al., 2015).

There is a clear connection between consejos (DeFreitas & Rinn, 2012), pedagogies of survival (Campa, 2013), and Latinx familial educational attainment (Gloria et al., 2005). These three sources of cultural capital empower Latinx students to develop self-confidence to succeed academically in college (DeFreitas & Rinn, 2012). Research on college persistence, examining academic predictors, self-beliefs, and academic and non-academic mentoring, supports this larger picture of Latinx student success (Bordes-Edgar et al., 2011). Latinx students who graduate from college have stronger self-beliefs in achieving success in college directly associated with more positive persistence experiences related to greater self-efficacy (Crisp et al., 2015). Self-efficacy and self-confidence are defined as ganas, the motivation for Latinx students to succeed despite the challenges they encounter at PWIs (Easley et al., 2012). Having ganas creates determination for Latinx students to experience academic success.

Latinx students at PWIs experiencing imposter syndrome

Latinx students at PWIs often experience imposter syndrome from myriad sources including racism, tokenism, hostility, isolation, and discrimination (Museus et al., 2017). In addition, Latinx students are more likely to experience imposter syndrome based on their intersecting identities, including sexual orientation, gender identity, first generation to college status, nationality, language, culture, and socioeconomic status (Chakraverty, 2020; Zepeda, 2020). True for all racially minoritized students, including Latinx students, these issues emerge as PWIs are structured to mirror hegemonic societal ideologies of exclusion. As PWIs strive to create equitable and socially just campus environments, it is important for these institutions to understand the foundation and consequences of imposter syndrome, as well as how racially minoritized students experience imposter syndrome in these environments (Ramos & Wright-Mair, 2021).

Limited research documents the specific experiences of Latinx students experience with imposter syndrome at PWIs (Dueñas, 2021). Since PWIs neglect their responsibility to this racially minoritized student population, Latinx students are forced to find appropriate coping mechanisms, adopt them to navigate the challenges they face, and ultimately left to fend for themselves (Dueñas, 2021). Succinctly, the literature on imposter syndrome and Latinx students at PWIs documents the causal factors and impacts of imposter syndrome including the role of campus experiences in developing feelings of imposter syndrome (Arteaga, 2015; Castellanos & Gloria, 2007). Imposter syndrome and minoritized status stress play havoc on the mental health of students (Hubbard, 2016). Similarly, imposter syndrome can occur as a result of experiences with racial discrimination (Bernard et al., 2018). Sadly, a relationship exists between imposter syndrome and the declining mental health conditions and well-being of racially minoritized students (Hubbard, 2016; Zepeda, 2020; Cokley et al., 2013). Moving beyond a causal analysis of imposter syndrome, an exploration of how Latinx students experience imposter syndrome in college, details the need to further understand just how imposter syndrome plays out in the daily lives of Latinx students (Dueñas, 2021). This manuscript seeks to address some of the gaps pointed out by Dueñas (2021), namely in moving toward an understanding of how Latinx students resist imposter syndrome, and the role that postsecondary institutions play in addressing the crucial issue of how imposter syndrome perpetuates structural inequity.

Latinx students coping strategies

Latinx students cope with hostile and unwelcoming environments through building relationships with people on campus with whom they can relate (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Madsen Camacho & Lord, 2011; Saunders & Serna, 2004). These affirming relationships are typically with those who share their racial and ethnic identity and facilitated through organizations which affirm their identities (Arana et al., 2011; Delgado-Guerrero & Gloria, 2013). Latinx students do establish "counter-spaces" on campus at PWIs as supports to help them navigate through college, these spaces are often conceptualized as a coping mechanism to deal with imposter syndrome (Solórzano et al., 2000; Yosso et al., 2009). Many counter spaces include developing relationships with others across campus who share similar identities, as well as participating in activities affirming Latinx students' cultural backgrounds (Madsen Camacho & Lord, 2011). Counter-spaces provide Latinx students at a PWI with support, validation, and affirmation (Kiyama et al., 2015) and can serve to unpack and process feelings of imposter syndrome. Latinx students also draw upon funds of knowledge (Ramos, 2018; Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021; Kiyama, 2010; Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012; Vaccaro et al., 2019), community cultural wealth (Ponjuán & Hernández, 2021; Rincón & Rodriguez, 2021; Sánchez-Connally, 2018), and familismo (M. Mendoza et al., 2011; Sáenz et al., 2018) as positive mechanisms to counter feelings of imposter syndrome and support their success in college.

To date, only one study explicitly names the experiences of Latinx college students with imposter syndrome (Dueñas, 2021). While prior studies might not explicitly name imposter syndrome there does exist a clearly established connection between Latinx students' feelings of loneliness, hostility, and

not belonging which closely intersect with feelings of imposter syndrome (Aguinaga & Gloria, 2015; Arteaga, 2015; Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Castillo et al., 2004, 2006; Gloria & Kurpius, 1996; Gloria & Pope Davis, 1997). The existing literature on Latinx student experiences at PWIs, research on imposter syndrome, along with the findings of this study affirm imposter syndrome is a dangerous phenomenon deeply rooted in hegemonic exclusionary ideologies and has destructive impacts particularly on racially minoritized populations (Wilder, 2013). Imposter syndrome continues among many racially minoritized students well beyond the college years and has long term lasting effects on their post collegiate experience (Zepeda, 2020). In fact, Latinx students enter the workforce very anxious, skeptical, and worried. These feelings further develop as imposter syndrome continues to manifest in their lives and are often reinforced by those in power who fail to see how these institutionally preventable feelings are a direct by-product of interlocking systems of oppression (Ramos & Wright-Mair, 2021) Furthermore, these perspectives dismiss students' creativity in mobilizing their agency and resources to navigate and cope with imposter syndrome.

Theoretical framework

Latino/a Critical Race Theory, commonly known as LatCrit, examines the ways in which Latinx populations experience interlocking systems of oppression (Villalpando, 2010) such as racism, sexism, classism, heteronormativity, anti-immigrant ideologies, among others (Huber, 2010). LatCrit centers Latinx communities to illuminate the ways Latinx students battle oppression within and beyond the Black/white racial binary, specifically, in an educational context. The following five elements of the LatCrit framework expand our understanding of the experiences of Latinx students, specifically regarding how they navigate through feelings of imposter syndrome at a PWI (Villalpando, 2010).

First, LatCrit, similar to other critical theories (e.g., BFT and CRT), reiterates that racism is prevalent within U.S. society and has in turn permeated the U.S. higher education system. LatCrit contextualizes student experience by highlighting the intersections within Latinx identity (e.g., sexuality, gender, language, etc.), resulting in oppression and exclusion in a multitude of forms. Second, LatCrit pleads with educational personnel to bear witness to the eurocentric higher education system created to privilege white students, eliciting a disadvantage for Latinx students who believe a college degree will provide them adequate learning to advance to achieve social mobility (Villalpando, 2004). Third, LatCrit focuses on achieving social justice within institutional environments. As higher education preaches to serve students holistically (Patton, 2016), the third tenet of LatCrit highlights the need to provide an equitable experience for Latinx students which, in turn, leads to equality across the board (Villalpando, 2004).

Fourth, LatCrit reiterates the value and legitimacy of the knowledge gained by Latinx students through lived experiences (Villalpando, 2010). For example, LatCrit acknowledges the collectivist value Latinx families hold and adds this experience in the institutional setting by promoting its value rather than chastising and eliminating it. Lastly, the fifth tenet of LatCrit emphasizes the need to evaluate the policies and procedures that shape higher education. LatCrit acknowledges Latinx students are disadvantaged because of the educational policies, structures, and practices not designed to support them (Villalpando, 2010). In sum, LatCrit provides a well-rounded theoretical frame to examine the unique experiences of Latinx students, who experience feelings of imposter syndrome, and provides further context about how imposter syndrome operates, especially within the context of PWIs.

Methods

The present study draws from a larger phenomenological inquiry focused on the perception of Latinx undergraduate students' sense of belonging at a PWI, which illuminated the support and challenges Latinx students encounter in search for a sense of belonging at PWIs. A phenomenological research design (Moustakas, 1994) was well suited for this inquiry as it allowed for the understanding of the lived experiences of Latinx students attending a PWI. Specifically, phenomenology guided the researchers to gain a deeper

understanding of Latinx students' meaning making (Moustakas, 1994) of their experiences at PWIs and provided for an examination of how students address feelings of imposter syndrome. To comprehensively understand the experiences of Latinx college students who navigate imposter syndrome on predominantly white college campuses, the following research question guided the study: What strategies do Latinx students employ to counter imposter syndrome experiences at PWIs?

All authors in this study identify as racially minoritized women. Specifically, one author identifies as a Mexican immigrant woman, another as a Peruvian/Salvadoran American woman, and the other as a Black, South Asian immigrant woman. We highlight our racialized, gendered, and national origin in this section as these identities often impact the data collection process, (in this case especially the lead researcher who conducted interviews shared common identities with all participants), these identities undoubtedly index how data is collected, influence what and how participants share their experiences, and impact how data is interpreted and what conclusions are drawn. Our individual and collective identities as racially minoritized women allowed us to understand many of the experiences that were emergent in the data, and as such engage in the research process including the collection and analysis of the experiences of participants more authentically.

Participant recruitment

Utilizing purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) participants for the study were recruited based on the following three criteria: (1) self-identified as a Latinx student, (2) enrolled as an undergraduate student at a PWI, and (3) have a critical understanding of their experience as a Latinx student enrolled at a PWI. Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling, and were emailed directly via a listserv that included all residential students living on campus. Fourteen students at the same institution (R2 mid-size doctoral state university with high research activity, student population: 65% white students; 10% Hispanic/Latino; 9% Black; 5% Asian; 0.1% American Indian or Alaska Native) responded to the call for participants and twelve students who met the criteria and agreed to take part in the study were chosen. Twelve Latinx undergraduate participants classified themselves as four seniors, one junior, three sophomores, two first-year students and two students who did not disclose their academic year. The study included three men and nine women participants who were between the ages of 18–22. Participants identified with a wide cross section of Latinx ethnicities including: Colombian, Peruvian, Puerto Rican, Dominican, Brazilian, Mexican, Cuban, and Honduran, Ecuadorian & Spanish. Participant demographics are presented in Table 1.

Data collection

The study received IRB approval and informed consent was provided by all participants before engaging in the interview process. Interviews allowed for personal accounts from the participants on their day-to-day experiences navigating a PWI. Interviews were conducted for 60-minutes and occurred virtually as

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Name	Gender	Academic Year	Ethnicity	Major
Anthony	Man	Junior	Dominican	Accounting
Danielle	Woman	Senior	Brazilian	Chemical Engineering
Isabel	Woman	Sophomore	Mexican	Modern languages/linguistics and International studies
Jessica	Woman	Senior	Puerto Rican	Journalism
Mel	Woman	Senior	Did not disclose ethnicity	Human Services
Natasha	Woman	Senior	Colombian	Civil and environmental engineering
Nathalie	Woman	Sophomore	Ecuadorian/Spanish	Civil Engineering
Pacho	Man	Freshman	Peruvian	Psychology
Rafa	Man	Sophomore	Did not disclose ethnicity	Biological Sciences
Samantha	Woman	Freshman	Cuban	Psychology
Sonia	Woman	Senior	Puerto Rican	Biological Sciences
Vanessa	Woman	Junior	Colombian	Art Education

a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, which restricted in-person interviews. Participant interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview protocol which asked participants to provide their perspectives on two main areas: 1) how they experienced the PWI campus environment including challenges they encountered, and 2) how they navigated the challenges they encountered within a PWI context. One of the researchers who identifies as Peruvian/Salvadorian led data collection by being the primary person who conducted interviews. All interviews were audio recorded. Upon completion, interview recordings were transcribed verbatim. Member checks were conducted to ensure all information transcribed was accurate, ensuring that participants' voices were authentically presented. Participants had the opportunity to correct any information that did not accurately reflect their experiences and were also asked to choose a pseudonym for the study in order to ensure anonymity.

Data analysis

LatCrit served as the theoretical framework to assist in analyzing the data obtained from this study. Focusing on deconstructing racialized experiences and transforming educational systems that oppress racially minoritized students, LatCrit provided foundational context to the purpose and significance of this study. Data analysis included inductive coding procedures (Moustakas, 1994). Aligned with a phenomenological approach, interview transcripts from each participant were read multiple times to develop a broad and deep understanding of the experiences of participants. Detailing participant experiences through the process of horizonalization, allowed significant statements and patterns to be identified (Moustakas, 1994). From these statements, emergent codes were recorded and then organized into several categories, which were then organized into higher order themes (Moustakas, 1994). Precisely, researchers met regularly to discuss emergent codes, and were in full agreement with all codes recorded. LatCrit tenets informed theme categorization, which summarized the authentic experiences of all participants and illustrated the phenomenon of Latinx students' imposter syndrome (Given, 2008; Moustakas, 1994). Both textual and structural descriptions were generated to describe how participants experienced their environment (Moustakas, 1994) on a college campus that was predominantly white. Textual descriptions, point to what the participants experienced on campus, and structural descriptions document the role the environment played in those experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Across the textual and structural statements that were developed, similarities and differences were identified across the sample to highlight the collective shared essence of the experiences of participants in the study. This is described as intuitive integration by Moustakas (1994). For this study, a second wave of analysis was conducted to examine the experiences of Latinx students in relation to their individual and collective feelings of imposter syndrome, and their coping strategies when they encountered these feelings at their institution.

Findings

The emergent themes of the study include a) code-switching, b) consejo de las personas más cercanas (advice from the people closest to me), and c) strategic consciousness: committing to survive the toxicity of imposter syndrome at PWIs. These themes, embedded in LatCrit, outline the various strategies Latinx students utilize to overcome feelings of imposter syndrome at PWIs.

Code-switching

When Latinx students arrive at PWIs, the environment is much different from what they are accustomed to in their home environment. As they begin to navigate their college journey, they recognize an apparent difference between themselves and the overarching campus community, specifically feelings that they do not belong. With this awareness, Latinx students code-switch (Heller, 1988a) to address imposter syndrome. Code-switching is defined as changing one's behavior and actions to be accepted by the dominant culture (Heller, 1988b; Thompson, 2013; Stitham). Code-switching becomes a harsh reality for students who are marginalized, especially if it is the only way

they can feel appreciated and valued in institutional spaces. Always taxing, code-switching requires these students to pretend to be something/somebody they are not to fit in or be accepted.

Participants in the study spoke about their code-switching experience as a coping mechanism to feeling like an imposter on the PWI campus. During the interview, Natalie stated: "I feel like I've gotten better at adapting. . .which sounds really, really bad, but. . .I've gotten used to it." Natalie illustrates the difficulty adjusting to the campus community and how she needs to adapt. Furthermore, many participants expanded on the topic of adjustment by highlighting their code-switching experiences to fit into their environments. Danielle, another study participant, explained her code-switching experience in two separate instances. First, Danielle exclaimed:

> It feels different, it's like you do have two layers to you, you have two sides, you know. . .for me, it's not just one. I have the side that's very American and very acclimated to the culture and . . . then there's the side of me that's just totally Brazilian and. . .I listen to Brazilian music and I. . .look at memes, I do all these things, but I don't do that at [PWI], you know. I do it on my own time by myself, because there's no one else who understands that.

Danielle explained: "it's just annoying [to code-switch] . . .when you're here at a [PWI] you get to enjoy [Brazilian jokes] [by] yourself." Pacho added his perspective on code switching when he stated, "[When] I came here, [there was] like a whole. . .culture shock for me away from home, I had really no friends here on campus when I first started, but then I started to. . .assimilate." Pacho highlights the term *assimilate*, which is a form of code-switching. Because code switching is defined as alternating one's behavior to fit in with the majority, to assimilate is to learn to resemble the actions and behavior of others. Vanessa also spoke to her code-switching experience alongside the feeling of imposter syndrome. Vanessa highlights her conundrum:

> Everyone else seems to be aware that I'm different from everyone else, maybe that's just me overthinking it but. . .I feel like I walk into a room and people. . .automatically know that like I'm neither Black nor white. . .I'm like the red person in the Black and white room.

In these excerpts, Danielle, Pacho, and Vanessa illustrate how they have been forced to hide their ethnic identity and work on becoming accustomed to the acceptable values, behaviors and beliefs of a PWI. Who these Latinx student participants are at home is largely different, and they have created another personal identity to match the institutional community. For example, when Vanessa discussed her time at home, she stated "[When] I go home, and I speak Spanish with my parents and my God, it's like a big sigh of relief." Furthermore, Natalie, Danielle, Pacho, and Vanessa illustrate the need for Latinx students to put on a mask that hides their authentic selves in order to function at the PWI, otherwise, they are viewed as imposters. Participants stressed that they are not represented and are lost within the institution. Therefore, the only way to cope with the feelings of imposter syndrome is to align with the dominant white culture, and starve themselves of the values, traditions, and morals with which they identify.

In summary, Latinx students have been forced to create dual identities in order to be "accepted" at PWIs. Participants felt that switching between identities was necessary because their Latinx identities were not acknowledged, represented, or valued. Participants felt the urge to code-switch to align with a culture they felt was more accepting of their identities. Natalie stated during her interview, "It's kind of been an ongoing battle, and I feel like that's definitely going to be something [feeling out of place] that I'm going to deal with until I graduate." For these Latinx student participants, the structural barriers to equity, inclusion, and justice are deeply embedded in the PWI they attend.

Consejo de las personas más cercanas

In the Spanish language, *Consejos de las personas más cercanas* translates to "advice from the people closest to me." To work through feelings of imposter syndrome, Latinx students seek guidance and holistic support from the people they are closest to who see them as worthy to achieve all things. Thus, guidance from family, campus administrators, and friends make it possible for Latinx students to

prevail against institutionally inflicted imposter syndrome. As Latinx cultures value collectivism, interpersonal relationships guide Latinx students through the obstacles they face. Participants illustrated strong connections with family members, campus administrators, and peers who share similar experiences. These connections help Latinx students cope with the imposter syndrome that lingers within their collegiate experience. During the interview, Rafa highlighted the "sentimental value" that comes with familial guidance which can seem so "simple to someone listening from the outside." Rafa reflected:

> My family doesn't know much about. . .what it takes to get here and. . . what it means to be a college student, but. . .just them being there, and offering support for what you may need outside of studies and academics. . .it's just nice to have someone to talk to.

In addition, Nathalie spoke about the advice she received from her cousin. She stated, "[My cousin said] stay motivated. . .notice what your goal actually is. . .don't let the people from the outside and people who don't really care about you. . .hurt you because that's what they want to see." In a similar way, Natalie also spoke about support from a campus administrator who recognizes the discrimination of female Latinx students in engineering. Nathalie declared:

> My EOF advisor in the first semester that [I] was here. . .had a talk with me. . .he told me that he had a couple of female and people of color students in engineering wanting to drop out or change their major because of [oppressive acts against female Latinx students within the major] and. . .he was like "I want you to make sure that you're comfortable and you feel motivated to do it [be in the major]. . .You should feel welcomed."

Isabel also spoke to the support she received from a student leader, when she felt unsure of herself as a first-generation college student. Isabel stated:

> She [Isabel's RA] was very helpful my freshman year like transitioning because I think everyone knew. . .that we were [Isabel and other first gen students] the first person to go to college and she [the RA] was very helpful, especially when I had issues financially, because that was a big problem freshman year.

Furthermore, advice is also valued from peers who share similar experiences. As friendships developed with the people with whom they spend the most time, resembled the relationships with family and close friends at home. When becoming friends with peers who share similar ethnic identity, Latinx students feel they are not alone in feeling out of place. Jessica spoke about a time she made friends with someone who is Latinx and also experienced racism and oppression from their white roommates. Jessica declared:

> That was literally our first interaction with each other, both having difficult situations because we [were] placed with racist people. After [experiencing the oppressive act], I just stood for myself and me and Ashley just only hung out with each other, and. . .she was slowly getting more involved [with the Educational Opportunity Fund program and its members], and we started meeting people together.

In a similar way, Anthony spoke to his relationship with his peers when he stated, "I started already with a team-based friendship [through the EOF program] . . .and that really helped me grow through my years, just having that group." Natasha also spoke to her close peer relationships when she affirmed:

> She [Natasha's friend] was the one that really got me [on] my toes into meeting other women like [my friends] Liliana and Jay and then that just branched off to like meeting. . .the [Residence] Life community and everything like that so [I am] really grateful for meeting her and crossing paths with her.

In summary, the previous excerpts illustrate strong bonds formed by participants and those within the institution who acknowledge, appreciate, and value them for their authentic selves. Facing never-ending marginalization from the start, the burden is still placed on Latinx students to search for belonging and confront their feelings of imposter syndrome. Luckily, support from interpersonal relationships provides a mechanism for survival and affords these students opportunities to be in, and with, community. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that a strong support system reinforces motivation to persevere and survive within the eurocentric environment of a PWI.

Strategic consciousness: committing to surviving imposter syndrome at PWIs

As Latinx students move through feelings of imposter syndrome, many overcompensate and develop unhealthy patterns of doing more in an attempt to prove themselves "worthy." Exhausted from the consistent need to prove themselves and combat feelings of imposter syndrome, Latinx students in this study committed to achieving their educational goals amid the toxicity and hostility that accompanies imposter syndrome. Participants shared they needed to remind themselves of their worth and the value of attaining a postsecondary degree for the benefit of their families and future generations of Latinx students. While fully aware of the oppressive contours of the PWI they attended and their connection to feelings of imposter syndrome, participants prevailed by focusing on their own worth aiming also to disrupt the oppressive, toxic, and taxing institutional environment. For example, Nathalie proclaimed: "But there's other days where I'm just like you know what, no... I'm not going to let people here bother me; I'm putting my foot down; I'm not going to let them win." Natalie's experience with oppressive classroom experiences at the PWI led her to establish a deep commitment to countering feelings of imposter syndrome. Pacho also alluded to his awareness of the oppressive environment of the PWI and his commitment to challenging it when he spoke about his journey. He stated, "so like the majority [of the campus community] . . .is not my culture . . . but . . . [you] got to make the best out of it to succeed."

Further, Vanessa spoke about her agency in achieving her goals, amidst the unwelcoming environment of the PWI. Her narrative especially addresses her need for adapting to navigate the institution. Vanessa articulated, "So I do sometimes feel isolated, and then sometimes I don't feel isolated; that's just a personal thing because I play my own drum and I fit into wherever I need to fit in. I'm flexible." Similarly, despite experiencing feelings of imposter syndrome, Rafa expressed his commitment to succeed through reflections on his self-worth and his educational journey. Rafa noted, "Remembering [that] I've made it to college, so [if] I was able to do that. . .there must be something that I have . . . that I'm able to give, and that I'm worth something." Although feelings of imposter syndrome were apparent, and reported by all participants, they also were aware of the oppressive origins of the phenomenon and worked, strategically and consciously, to navigate feeling like an imposter through reflections of their self-worth, academic abilities, and their commitment to achieve an education for the benefit of their families and communities. They also clearly understood that in these predominantly white campus environments, they were often the only individuals invested in their achievement and success.

Discussion

This study focused on examining the strategies Latinx college students employ to combat imposter syndrome at a PWI. Three strategies emerged among study participants: a) code-switching b) consejo de las personas más cercanas (advice from the people closest to me) and c) strategic consciousness as a commitment to survive the toxicity of imposter syndrome at PWIs. Together, these strategies expand our understanding of how Latinx students navigate and defy feelings of imposter syndrome at a PWI. Additionally, findings extend to the only other known investigation of Latinx experiences with imposter syndrome (Dueñas, 2021). This study makes vital contributions to this area by expanding on Latinx college students' strategic implementations of approaches not only to endure but also refuse the imposition of imposter syndrome. We center our discussion around three main areas highlighting participants' contributions in relation to limited research about Latinx college students and the theoretical understandings provided by LatCrit.

First, findings indicate that study participants are well aware of the structural inequities ingrained in the college environment, which shape exclusionary cultures and contexts and ultimately produce feelings of imposter syndrome. For example, participants shared that upon arriving at their institution they encountered an institutional culture and value system that differed from their own (Harvey & Katz, 1985; Parkman, 2016). The differences denoted eurocentric ways of being and with this

knowledge framed Latinx students as outsiders and imposters (Gloria & Kurpius, 1996; Gloria & Pope Davis, 1997). In response to the exclusionary culture and values of the PWI, students engaged in strategies to navigate the campus environment and more specifically their feelings of being an imposter. The application of LatCrit to the study allowed us to highlight the oppressive features of the institutional context and illuminated students' lived experiences as sources of knowledge and tools to craft students' navigational approaches (Arana et al., 2011; Campa, 2013; Ramos, 2018; Kiyama, 2010; Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012).

Second, study participants narrated the critical role support systems play in their ability to counter imposter syndrome. Precisely, students defined diverse forms of familial networks they leaned on for assistance. Relatedly, findings from the present study support those of Dueñas (2021) who found Latinx student participants described mechanisms to cope (or not) with imposter syndrome. Emphasizing collectivism as a value central to students' culture (Devall et al., 2005; Gloria & Castellanos, 2012) and in direct opposition to the individualistic ideals ingrained in the context of neoliberal PWIs. Particularly, students named systems of support inclusive of biological and chosen family, campus services and professional staff, and peer support networks, which included peers with whom students shared similar culture and values. Consistent with previous research (Ramos, 2018; Kiyama, 2010) the findings of the study underscore the centrality of familial support in the experiences of Latinx college students, a characteristic highlighted by LatCrit, which encourages institutions of higher education to disrupt policies and procedures promoting individualism as a requirement for college success (Delgado Bernal & Alemán, 2017).

Third, findings illuminate Latinx students' responsibility for negotiating their presence at PWIs as they engage in strategies like code-switching, which prevent them from embracing their authentic selves. Consequently, the burden to counter imposter syndrome lies upon students themselves and not the institution they attend (Dueñas, 2021; Mendoza et al., 2011; Sáenz et al., 2018). Similarly, Dueñas (2021) highlighted the need for changes in institutional support for Latinx college students related to imposter syndrome. The findings highlight Latinx students' alienation when grappling with imposter syndrome and call for institutions and scholars to further problematize this dynamic and hold institutions accountable for the oppressive products (i.e. feelings of imposter syndrome) of their environments that negatively impact racially minoritized students. In alignment with LatCrit, institutions must identify systems and structures that sustain imposter syndrome and dismantle them in order to create affirming and validating campus environments (Museus, 2014) where Latinx students cannot only bravely survive but freely thrive.

Implications

This study provided an overview on some of the strategies Latinx students utilize to navigate and combat feelings of imposter syndrome at PWIs. As such this study provides important implications for both research and practice and lays important groundwork for future studies concerned with enhancing positive experiences for Latinx students and to dismantle the foundations of white supremacy upon which U.S. higher education is built (Wilder, 2013). This study supported and extended prior work on imposter syndrome (Ramos & Wright-Mair, 2021) as well as imposter syndrome among Latinx students at PWIs (Dueñas, 2021). This investigation illustrates that imposter syndrome is an issue with negative and material consequences for historically minoritized groups such as Latinx college students. Most importantly, however, experiencing imposter syndrome, as evidenced through this work, is not due to individual shortcomings but rather is a direct result of inherently racist structures and systems within thet U.S. society which are reproduced on college campuses. Furthermore, the underlying ideologies of exclusion that predicate imposter syndrome are often amplified and further perpetuated by individuals who operate within, and do not problematize, these systems of exclusion.

Implications for research

Primarily regarding research, further empirical investigation would benefit this emergent strand of scholarship by exploring how systemic inequities perpetuate feelings of imposter syndrome. Specifically, research in this area could examine how social dynamics of racialized exclusion – apparent through media, politics, and organizational leadership structures, for example – negatively contribute to college students' experiences of pursuing higher education. Critical discourse analysis may be a fruitful methodology for such an inquiry. Furthermore, given this study highlights some of the individual impacts of imposter syndrome on Latinx students at PWIs, additional scholarship could scrutinize the relationships between systemic oppression of racialized groups and their effects on specific populations, especially Latinx students.

Second, future research can further our understanding of the imposter phenomenon by examining how various minoritized populations grapple with feelings of being an imposter as they navigate their education at all levels (i.e., undergraduate and graduate), especially at PWIs. Uncovering where these imposter feelings originate, and how they manifest across the educational lifespan of a student can also be a unique contribution that would shed light and enhance the literature on the experiences of racially minoritized individuals, as well as examining how the institutional players (i.e, faculty, staff, and peers) in their educational journeys perpetuate and/or disrupt notions of imposter syndrome. In particular, the U.S. sociopolitical climate problematically upholds values that unquestionably esteem and valorize whiteness; by extension, then, inquiry could center the underlying, unspoken value judgments of even labeling an institution "predominantly white" when U.S. society overall is equally "predominantly white." Specifically, scholarly inquiry would contribute to knowledge akin to the present study by examining attrition or degree attainment corresponding to enrollment in PWIs and how these places of socialization shape historically minoritized students' world views and employment outcomes.

Third, this study affirms the need for research on educators within institutions of higher education. Concretely, research can extend the present study by centering those who develop and implement practices that impede notions and reproductions of imposter syndrome. More specifically, if imposter syndrome is predicated on a *belief* of intrusion (based upon socially present conditions of racism and hegemonic ideologies of exclusion), then educators have the capacity to trouble students' ideas of being imposters (based upon the valid and beneficial presence of historically minoritized groups within higher education). Research focused on strategies of disruption (whether individually or institutionally) that are employed to dismantle systemic cultures perpetuating imposter syndrome can shed light on providing tangible examples across education that can benefit racially minoritized populations.

Practice implications

In practice, we urge postsecondary educators to first disrupt and resist urges to validate feelings of imposter syndrome because of their foundations in socially constructed exclusion. Instead, when educators encounter students or peers espousing feelings of imposter syndrome, they can help tease out explanations of why a student may be experiencing these feelings and help them reframe their feelings, acknowledging they are valid but a direct product of a system rooted in deficit views and thinking about racialized minorities. Furthermore, an additional productive practice is to provide those who espouse a feeling of imposter syndrome with holistic support for them to work through these feelings and deconstruct the existence of interlocking systems of oppression (Collins, 1990).

Second, we, as actors across higher education, must challenge problematic practices, policies, and procedures which contribute to various constituents on college campuses feeling less than. To acknowledge imposter syndrome as "normal" is ill-advised, as it is not. The very systems of thought (ideologies and epistemologies) that result in differential valuation of people and behavior toward them (ontology) is predicated on a faulty, deficit-based structure of ethics (axiology). In short, deficit views are productions of thought and can be transformed. Instead, we call for higher educational

stakeholders to instead utilize any privilege afforded to facilitate transformation on a broader scale (i.e within programs, departments, across college units, or more comprehensively, at the institutional level.)

Third, educational stakeholders should commit to engaging in reflexive practices that explore individual complicity in maintaining systems and practices fostering and maintaining feelings of imposter syndrome. These efforts can begin with internal reflection of implicit biases and how they shape work with students. Once engaging this level of awareness, educational actors can move to correct the ways in which their practice reproduces systems of oppression and its corollary, imposter syndrome.

Limitations of the study

This current study presents a few limitations. First, participants were recruited from a housing and residential life specific listserv, which meant that students lived only on campus. The experiences of Latinx students living off campus could provide additional insight to other coping strategies that perhaps were not captured in this study. Second, the virtual structure for interviews was not ideal and restricted interactions between the lead researcher and participants, especially in building rapport face to face and providing a more personal connection to facilitate an interview environment to discuss topics such as imposter syndrome. Given the COVID-19 pandemic however, the only option for interviews were virtual formats. Furthermore, as the study coincided with the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the additional stresses that the pandemic added to students' experiences at PWIs were not explicitly documented in the study. These factors might have been crucial to the experiences of participants, as they were not operating in a traditional face-to face college context and could have added another important layer to the study. Third, the study only highlighted the experiences of Latinx undergraduate students and did not include graduate students whose experiences within hostile PWI contexts often differ based on other factors including, the extent of experiences navigating academic environments, age, familial responsibilities, graduate degree programs etc. Finally, the gender identities of participants only represent the binary of women/men, the absence of perspectives from Latinx students from Trans and other nonbinary gender identities represents another study limitation. Collectively, these limitations represent opportunities for future research examining the experiences of Latinx college students who experience imposter syndrome.

Summary and conclusion

This manuscript examined Latinx college students' strategies for resisting imposter syndrome within the context of PWIs. Situated within research on the experiences of Latinx students at PWIs, this study further illuminated the oppressive dynamics of campus environments in these typically neoliberal institutions. Additionally, this research explicated how these oppressive systems produce and reproduce feelings of imposter syndrome among Latinx college students, a historically minoritized group in higher education. Most importantly, however, this research established strong links to foundations and limited research that direct our attention to the agency and resistance Latinx students mobilize to counter and navigate imposter syndrome at PWIs.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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