

Social Exchange Practices among Mexican-Origin Women in Nogales, Arizona: Prospects for Education Acquisition

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ABSTRACT: *This paper summarizes quantitative and qualitative findings from a 1999 study of Mexican-origin households in Nogales, Arizona. It finds that women's educational progress is facilitated by social support and, even more important, that a household's investment in the education of its members is significantly raised with an increase in the education level of the female head of household. It argues that systematic efforts to build on existent cultural frameworks of social support will promote women's educational progress and thus help improve educational opportunities for all people of Mexican origin.*

Research conducted in 1999 in Nogales, Arizona, used qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate how Mexican-origin households deliberated economic problems, how often they perceived education as a way to solve these problems, and the extent to which investment in women's education played a part in this process.¹ The research site also provided a laboratory for examining how social networks might help women negotiate binational and bicultural dilemmas and help them attain their educational goals. The study's principal finding—that better-educated women invest more in the education of members of their households—points to the urgent need to reinforce women's resolve to pursue their education in the face of countervailing economic pressures and cultural expectations.

These findings come at a time when policy makers are grappling with problems of dwindling economic opportunities, decreased funding for educational programs, and stagnant academic achievement among Latinos (Baker 1996; Fisher et al. 1997). If we accept the long-held premise that

universal education is a basis for achieving social equality, then a focus on women's educational success should drive new approaches for advancing the education of students of Mexican heritage (O'Leary 1999). The present analysis suggests that the formalized and deliberate promotion of social support practices may be the cornerstone of such an approach.

After a brief description of the study, I summarize the educational landscape of Nogales, Arizona. The community's educational resources provide an important starting point for examining women's engagement in education. The patterns that emerge from the data support the argument that women should be placed at the center of a plan for improving the educational attainment of Mexican-origin populations. The descriptive statistics show that more women than men participate in educational programs. They also show that for women, more than for men, chances for attaining educational goals are improved by relying on the existent cultural framework that promotes socially supportive practices.

A brief summary of the social and historical context for social support introduces the qualitative data. Interviews with women illustrate how they were able in some cases to advance their education by relying on their support networks. The case studies suggest that by making use of the cultural framework that facilitates social support, women improve their odds of achieving their educational objectives, for themselves and for their children. These findings are consistent with mounting evidence that links women's education attainment to improved educational outcomes for household members, by way of an increase in household investment in education.

The Study

The U.S.-Mexico borderlands provided the laboratory for examining familial deliberations over employment, domestic organization, and education—discussions that might be considered routine were it not for their binational and bicultural dimensions in this setting. The border city of Nogales was founded in 1882, when the railroads from Guaymas, Sonora, and Kansas City, Missouri were joined. It was a single community until 1917, when a dividing fence was erected, cleaving the city in two and creating an Arizonan and a Sonoran Nogales on opposite sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. Today,

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in this divided metropolis of *ambos Nogales*, the economies and cultures of the United States and Mexico continue to converge.

An important reason that Nogales, Arizona was chosen for the study was that U.S. Census Bureau records indicate that a high percentage of households, about 94 percent, identify as being of Mexican origin. The percentage of households in our study that self-identified as being Mexican, Mexican American, or Chicano was 97 percent, a little higher than the Census Bureau figure.

One objective of the study was to isolate the social and material factors that influenced a household's ability or willingness to invest in the education of its members, particularly its female members. Ethnographic research on a convenience sample of households provided the information needed to develop a survey instrument that was administered to 297 randomly selected households. Following guidelines for sample selection offered by Bernard (1994, 79), a sample of 404 households was selected for the quantitative part of the study. The 404 included a random sample of 351 households plus 53 alternates (15 percent of the base sample) chosen at the same time to compensate for expected refusals and absences. This number provided for a probability sample in which the value for a given element had a 95 percent probability of representing the value for the true population (4,268 residences). The confidence interval of 95 percent is not an absolute criterion, but is considered standard for estimating the population parameters in most research. As it turned out, the 15 percent added to compensate for refusals and absences proved to be too low, resulting in the completion of 297 surveys in a period of four months.

To begin selection of the random sample, a computerized list of Nogales City residences was purchased from Cole Publications, a firm that specialized in providing mailing addresses for U.S. cities. For each residence, the database provided the title and name of resident, street address, and census tract. From this list, a simple systematic random sample was selected. Again following the procedure suggested by Bernard (1994), the sampling interval was determined by dividing the total number of residences by 404 (the number needed for the sample). The list of residences was then entered at a randomly selected spot, using a random start number from the list of random numbers provided in Bernard's text. This simple random selection procedure was followed after it was determined that there were no significant differences between the three Nogales census tracts with respect to educational attainment, income in 1989, poverty status, labor force participation, occupation, or social characteristics.

The questionnaire consisted of 80 questions of both fixed-choice and open-ended types. It was developed using the guidelines suggested by Bernard (1994, 268–75) and Fink (1995). For ease in administration, the survey was divided into three major sections: household composition, household labor and social history, and women's activities. Following suggestions found in Fink and Kosecoff (1996), the flow of questions moved from those that were the easiest to answer to those that were less easy. In the field, the administration of a questionnaire took about 20 minutes, depending upon the household's members and activities and on respondents' interactions with the researcher. A face-to-face survey procedure ensured that even informants who would not otherwise have been able to participate (such as the illiterate, blind, or elderly) were included, thus safeguarding the random sampling process. This procedure also ensured that questions were answered systematically and in full and could be repeated or clarified if needed.

The survey questions were usually answered by at least one adult member of the household, whoever was present in the residence at the time. We asked that the person giving the information be at least eighteen years of age. Women were the prime source of information gathered, which proved fortunate. As the survey process advanced, we found that women were more likely than men to know the activities of others in the household. They were also the most reliable in recollecting basic demographic information for each of the household members, such as birth dates, birthplaces, and grade levels.

The responses to the surveys were statistically analyzed using software called Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. The factors influencing investment in education practices fell into two general categories: material and nonmaterial. All were tested for the strength of their correlation and relationship to the dependent variable, "investment in education." Values for investment in education were determined using four material indicators: educational fees paid (in total dollars), enrollment in educational program(s), educational purchases made (in total dollars), and an inventory of educational materials within the household.

For the qualitative part of the study, 32 interviews were conducted with women from a convenience sample of households. Their narratives helped flesh out a picture of how women negotiated their educational ambitions and the extent to which their goals were realized. From these interviews, researchers gained insight into the dilemmas facing women as a result of socioeconomic pressures and cultural expectations. The interviews focused particularly on the integration of employment and

domestic responsibilities and women's perceptions of the role education can play within this overall picture.

Education and Training Resources in Nogales

Meetings with administrators of several local education and training programs in June 1997 provided information on the resources available to Nogales residents.² Many programs were centrally located at the Pierson Educational Complex (PEC), housed in the former Nogales High School building on Plum Street. Plum Street is close to the central, older part of town and runs uphill, perpendicular to Nogales's main street, Grand Avenue. Built in 1915, the PEC is a stately three-story building with vintage architecture characteristic of schools built during Arizona's post-territorial years. Its imposing presence contrasts to newer and more efficient prefabricated classrooms that surround it.

The PEC was the site of Nogales's Santa Cruz Alternative High School (also known to local residents as "la Pierson" or simply *la alternativa*). This high school had been developed to fill the needs of students who were no longer eligible to attend regular high school, either because they were too old or because they had been expelled. Several programs had been designed to meet their needs. One was Even Start, a program federally funded with Title I money. Essentially a recovery program for teen mothers who needed to finish high school, it combined academic classes with classes on parenting and other life skills such as applying for a job. In this program, students worked toward gaining the knowledge needed to pass the General Educational Development (GED) exam. The children of these students (infants to preschoolers) attended preschool at the same facility while their parents took classes. Separate from Even Start, but part of the PEC system, was the Mariposa Clinic, a wellness center where parents could take their children for medical checks and immunizations. A coalition of University of Arizona and Arizona State University personnel also provided psychological counseling services to students.

Other adult education programs were also available through the PEC, many of them government-funded and free to U.S. residents. These included English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, citizenship classes, pre-GED classes, and an adult literacy program. The PEC was also the site for the "2+2" Interactive Video Classroom that began in 1997, jointly offered by Northern Arizona University (NAU) and Pima Community College (PCC). Televised classes were live and interactive: students from

the remote-access site could interact with the instructor, ask questions, listen to others, and participate along with the on-site students. The program was intended to integrate PCC university-transferable classes with upper-division courses from NAU to enable students to complete a degree. Completing upper-division courses at the University of Arizona was also an option. However, this entailed a commute to Tucson, sixty miles to the north, and additional commitments in terms of time and money. At the time the fieldwork was conducted, NAU and PCC seemed to have capitalized on community interest in three areas: business, criminal justice, and bilingual education. The interest in business reflected the community's concern with the peso devaluation in 1994 that devastated the downtown retail economy of Nogales and resulted in the loss of hundreds of jobs. The interest in criminal justice stemmed from the ubiquitous law enforcement activity along the border, including the high-profile presence of the Immigration and Naturalization Service,³ the Drug Enforcement Administration, and the Border Patrol. The interest in bilingual education reflected a shortage of qualified bilingual teacher's aides in the Nogales schools.

The Community Vocational Training Center within the PEC facility was attempting to recruit individuals interested in certain vocations that would fulfill projected needs, such as diesel mechanics, truck driving, and the building trades (carpentry, plumbing, electrical, and masonry). This program evolved in response to the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 and the predicted manpower shortage, especially in the trucking industry. The program aimed to increase the number of diesel mechanics available to service the increased number of transport trucks that came with the expansion of trade under NAFTA. Outreach efforts to encourage women to enter these traditionally male fields had met with little success. The training of hotel services personnel was another goal, in anticipation of a new Holiday Inn that would be constructed to meet the needs of truckers and business travelers between the United States and Mexico.

Information about other education and training programs outside the PEC structure was readily available through the PEC information desk. For example, the Jobs Training and Partnership Act office was across the street from the PEC building. Free training in commercial truck driving, clerical work, travel services, and medical assistant fields was offered to qualified low-income individuals.

The Habitat for Humanity Program, also known as the sweat-equity home program, helped low-income families meet their housing needs.

Among the residents of Nogales, this program was strongly associated with one of its sponsors, Chicanos por la Causa. Community volunteers trained individuals in any one of several building trades, such as carpentry or electrical. After training, they received a level II apprentice certificate proving their qualification in the selected trade. The federally funded program would finance 65 percent of the building materials for a house for qualified applicants. Those earning \$13,000 a year or less had to contribute their own labor—sweat equity—to help build a series of homes for other program participants. Each housing unit, then, was built by a community of trainees who moved into their own homes after satisfying their obligation to the program.

The Santa Cruz site of Pima Community College offered about eighty courses each semester. Students could earn an associate of arts or associate of applied science degree in about twenty different programs. Degrees took two to three years to complete, depending on the availability of classes and on the student's ability to participate full-time, that is, to enroll for a minimum of twelve credits per semester. Students could also earn a basic certificate in business, administrative support, or translation in about a year. In addition to the more conventional courses, the PCC facility offered self-paced classes, accelerated weekend classes, and televised courses. Most of the on-site classes were offered in the evenings to accommodate working adults. ESL classes were also offered, in some cases at no cost to those who qualified.

Patterns of Education Acquisition

The map of Nogales's educational landscape provided the context for understanding patterns of educational engagement among residents. My survey data on educational attainment on adults over age eighteen revealed that the gap between the average educational levels of women and men became progressively narrower with decreasing age (table 1).⁴ Whereas older women generally had less education than men, younger women seemed to have closed the gender gap in education, resulting in slightly higher average educational attainment for women compared to men in the eighteen to twenty-nine age group. This suggests that patterns of education acquisition for women may be undergoing change, with younger women advancing further than their predecessors were able to do. This finding is consistent with research by Fisher et al. (1997, 295).

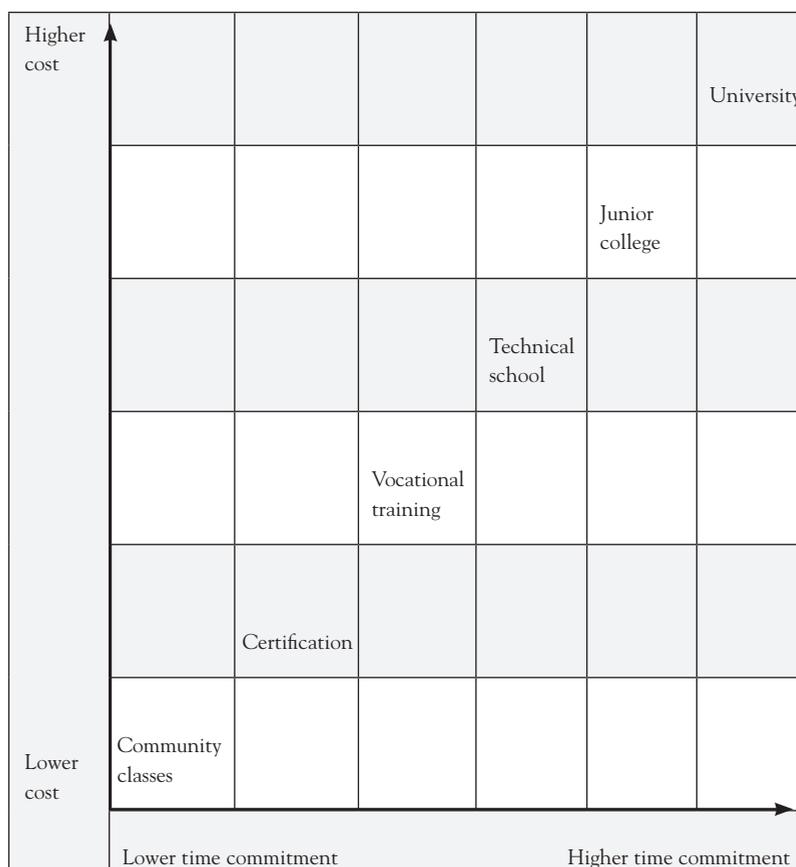
Table 1. Average education levels by age and sex.

Age group	Sex	Mean years of education	N
18 to 29	Female	12.08	96
	Male	12.04	82
	Total	12.06	178
30 to 49	Female	11.34	117
	Male	12.18	95
	Total	11.72	212
50 to 65	Female	9.75	53
	Male	11.35	51
	Total	10.54	104
Over 65	Female	10.66	48
	Male	11.54	30
	Total	11.06	78
Total	Female	10.66	314
	Male	11.54	258
	Total	11.06	572

Because eighteen is an age at which many people enter the job market or a postsecondary education program, item 35 of the questionnaire specifically queried the recent educational activity of household members eighteen and over. This ensured the inclusion members of the household, such as housewives, who might not consider themselves students in the conventional sense but might still be involved in some educational activity. The analysis excluded those eighteen and over who were still in high school.⁵ The different education programs of 184 individuals who were actively participating in some type of educational activity or who had participated within the last two years were grouped according to types of activity. Six categories of educational activity were established, each category being differentiated by its incremental demands on the participant in terms of the program's structure, time commitment, and cost (fig. 1).

The most common educational activities among the households surveyed were those in the first category, "community classes." Programs in this category were the least demanding in terms of structure, time commitment, and cost. They were also the least restrictive in their enrollment criteria. With a few exceptions, the community classes were publicly sponsored and free to those who qualified. English classes were the most frequently listed activity in this category and were offered through different community agencies and public schools. Other activities were GED preparation classes, and to a lesser extent, recreational activity classes.

Figure 1. Comparative cost and time commitment for six categories of education.



The second most frequently listed educational activity was labeled “certification.” This was essentially a continuing education process in which individuals maintained and periodically updated their occupational credentials. The most common examples were continuing medical education courses for health care professionals and in-service training for teachers. Activities in this category were highly varied in structure, depending upon the profession and its performance standards. They also varied widely in time commitment and cost to participants. For example, in some cases employers offered courses at no charge, while in other cases, participants had to pay registration fees or travel expenses.

The “vocational training” category included programs that combined classes or formal instruction with job training or employment. The cost of participating in these programs ranged from no cost to minor expenses related to transportation and materials. The community’s Job Corps program (funded by the Job Training Partnership Act) exemplified the combined training-and-work approach to education. Another example in this category was law enforcement training. Often, the cost of training was reflected in the reduced wages of new employees pending completion of the program. Some private sector employers, such as Walgreens, used this on-the-job-training strategy. Walgreens provided its trainees employment while they earned their credentials as pharmacy technicians. Ford Motor Company also provided an on-the-job certification program for its mechanics.

The next category, “technical schools,” offered more formally structured education in which participants could earn specialized certification or an associate or bachelor’s degree. The structuring of the programs usually reflected the work schedules of the enrollees and was geared toward credentialing them for the job market. While program duration varied, these schools generally offered students accelerated education followed by job placement or internship in the private sector after completion of the program. At this level of educational structure and commitment, financial cost to the enrollee might be substantial, especially when compared to the categories of programs already mentioned. However, the technical schools generally provided financial assistance or facilitated educational loans to help students meet the costs. The technical school most often mentioned was Chaparral College, which offered programs in office skills, computer technology, accounting, and business administration. ITT Technical Institute, Lamson’s Business College in Phoenix, and Pima Medical Institute were also included in the technical school category.

The final two categories of educational activity involved college and university programs. The “junior college” category was distinguished from the “university” category by its lesser demands in terms of time and cost. Junior colleges mentioned by the households surveyed included Pima Community College (PCC), Mesa Community College, and Cochise College. Unlike technical schools, junior colleges offered courses that could be transferred to a university program of study, and in this way their programs might be nested within the structured requirements for a four-year university degree. Through its extended campus in Nogales, the Tucson-based PCC offered students the option of earning an associate degree that took two to three years to complete and could be applied toward a university

degree. An associate degree from PCC generally took longer to complete than a degree from a technical school. However, in order to respond to the needs of working students, PCC developed specialized courses and programs for non-degree-seeking students similar to the programs offered by technical schools. These certification programs were offered in several technical fields including finance, computers, and business administration, and could be earned in less time than an associate degree. The junior colleges thus competed to some extent with the technical schools, offering flexibility for working adults who were interested in enhancing their job skills or obtaining certification in minimal time.

The final category, "university," was the most structured and the most demanding in terms of time and cost. Because the closest such institution was the University of Arizona in Tucson, sixty miles away, and because completing a basic bachelor's degree generally requires four to five years of full-time course work, attending a university involved greater time and financial commitment than any of the other types of education. In addition, university study required a psychological commitment to completing a program of study that might seem alien, distant, and impersonal. For all these reasons, barriers to university study were especially high. Two of Arizona's three public universities, Arizona State University and Northern Arizona University, had attempted to reduce the geographic and psychological distance for the Nogales community by establishing on-site programs there. These institutions addressed local needs by offering, among other programs, bilingual certification programs for Nogales teachers. Such efforts made university education not only more accessible and affordable to residents of Nogales, but more meaningful as well.

Using these six categories of educational activity, I charted patterns of educational participation among the respondents over the past two years (table 2). The most remarkable finding was that overall, more women than men had been active in acquiring some form of education; indeed, women outnumbered men in all but one of the six categories (more men pursued vocational training). The higher postsecondary education participation rate of Hispanic women compared to Hispanic men is consistent with findings by Fisher et al. (1997), and indicates that somehow women are negotiating their educational participation well enough. The most dramatic difference between men and women was in the community classes, where women outnumbered men by nearly three to one. This category also showed the most irregularity in terms of attendance. Many women stated that they had been taking English classes "for years," attending only when they had the

Table 2. Participation in education within the last two years, by education level and sex.

Educational level		Female	Male	Total
Community classes	Count	30	9	39
	Distribution by sex within level (%)	76.9	23.1	100.0
	Level as % of total	25.8	13.2	21.2
Certification	Count	25	16	41
	Distribution by sex within level (%)	61.0	39.0	100.0
	Level as % of total	21.6	23.5	22.3
Vocational training	Count	7	9	16
	Distribution by sex within level (%)	43.8	56.2	100.0
	Level as % of total	6.0	13.2	8.7
Technical school	Count	6	1	7
	Distribution by sex within level (%)	85.7	14.3	100.0
	Level as % of total	5.2	1.5	3.8
Junior college	Count	26	23	49
	Distribution by sex within level (%)	53.1	46.9	100.0
	Level as % of total	22.4	33.9	26.6
University	Count	22	10	32
	Distribution by sex within level (%)	68.8	31.2	100.0
	Level as % of total	19.0	14.7	17.4
Totals	Count	116	68	184
	Distribution by sex (%)	63.0	37.0	100.0

time. Women's concentration within this basic level of educational activity may reflect thwarted efforts to increase educational levels that were low to begin with, especially in English language skills.

Another remarkable pattern was that more than twice as many women as men had participated in university-level classes in the past two years. Furthermore, examination of households where members had engaged in this category of activity showed that of the twenty-two women listed, fourteen were still enrolled. Four of the twenty-two women were teachers working on their master's degrees; however, only one of those four women was of Mexican origin. Of the men engaged at the university level, all ten were still enrolled, and all ten came from Mexican-origin households. The same pattern appeared in the "junior college" category, with the majority of those currently or recently enrolled being women.

Question 69 of the questionnaire probed the reasons why respondents stopped attending educational programs. The reasons were varied. For women, they included not having enough time because of work and family commitments, not having transportation, and not having someone to watch young children. These responses indicated that education acquisition

patterns of women were affected by many competing commitments and obligations, a finding discussed in more detail below. An analysis of social contexts in which decisions are made about education sheds light on the obstacles to education with which women must contend.

Social Exchange Practices in Mexican-Origin Households

The chronic economic instability of many Mexican and Mexican American households, increasingly the result of fluctuations in the global labor market, helps to explain the persistence of supportive practices that facilitate the informal procurement and exchange of resources. The wealth of scholarship on social exchange has shed light on its nature. What is exchanged can be material, such as goods, services, loans, or information; it can also be non-material, such as emotional support or encouragement. For over thirty years, Lomnitz's studies have helped develop a definition of social networks as mechanisms through which households engage in mutual support through informal social exchange.⁶ Fundamental to this system is the role of kin and the incorporation of nonkin into an expanding web of social relationships through *compadrazgo*, or fictive kinship (Lomnitz 1994a).

The maintenance of such relationships through continual exchanges of favors, money, information, services, and gifts has become a quasi-permanent feature among Mexican-origin populations. Other studies support the view that networks of exchange are necessary, beneficial, and intrinsic to the survival strategies of poor urban households in Mexico and Latin America (Selby, Murphy, Lorenzen 1990; Willis 1993), of Mexican immigrants in the United States (Alvarez 1991; Chavez 1985; O'Conner 1990), and of Mexican American families (Keefe 1980; Vélez-Ibáñez 1988). The importance of social exchange among economically vulnerable populations reflects their pervasive lack of confidence that they will ever be fully absorbed by the existing economic order, as well as the recognition that help givers may just as easily find themselves help seekers at any given time.⁷

Because of the importance of social exchange to the informal procurement of resources, one of the study's objectives was to document women's roles in the social exchange process, particularly in terms of how their roles impeded or facilitated their educational undertakings. The responses to survey questions were used to identify variables corresponding to specific types of exchanges (e.g., visits, loans, child care) between individuals and households. Of particular interest were those exchanges that might affect women's educational acquisition efforts. Some of the "help-giving" exchanges appeared to hamper educational activities because they

competed with the time needed to pursue studies. In contrast, some of the help-seeking behaviors appeared as efforts to negotiate educational goals in light of the competing pressures to fulfill social expectations.

To help determine the relationship between household exchange and household investment in education, the behaviors indicative of these were documented, then coded and analyzed. The first group of behaviors, indicator variables grouped into a category labeled "reliance," represented the social exchange practices upon which households relied to meet their needs. Multiple regression analysis of these variables was used to test for changes in the dependent variable, "investment in education." In other words, the different variables designed to measure household reliance were tested for the strength of their correlation to the dependent variable, investment in education. Combinations of the reliance variables were systematically regressed on investment in education to determine which would best predict a household's investment in education. Variables that produced the most change were selected and those that had little impact were eliminated.

This process found that three variables produced the best model for predicting investment in education:

1. Help given (to other households)
2. Frequency of visits (between households)
3. Number of related households in Nogales on the Arizona side of the border

The combined effect of these variables accounted for about 8 percent of the variance in investment in education. Table 3 presents the standardized and unstandardized regression coefficients and their accompanying *t*-values for this model of investment. The *t*-values and *F*-ratio indicate that although the relationship is not very strong, we can expect it to be positive: a significant increase in investment in education was associated with increased interdependency between households. In other words, the level of investment in education was related to how strongly households relied on one another. A plausible explanation is that the informal exchange of goods and services between households frees up money needed to pay for registration and buy educational materials.

The impact of the reliance group of variables was further tested for their relationship to investment in education by gender. For investment in men's education ($N = 58$), no significant change was associated with the reliance variables. For women's education ($N = 90$), however, significant change in investment was detected with increased levels of reliance ($R\text{-square} = .093, p < .03$). This finding suggested that investment in women's education

Table 3. Effect of indicators of household reliance on household investment in education: multiple regression analysis.

Independent variable	β	Beta	T	sig.
Help given to other households	1.839	.181	2.989	.003
Frequency of visits	1.175	.161	2.692	.008
Number of related households	1.183	.153	2.498	.013
$R^2 = .085$				
$F(3,260) = 8.065^*$				

* $p < .001$

accounted for most of the variance in investment in education when reliance indicators were considered. It further suggested that women, more than men, depended on and benefited from the exchange relationships between households to help them meet their educational goals.

Another category of variables was set up to represent specific supportive behaviors that would relieve women of domestic obligations. This category was labeled “social support.” For these variables, I developed a scale that rated how much help with household chores was given to women:

1: No help with chores was given.

2: Help with chores was given.

3: Household financial resources were used to help pay for help with chores (such as by hiring a housecleaner).

Similarly, a scale for assessing help with child care was set up:

0: No child care needed (no children present).

1: No child care arrangements were made.

2: Child care arrangements were made.

3: Household financial resources were used to help pay for child care.

Other social support variables were constructed to measure observable behaviors that were specific to helping women manage their households. These included whether women had access to household resources such as bank accounts, credit cards, or a vehicle, expressed in terms of dichotomous variables (values of 0 or 1). Another variable, “hours spent studying,” was used to help determine the amount of social support women had for undertaking educational activities.

Correlation matrices were generated to determine which variables were the strongest in terms of their relationship to each other and to the dependent variable, investment in education. Through the process of elimination, the social support variables that most strongly correlated with the dependent variable were “help with child care” and “hours spent

studying.” The combined strength of these two variables suggested that help with child care freed up time for studying. The combination of these two led to a stronger positive educational outcome in terms of an increase in a household’s investment in education. The *R*-square of .160 ($p < .01$) indicated further that these two supportive practices specific to women’s needs produced significant changes in investment in education as a whole, suggesting that help with child care might be at the heart of educational progress for the entire household.

These findings, summarized in box 1, are illustrated by several case studies. The first illustrates how exchange practices can impede women’s progress toward educational goals when help-giving roles interfere with the pursuit of education. The second and third case studies illustrate how women can use help-seeking behaviors to advance their goals. The third case study also demonstrates how a skillful combination of both help-seeking and help-giving roles can enable a woman to invest in the education of her family members. Analysis of these case studies suggests that a cultural framework that facilitates help-seeking and help-giving exchanges could be redirected to help promote positive educational outcomes.

Box 1. Major findings from testing the reliance and social support sets of variables

- Increased reliance between households *did not* produce significant change in investment in education for men. In contrast, increased reliance between households *did produce significant investment in education for women*.
- Based on these findings, we can predict that women more than men will benefit from increased reliance between households.
- The two variables that produced the most change in investment in education for women were help with child care and hours spent studying.
- The high correlation between help with child care and hours spent studying suggests that help with child care may increase the time available to study.
- Help with child care is key not only to educational progress for women, but to promoting overall household investment in education.

CASE STUDY 1: LUISA

The trials and tribulations of the Gámez family household had not dampened the hopes and enthusiasm of its matriarch, Luisa.⁸ At age forty-five, she was determined to return to school and earn a teaching degree so that she could surprise her elderly parents. But obligations to family members throughout her life had impeded her pursuit of that goal.

As a young girl, Luisa hoped to become a teacher. After she graduated from Nogales High School, however, her mother insisted that she find a job and help support her younger brothers. Luisa's father, an alcoholic, was an inconsistent provider and the additional income from Luisa's employment provided much-needed economic support.

Luisa's husband was from Mexico and had come to the United States as a young boy to do seasonal work. Early in the marriage, Luisa often helped her husband, digging ditches and shoveling. Because he didn't have legal documentation to work, he had little choice but to accept whatever work was available. About twelve years ago Luisa's husband injured his back on the job and was medically disabled, qualifying for compensatory benefits. He looked for other jobs that didn't require hard labor, but his sixth-grade education in Mexico limited his opportunities. For years, the family depended on his disability benefits and on Luisa's wages as a teacher's aide in a local school, where she worked in a special education class for children with Down Syndrome and other handicaps. Luisa began her present job, as a secretary in a community service agency, on a volunteer basis, and after a year was hired part-time. Her income became crucial to the economic stability of her family.

Luisa's oldest son, Enrique, was twenty-four years old and had recently married. Although he contributed to the household, he and his new wife had plans to move away. He had been attending Pima Community College for two years, taking classes toward a teaching degree. Now, he was planning to enroll in a computer programming course of study at Chaparral College in Tucson. The program was expected to take about twenty months to complete and financial aid from the college was available. His wife had expressed interest in continuing her education, but because she was not a U.S. citizen, there were fears that she would be ineligible with recent changes in U.S. law. The plan was for her to find a job and help her husband attain his educational goals. Luisa and her husband, as well as the in-laws, were expected to help the young couple in the spirit of family unity. Luisa explained that the help might include paying the couple's rent or providing them transportation to look for work:

Van a ser veinte meses difíciles para ellos porque es mucho trabajo—y para sus familias también, porque son muy unidas. Las dos familias están dispuestas a ayudar a la joven pareja. Les están ayudando con la renta, por ejemplo. Mi hermano vive en Tucson y su esposa ha ofrecido llevar a la nuera a buscar trabajo allá.⁹

Luisa's daughter Karen had also just graduated from high school. Luisa and her husband had encouraged their daughter to consider furthering her education, but she was undecided. Karen's initial plan was to go to Tucson with her cousin and enroll in PCC to study veterinary medicine, but she had changed her mind, fearing that she and her cousin would not get along. She then considered joining the Air Force, but around that time a sexual harassment scandal at the Air Force Academy became public and she again changed her mind. Finally, Karen opted for a course of study in social work at the local campus of PCC. Luisa accompanied her daughter and solicited the financial aid applications. They found that Karen would qualify for a government Pell grant and other financial aid, and could begin classes in the fall semester.

Having resolved the immediate concerns of her two oldest children, Luisa was still pressed to cope with the recent problems of her youngest child, Diego. Diego, who was in his last year of high school, had academic as well as behavioral problems. Luisa's greatest fear was that her son, who appeared to be influenced by many of his friends who were also facing problems at school, would not graduate. In recent years there had been an increase in gang-related problems in her neighborhood. She recognized the members of the gangs as childhood friends of Diego, and feared that many of them were abusing drugs. She felt that she had been too lenient with her son in the past, and was now taking steps to help him improve his academic performance. Her increased vigilance of her son's social activities brought resentment as she tried to refocus his attention on his education and his responsibility as a member of the family. Luisa was working closely with his teachers and counselors to monitor his school assignments. Every Thursday, the school sent home a list of assignments, which she reviewed and signed and returned to the counselor. It disappointed her to have to resort to such disciplinary measures. She was grateful, however, that more serious problems had not emerged; some of the other boys had already been in trouble with the law.

With so many other things to do, Luisa had delegated much of the work of monitoring Diego's homework and other activities to her husband, who was at home for most of the day. Seemingly relieved, she added that he had always had a firmer hand with the children than she had:

Como mi esposo es mas estricto, yo ya le dejé la responsabilidad. Si mi hijo me pide permiso para ir algún lado, yo lo mando con su papá. 'Ve con el,' le digo. 'Si él te deja ir, ve.' Ahora es mi esposo quien decide . . . quien se hace responsable. El es el que está al pendiente de que hagan

las tareas, de preguntarles como les fue en la escuela, en fin él es quien decide sobre ellos.¹⁰

Even with her husband's increased share of child-rearing responsibilities, Luisa saw her job as a parent as beginning when her children were born and continuing until her dying day: "Los papás empiezan de preocuparse cuando los hijos nacen, y dejan de hacerlo cuando nos morimos." She remembered a phrase her mother often used to describe the eternal toil of parenthood: "Si la noche fuera día, descanso no habría." (If nighttime were day, there would be no rest.)

Parenting was only part of what kept Luisa from pursuing her own goals, specifically her desire to earn an associate degree and realize her dream of becoming a teacher. Both of her parents were ill. After many years of drinking, her father had developed cirrhosis of the liver, and her mother had cancer, which often prevented her from attending to her husband's illness. The father's health had recently taken a turn for the worse, so Luisa had decided to put off her education and spend time with him. In addition, Luisa's elderly mother-in-law also lived with them.

Added to these overwhelming family obligations were what Luisa perceived to be her biggest constraint: the household's dependence on her income. "Mi esposo no tiene recursos para darles educación a nuestros hijos, yo soy la que mantiene la casa." (My husband has no money to provide education to our children; I'm the one who supports the household.) Although the mother-in-law received Social Security, these payments were rumored to be in jeopardy with changes in the law affecting retirement benefits to non-U.S. citizens.

To her credit, Luisa had managed to earn a certificate in general studies from PCC two years earlier. She had taken classes locally, and when her son commuted to Tucson to take classes that were not available in Nogales, she had accompanied him and attended classes there also. She finished with a 4.0 grade point average. She boasted that she was the first in her family to have attended college, and her parents were proud of her. Although her brothers had been given the opportunity to continue their education, partially through Luisa's help in supporting them, they had not completed their studies. In terms of prospects for furthering her education, she remained hopeful that she would earn her teaching degree before her parents died: "A mí me gustaría, antes que ellos mueran, graduarme y entregarles a mis padres un diploma, o un documento donde diga que yo ya termine mis estudios." (Before they die, I would like to graduate and give my parents a diploma, or a document that says that I finished my studies.)

This case study demonstrates how supportive practices can be a liability for women, rather than an asset. In a primarily help-giving role, Luisa exemplifies the types of practices many women find routine. For Luisa, these began before marriage, with the economic support rendered to her mother and brothers. The pattern was repeated after marriage, when she worked side by side with her husband and later became the primary breadwinner. Later, she gave support to her grown children as they launched their own educational and work careers. Not least, she is the primary caregiver to aging and ill parents and in-laws. Luisa scarcely has had the time to devote to fulfilling her own educational ambitions. In this light, socially supportive practices can be seen as a liability for women, who in fulfilling the needs of others often must defer their own educational plans. One can only speculate what educational level Luisa might have reached if the support she had conferred on others had been reciprocated.

CASE STUDY 2: REYNA

Reyna Santiago was a twenty-two-year-old wife and mother of three. She came from a large family that included her parents and nine siblings, most of whom did not finish high school. Reyna herself attended one semester of high school, but decided to drop out because of what she referred to as “personal problems” at home. Her parents’ attempt to impose their beliefs on their children translated into an authoritarianism that Reyna thought unrealistic. She felt that her parents were products of another time, shaped by an upbringing and philosophy that disapproved of and restricted activities she considered typical for adolescents her age. When her parents tried to exert control over her, she rebelled. By age sixteen, she had dropped out of school and left home to live with a sister.

At this point in her life, Reyna’s future did not seem very promising. She worked for a brief period in Tucson, helping a sister in her job at an insurance agency. She married Luis Donaldo, who had also dropped out of high school in the ninth grade. The couple began having children: first Maritza, who was four at the time of the study, then Luisito a year later, and finally Mario, who was eight months old. Then, serendipitously, Reyna came across an opportunity that would help her change her life for the better.

One day in 1994, Reyna was visiting her mother, and by chance, a letter addressed to her parents as public housing residents caught her eye. The letter was from the Nogales Housing Authority (NHA) and informed potential qualifying households that applications were being accepted for a

new housing program. The program was a form of public housing in which participants contractually agreed to take responsibility for improving their economic situation over a five-year period and ultimately ending their dependency on public assistance. Upon reading the program eligibility guidelines, which contained restrictions based on age and other criteria, Reyna realized that her parents would not qualify because her mother was medically disabled and her father was retired. Reyna and her family, however, would. Reyna saw an opportunity and applied.

When Reyna agreed to participate in our study, she had just moved into one of the thirty units built for the NHA housing program. Reyna and her family were among the first to move into the new *colonia*. Her neat and tidy duplex sparkled brightly with fresh paint and an aura that comes with dignity and pride in oneself. The contract between NHA and the program participants stipulated that one of the heads of household must work full-time, and the other (who may work part-time) must do something to improve the household's long-term economic prospects. Anything that helped households attain self-sufficiency could be utilized and was encouraged: learning English, earning a GED diploma, taking college courses, or participating in any of various self-help programs that were available. As the skill levels of household members improved, it was anticipated that better-paying jobs would be available to them. The NHA program would also help participants with job placement. By the end of five years, the household was expected to be self-sufficient, that is, no longer dependent upon public assistance.

In most forms of public housing, the rent paid is determined, or prorated, according to the household's earnings. As their income increases, participants are expected to pay more rent. Under the terms of the new NHA housing contracts, participants also paid more when their earnings went up, but the difference between the initial rent and the increased rent was held in trust. At the end of the five years, the total monies held in trust for each household would be returned to them to be used for a down payment on a home. Reyna explained that she now paid \$132 a month for their three-bedroom home. When she finished her GED program and began full-time employment, the rent would increase to \$500 a month, reflecting the increase in the household's earnings. The increment of \$368 a month would go into the trust, which after five years would total \$18,680. This money would be returned to Reyna's household and would be applied toward the purchase of a home.

Part of the application process required a statement of goals by the applicant household. When she applied, Reyna had already enrolled in a

program at the Pierson Educational Complex to earn her GED. In keeping with the NHA program requirements, she was working part-time and her husband was working full-time. When asked how they decided who would do what to fulfill the requirements of the contract with the NHA, she said that they both decided that her husband, who was twenty-five and worked as a groundskeeper, would be the full-time working spouse. Also, in keeping with the terms of the contract, he committed to helping her with the housework and with the children. He was happy to let Reyna satisfy the requirements for improving the household's skill level through education and had been honest about his disinterest in undertaking any form of continued education for himself.

In addition to the classes that prepared her for the GED examination, Reyna participated in vocational skills training offered by the Even Start program. There, she was given instruction in basic office skills such as typing and filing. The program also provided instruction in child care. When Reyna went to her classes, Maritza and Luisito went with her and attended preschool and day care on-site. Reyna still relied on her mother to take care of the smallest child, Mario, who was too little to participate in the program. She also depended upon her sister, who had helped her at times by loaning her money. Reyna attended the morning session at Even Start and would finish in a matter of weeks. She also attended an evening course once a week at PCC to learn to use Microsoft Works, a word processing program. Using an income tax refund, Reyna had just purchased her own car, which had facilitated her many activities. Before she had her car, her husband dropped her off at a neighbor's, who took her to the educational complex when it was time for class.

Reyna had not set any goals beyond her GED, but she was now considering enrolling in a child care certification program. Before she dropped out of high school, she never sought or received help from counselors or teachers. Indeed, she particularly remembered teachers as being rude and indifferent toward students. Many teachers publicly humiliated students and did not appear to want to help them. Her reluctance to seek help—however justified—changed dramatically with the opportunity provided by the NHA program. The program structured a support-seeking approach to education acquisition that made sense to Reyna. Although she had not yet defined her future educational goals, Reyna seemed to have intuitively mastered the technique of seeking support from others and then using that help in pursuit of her own goals.

CASE STUDY 3: LOURDES

Lourdes Cifuentes had lived in Nogales, Arizona, for thirty years since coming with her parents from the Sonora side of Nogales at age seventeen. Her father, who went as far as the third grade, arranged for the legal immigration of his family. Her mother, who went through the sixth grade, never worked outside the home. Lourdes learned English through a program for Spanish-speaking students at Nogales High School and attended several months of secretarial school before marrying.

The remarkable feature of the Cifuentes household was that of the five children, the three oldest had finished or were in the process of finishing a postsecondary education program. Luz (23), the eldest, had graduated from Nogales High School. She went on to complete a two-year executive secretary program at Cochise College in Douglas, Arizona. She was working at the time of the study as a secretary in Tucson and commuted there on a daily basis in one of the three family autos. The second-eldest daughter, Regina (21), was enrolled in a bachelor's degree program at the University of Arizona in Tucson. She was living on campus at the university and her goal was to become a certified public accountant. Esther (19) was studying interior design at Interstate Career College in Tucson. Esther, according to her mother, had been the most independent and headstrong of the daughters and the mother sighed with relief that Esther, too, would be graduating that summer. She had been commuting to Tucson with her elder sister, Luz, on a daily basis to attend the college and already had a job prospect. Luz had been teaching her younger sister how to get around Tucson on her own and supervising her driving on the interstate so that she would become independent upon graduation.

Although Lourdes beamed with pride at her daughters' accomplishments, the formation of their educational goals and the road toward meeting those goals had not been smooth. The development of Luz's educational plans marked the first critical turning point within the Cifuentes household. When Luz was deciding on a career, right after high school graduation, she was interested in becoming a fashion model. Her parents objected to this goal primarily because she would have to go to school in Tucson. They were unfamiliar with Tucson and highly influenced by rumors of crime and violence there. They feared for their daughter's safety because she had been raised in what they considered a safe place to live and one where the behavior of their daughters could be easily supervised. They also felt that because they had always been overly protective of their daughter, she was unprepared for life alone in the big city. In addition, in their opinion the

fashion model career path Luz had chosen was a dubious one. Their effort to discourage her first career choice initially centered on exploring Nogales's education resources, but they were dissatisfied with what was available. Tucson seemed to offer the best alternatives in terms of programs and curriculum, but that still left the problem of transportation. How would their daughter travel to and from Tucson, about sixty miles away?

Finally, following much deliberation, Lourdes came up with an idea and Luz agreed. She would attend Cochise College instead and enroll in the executive secretary program there. The decision was primarily based upon Lourdes's recommendation that earning secretarial qualifications would offer the best chance for reliable employment. Cochise College offered several other advantages. Although it was not in Nogales, it was located in a small city (Douglas, Arizona), which addressed the danger-in-the-big-city issue. Also, Lourdes had a sister who had moved to Douglas several years before, which resolved the problems of supervision and transportation. Lourdes thus took Luz to her aunt in Douglas, and although the aunt moved back to Nogales soon after, Luz had been successfully transplanted within a network of familiar social contacts, *conocidos*, whom the family could rely upon.

With such a large family, the cost of education was an important consideration. Lourdes explained that they had to find ways to stretch their modest income to meet the education expenses that loomed as her children came of age. Lourdes usually took care of distributing the money that her husband earned. Although she stated that decisions about how to spend the money were shared equally between the spouses, she was the one who was most informed about what bills needed to be paid and how much the household budget could be stretched. There had been no savings plan specifically set up for college expenses, so her initiatives were critical in finding the money needed to pay for education. She saved any "left over" money in a savings account and applied for student loans, parental PLUS loans, and financial aid. The family had two credit cards, and by using their credit at a local store they purchased a personal computer. In addition, the girls helped share the expenses of going to school by participating in college work-study programs. By the time Regina was ready to embark on her career, Mr. and Mrs. Cifuentes were more familiar with the system of obtaining money for education, and they regularly attended orientations and seminars on financial aid sponsored by local agencies and schools.

Lourdes often drew comparisons between her own education and that of her daughters. A common theme was the importance of family support, although the notion of support had evolved quite a bit since she was young.

Now, she and her husband found themselves wrestling with concerns as their daughters ventured further away from home and family in their quest for an education. The preceding summer, for example, Regina had had the opportunity to work in Sacramento, California through a program of the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (based in Washington, DC) that aimed to expose Hispanic students to various work experiences and career opportunities. Reflecting on her experiences with her children's education plans, Lourdes said that such decisions are her children's and that they, as parents, should support those decisions. By keeping them home, she said, parents do not help their children in their development. Parents can only help them find opportunities to develop themselves.

Perhaps this third case study best demonstrates the effectiveness of combining both help-seeking and help-giving roles to organize a household's investment in the education of its members. Lourdes can be seen as the primary help giver: she organized the household's financial resources, purchased needed materials, and offered plans and advice. But she was also a help seeker, tracking down the information necessary from schools about programs and financial assistance and soliciting help from relatives. The cultural framework facilitated both help-seeking and help-giving roles and translated into increased educational investment in the Cifuentes household.

Implications for Policy Change and Practice

The interviews provide some evidence that socialization patterns emphasizing marriage and motherhood may produce low educational expectations for women, thereby slowing or impeding their educational progress. The experience of Luisa Gámez is perhaps typical of this traditional pattern. She readily supported the educational undertakings of her family members, but was reluctant to solicit help from others in order to pursue her own.

If the logic of exchange holds, women should not only feel obliged to provide support, but should also feel free to request it—as Reyna, for example, did when she solicited and received help with housework, child care, and transportation so that she could attend classes. This pattern, once fairly rare, may be becoming more common among younger women. The summary and analytical statistics, especially of the social support variables, together with Reyna's interview suggest that gendered patterns of requesting support may be undergoing some change, as more women challenge socially imposed gendered expectations.

This would be consistent with findings in the literature. Earlier studies show that education for Mexican American women has been impeded by traditional attitudes that emphasize domestic roles (McGowen and Johnson 1984; Vasquez 1982) and employment, especially in low-income families (Vasquez 1982; Young 1992). In the McGowen and Johnson study, the authors contend that the more education women have, the more likely they are to reject traditional attitudes. The idea that education weakens cultural identity (Niemann, Romero, and Arbona 2000) presents dilemmas for bicultural Mexican-origin women who, in negotiating educational goals, move hesitantly along their chosen path. My argument is that programs and practices that systematically and deliberately help to resolve such dilemmas can address the uncertainty women face, and thereby improve educational outcomes for a rapidly growing and educationally underserved population.

Given that systems of mutual social support are salient both within and between Mexican-origin households, and are maintained over time and geographic space through patterns of social interaction, their presence provides the starting point for instituting such changes. The case of the Cifuentes household best illustrates how. Here we saw Lourdes successfully negotiate her daughters' educational plans. She involved her sister and her sister's social networks to locate her eldest daughter in Douglas to further her education. Along with managing the household finances, she mined local resources for information and practical advice on obtaining funding for college. This case suggests that by utilizing the social exchange mechanisms already in place, women can capitalize on the support available for their educational activities, and in so doing, improve the opportunities for education for household members.

What could we expect in terms of educational outcomes for the wider Mexican-origin population if this framework for education acquisition were made more constant? To help answer this question, we return to the statistical analysis of the factors affecting households' investment in education, the variable composed of four material indicators: educational fees paid, enrollment in educational program(s), educational purchases made, and an inventory of educational materials within the household. A multiple regression analysis of years of education for male and female heads of household on investment in education shows that with more years of education for either head of household, positive changes in the household's investment in education are produced. The number of years of education for a female household head, however, provided for greater,

and significant, change ($F = 43.5$), and was a better model for predicting a household's investment in education practices (table 4).

Table 4. Effect of household head's educational level on household investment in education: multiple regression analysis.

Independent variable	Beta	R ²	F-ratio	sig.
Years of education for female head of household	.373	.139	(1,270) 43.5	$p < .001$
Years of education for male head of household	.326	.106	(1,222) 26.3	$p < .001$

The Findings in Light of Existing Research

The predictive power of years of women's education for increasing household investment in education should come as no surprise. These results are consistent with previous research that has examined women's education as an important factor influencing a wide range of other measurable educational outcomes. McGowen and Johnson's study (1984) finds that more years of education for Mexican American women results in higher linguistic and intellectual performance of their small children. Eccles, Vida, and Barber (2004) demonstrate that both family income and mother's education independently predict college attendance of children, but that mother's education is the more powerful of the two predictors. West (1998) also offers evidence that mother's educational level is a better predictor of parental involvement in children's schooling than social class, and that mothers' involvement both inside and outside the classroom invariably improves children's educational achievement. These findings echo Gándara's research on high-achieving Chicanas and the important roles of mothers (1995). West's research can also be used to explain the relationship between women's education and investment in education by showing that mothers with more education are more likely to purchase school supplies and pay for tutors for their children. They are also more likely to attend parent-teacher meetings and share information about their children's schooling with the child's father.

Raised educational levels for women also translate into powerful psychological advantages. Maitra (2003) cites data from a variety of countries to argue that with increased education, the bargaining power of women is strengthened, which benefits children's schooling. However, a mother's push

to have her children secure opportunities through education also might be motivated by her own lack of education and poverty. Indeed, Sewell and Shah (1968) point out that parents demonstrating a dissatisfaction with their own social position are more likely to project their aspirations onto their children and motivate them to aspire to higher levels of achievement. However, in cases where one parent has some college education but the other has not completed high school, it is the mother's rather than the father's education that has the greatest influence on the educational aspiration and achievement of their children, especially daughters (Sewell and Shah 1968, 208).

An early study by Kerckhoff and Campbell (1977) shows mother's education level to be more effective than other socioeconomic status variables for overcoming fatalism among young African Americans regarding their prospects for education and employment in a system strongly shaped by racist attitudes. Gándara's (1995) study reaches a similar finding with respect to Chicano youth and attempts to explain why the level of education of women is such an important variable. She suggests that mothers might be more deliberate in conveying their desires to their children, perhaps as a result of their own disappointments, frustrations, unhappy marriages, or dependency. West (1998) points out that highly educated mothers also appear to use their own financial resources to enhance their children's chances of educational success, perhaps because they themselves have experienced the benefits of higher levels of education.

A study by Cochran and Riley (1990, 176) adds yet another facet in understanding how women's education improves educational outcomes. Their research shows that women with higher education have larger social networks and thus expose their children to a larger group of kin and nonkin. They see woman's education and employment as stimulating the social development of children and, ultimately, enhancing the social skills needed for higher education. The authors explain that the increased frequency and intensity of children's contact with kin and nonkin build the social skills they need to form friendships and construct social networks of their own, which helps them better negotiate their own educational environments. This process thus becomes a "nonrandom selection device" through which higher education becomes easier for those who are already socially skilled.

Steps to promote women's education should therefore be central to a plan to increase the educational success of all Mexican-origin persons. The cultural framework emphasizing social exchange appears to be potentially useful in overcoming a variety of obstacles to education. It also appears,

however, to be somewhat inconsistently invoked by women to help them meet their own educational goals. Nevertheless, I contend that efforts to promote the framework—making it more transparent and constant—can help women meet their educational objectives more systematically, and that this in turn can improve the educational outcomes of the larger Mexican-origin population through a predictable increase in investment in household education. This may be accomplished through the deliberate and formalized recognition of the value of the informal social exchange commonly practiced by Mexican-origin populations, and in particular by women.

Scholars have already confirmed the value of social networks to the schooling process. Stanton-Salazar (2001) has extensively researched the importance of help seeking and social network building in shaping educational outcomes of Latino youth. His data and analysis leave little doubt about the positive relationship between social support and children's scholastic progress. Importantly, Stanton-Salazar's study shows that adolescent girls are more confident than their male peers regarding the benefits that kin- and nonkin-based social networks provide, and they are more likely to seek help from school personnel in academic environments.

Despite the growing body of research confirming the importance of social exchange practices to Mexican-origin populations, there has been little attention to this topic within academia. Given that social support is actively created and cannot just be assumed, educators and policy makers should seek ways to promote cultural practices to advance the education of Mexican-origin students (O'Leary 2005). Following innovative educational approaches in which cultural resources are activated for enhanced learning, a "funds of knowledge" approach would not only access the knowledge and experiences of the household about social exchange, but would also serve to enhance learning among minority students (Moll et al. 1992; Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg 1992).

The formalized recognition and validation of cultural help-seeking practices could be the first step in an educational practice that systematically constructs an advantage for women. The cultural framework that features social exchange could be the subject of workshops or focus groups of adult women learners, becoming a "cognizable object" in the Freirian sense (2000, 128–29). Recognizing the value of this cultural framework would be a deliberate, conscious act, an "act of cognition," and emancipatory (79). Freire teaches that a deepened consciousness of their marginal situation leads people to apprehend their situation as historically and structurally conditioned and, as such, alterable. Through conscientization, the social

exchange process itself can be sanctioned, and systems of support can be consciously mobilized in support of women's educational activities. By helping women realize their own academic goals, we can enhance educational progress for entire families and communities of Mexican origin.

Notes

1. The research was funded in part by a National Science Foundation dissertation improvement grant.

2. Meetings were held with Dr. Jerry Booth, director of Pierson Educational Complex and principal of Santa Cruz Alternative High School; Brian C. Nelson, program coordinator of the Nogales-Santa Cruz County Educational Center; and Margarita M. Villegas, job developer under the Job Training Partnership Act.

3. This agency is now under the jurisdiction of the Department of Homeland Security and is known as U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

4. Age eighteen was chosen because most students have earned a high school diploma by this age.

5. Some individuals were over eighteen and still enrolled at the public high school. This group was distinguished from other adults who were enrolled in any of the community programs available to non-high school graduates earning their diploma.

6. See Lomnitz (1994b) for a compilation of key articles on the topic that have appeared in various journals.

7. While mutual assistance is most commonly associated with economically disadvantaged populations, the elite also rely on their own support networks to secure jobs and consolidate political power (Gil-Mendieta and Schmidt 1996; Lomnitz and Lizaur 1994).

8. All case study participants are referred to by pseudonyms to protect their identities.

9. "It will be twenty months of difficulty for them because it is a lot of work—and for their families also, because we are very close. The two families are willing to help the young couple. They [the in-laws] are helping with the rent, for example. My brother lives in Tucson and his wife has offered to take my daughter-in-law to look for work."

10. "Because my husband is very strict, I turned over responsibility to him. If my son asks me for permission to go somewhere, I send him to his dad. 'Go to him,' I say. 'If he lets you go, then go.' Now it is my husband who decides . . . who takes charge. He is the one who makes sure that they do their work, who asks about school. In sum, he is the one who is watching over them."

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