Adventures in *El Norte*: The Identities and Immigration of Unaccompanied Youth

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Abstract
Research on migration typically focuses on adults; yet, each year, thousands of children and adolescents immigrate to the United States independently. The experiences and identities of these young immigrants are complicated by a myriad of social locations, not least of all their gender identity. Based on sixteen qualitative interviews with men who immigrated to the United States as unaccompanied minors in the 1990s and 2000s, this article provides an intersectional understanding of the dynamic relationship between masculine identity and migration experience for adolescent men who migrate by themselves. In particular, this work explores how migration can serve as a “male quest story,” allows young men to take economic responsibility for their families, and provides the opportunity for men to escape local forms of violent masculinities.

Keywords
immigration, youth, identity, masculinity

I had to tell [the boss] that, truthfully, I didn’t know how [to do the work] but if he would do me a favor, I would learn if they would give me two weeks to do so. If not,

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well, they could fire me. He told me, “Okay. I am going to do this for you because you are really young and I don’t know what you are doing here. This is for men.” “I am a man,” I told him.

(Fernando Herrera, discussing his first day of work in the United States at age fourteen)

Fernando was born in a small town outside of Toluca, Mexico. When he talks about his early childhood, he describes waking up in the middle of the night from rain leaking into the house and the hole that would form in his stomach when there was no food for days on end. As early as age seven, he reports analyzing his life path and arriving at the conclusion that his choices in Mexico were limited. In his view, he had two options: first, if he stayed with his family, they would continue to struggle and he risked becoming caught up in the only real money-making option that he saw—crime. Or, in his words, he could fight to stay on the good path by being the strong one in the family and immigrating to the United States. When a friend offered to help fund his trip, Fernando made an overnight decision to migrate. At the age of fourteen, he undertook a dangerous journey across Mexico, the US–Mexico border, and to the Midwest with the help of smugglers. Although apprehended by immigration officials during his first attempt at crossing the border, on his second attempt he arrived safely to Phoenix and eventually Chicago. Through arrangements made by the smugglers, Fernando found lodging with a group of men in a small apartment, and his housemates quickly helped him to obtain work, despite his young age.

The story Fernando tells about his history is a complex tail of poverty and limited life options. Interwoven in his descriptions of life in Mexico and the United States are important details about Fernando’s identity as a young man. As he describes his rapid decision to leave his native country, the ensuing journey, and the subsequent suffering in the United States, he paints a picture of a young teenager who, along side of very practical economic needs, had dreams about who he wanted to become as a man. His understanding of his own identity and history is complicated by the numerous social locations in which he exists, including his class, youth, and masculine gender identity. Migration was a life altering way in which Fernando could control his identity and his destiny; it was a way that he could assert himself as an adult, and as we see in the opening quote, as a man.

Fernando’s story is not unique. He arrived to the United States as an unaccompanied minor, a youth under the age of eighteen who is “without a parent or legal guardian available to provide care and custody and without immigration status” (ORR 2015). Unaccompanied minors have crossed US borders for decades, although the numbers have skyrocketed over the last year. Indeed, US Customs and Border Protection reports that in 2009, 19,418 youth from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras were detained at the southern border; in 2014, that number rose to 67,339 (CBP 2014). According to Gonzalez-Barrera, Krogstad, and Lopez (2014), this increase is almost entirely composed of migrants from Central America; in 2009, Central American youth composed only 17 percent of the total; and in
2014, they made up nearly 77 percent of the unaccompanied minors from Latin America. Of these youth, 97 percent of unaccompanied minors from Mexico were teenagers compared to 80 percent of those from Central American countries. The majority of this immigrant flow is made up of boys and young men: 92 percent of unaccompanied Mexican youth and 66 percent of the Central American unaccompanied minors are male.

When detained at the border, youth from noncontiguous countries are placed into deportation proceedings where they may fight for various relief options to stay in the country; however, most youth from Mexico are quickly repatriated. Yet, many of these youth, such as Fernando, evade border enforcement, entering safely into the United States and starting a life in their new country.

The reasons for unaccompanied migration and, in particular, for the rapid increase in youth migrants are complex. Over the last several decades, human rights groups have argued that youth migrate independently due to factors including the desire to reunify with family members in the United States, economic necessity, violence in their home communities (for Central American youth), and pressure from local drug cartels and smuggling groups (for Mexican youth; Amnesty International USA 2003; Amnesty International 2010; Lozano Verduzco, Vargas Urías, and Beltrán Cruz 2012; The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] 2014). The 2014 spike—led almost entirely by Central American youth—is due to increased gang violence and continuing economic strain, although family reunification continues to play a major role (UNHCR 2014).

In this article, I continue to look at the push factors for youth migration; however, I take a step further in creating a more nuanced understanding of the dynamic relationship between these push factors and a masculine and adult identity that unaccompanied youth attempt to cultivate. This provides important nuance in the national conversation on unaccompanied youth, as it helps to understand the complexities of youth agency while avoiding one-dimensional understandings of youth as helpless victims. While the data collected for this report come from men who migrated in the 1990s and 2000s, their experiences are still relevant in the current conversation on immigration and youth identity. I begin this article with a literature review of immigrant masculinity and youth migration. Following, I provide a description of my qualitative methods process. I then illustrate three distinct findings regarding the development of an adult, masculine identity through immigration. I conclude by drawing attention to the importance of understanding identity and its dynamic relationship with the migration process.

**Literature Review**

**Immigrant Masculinities**

Intersectional scholars suggest that we cannot understand one’s social location as an isolated concept (Connell 2005; Crenshaw 1991; King 1988); so, a burgeoning area
of scholarship has explored how an individual’s gender and immigrant identity interact. Much of this scholarship has simply uncovered the ways in which “gender organizes migration” (Hondangue-Sotelo 1994, 186). Researchers have shown that while women certainly do immigrate, much migration from Latin America has been driven by men and male-dominated networks (Hondagne-Sotelo 1994; Lozano and Lopez 2013; Massey et al. 1987). Several scholars have suggested that a migration habitus exists in Mexico and other Latin American countries (Lopez Castro 2007) and that this habitus is gendered (Kandel and Massey 2002).

Masculinity studies, in particular, have allowed scholars to center men as a topic of analysis in immigration research. Traditionally, research on Latino immigrant masculinities was haunted by the problematic notions of machismo, which associated Latino men with drunkenness, infidelity, sexual potency, and a need to establish respect by demanding submissive deference from women and children (Mirande 1979). This idea conjures up negative, racialized connotation of Latin American masculinity and immigrant men. Yet, while the concept of machismo may still inform some scholarship of immigrant men, many new scholars challenge this characterization. Hondagnue-Sotelo suggests that while macho behavior may be present in immigrant men, these behaviors are performances that “are indicators of marginalized and subordinated masculinities” (1994, 69). Other scholarship suggests that instead of provoking macho behavior among men, immigration actually allows men to challenge aggressive forms of masculinity (Dreby 2006; Montes 2013; Pribilsky 2007) or change gendered relations between men and women (Vega-Briones 2003). And, still other researchers have explicitly dismissed machismo as empirically unfounded (Coltrane, Parke, and Adams 2004; Gutmann 2007; Mora 2012).

Other studies have focused on the lived experiences of immigrant men. Mentorship between men is an important part of immigrant life in the United States (Gomberg-Muñoz 2011; Ramirez 2010), and these relationships are often centered on hard work. In his discussion of jardinerO masculinity, Ramirez explains that hard work and familial responsibility are central to the masculine identity and to gaining acceptance among other Mexican immigrant men (2010, 104). Gutmann agrees that “financially supporting one’s family ... [is a] central defining features of masculinity for many men and women in various parts of the Americas” (2003, 13), a sentiment that has been echoed by many migration scholars (Hernández Hernández 2012; Lozano Verduzco, Vargas Urías, and Beltrán Cruz 2012; Rosas 2007). Similarly, Gomberg-Muñoz (2011) explains that in a restaurant in Chicago, busboys socialized new immigrant workers into the restaurant work ethic through humor and hazing. Indeed, the theme of work ethic structures much of what scholars know about immigrant masculinity.

Finally, the rich literature in the Spanish-speaking world looks at the role of masculinity in the decision to immigrate. These scholars suggest the migration constitutes a “rite of passage” for men (Huacuz Elías and Barragán Solís 2008). As such, men may often initiate their immigration without the consultation of wives,
creating a division in the understanding of male and female spaces. Rosas (2007) suggests that competition between men creates a strong desire for men to prove their worth by migrating; those who choose not to migrate risk being seen as lazy. Furthermore, the spoils of migration—houses and cars—help provide the symbolic material to prove one’s masculinity.

The small but growing literature on immigrant masculinities has begun to uncover intersections of gender and immigration, but there is still much work to be done in understanding greater complexities of immigrant experiences based on multiple axes of identity, such as age.

**Youth and Immigration**

Literature on immigration and youth has also gained momentum in the last several decades. Traditionally, much of this literature had to do with youth’s integration into the US society, particularly the education system (Dreby and Stutz 2012; Green et al. 2007; Martinez 2009; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2007). Others direct attention to young immigrants risk-taking behavior (such as sexual experience and alcohol and drug consumption) in comparison to nonimmigrant peers (Brindis et al. 1995).

Further attention has been focused on immigrant youth’s identity formation and transition into adulthood, although much of this literature views youth immigrants as dependent actors and unable to make agentic decisions about their life process. In this vein, some scholars have revealed concerns about immigrant children’s early transition into adult obligations because of the responsibilities placed on them as cultural and language brokers for their parents (Orellana 2009). Yet, other researchers suggest that a full transition into adulthood is complicated for immigrant youth because of difficulty in areas such as the acquisition of employable skills and education and mental and physical health (Fulgini and Hardway 2004). Piore worried that “the migration process is likely to be completely destructive of maturation” (1979, 72). More recent scholarship shows how states of illegality can impede young adult immigrants from transitioning smoothly into important markers of adulthood, such as full-time work (Gonzales 2011; Gonzales and Chavez 2012; Perreira, Mullan Harris, and Lee 2007). Finally, immigrant youth are often required to balance competing cultural expectations regarding adulthood (Mondain and Lardoux 2013).

However, much of the previous literature fails to look at how youth may themselves be decision-makers in the act of immigration (and thus decision-makers in becoming adults), a topic that more generally has been lost in the conversation on immigrant youth (Uehling 2008; Chavez and Menijvar 2010). In response, more recent scholarship has begun to explore how migration itself may serve as an indicator of adulthood (Martinez 2009). For example, De Keijzer and Rodriguez (2003) suggest that migration marks the end of youth, as it is a way for youth to separate themselves from their parents.
Complicating the issue, Vespa (2009) argues that important life-course experiences often impact an individual’s gender ideology. Immigration can be considered a life-course experience, and yet there is limited research that looks at the interplay between gender, immigration, and transition into adulthood. Along these lines, Hernández Hernández (2012) shows how migration is seen as a rite of passage for youth, particularly young men, as it allows them to make money for their families and prepare themselves to be future fathers and husbands. The idea of a rite of passage reoccurs among the young men in this study, who demonstrate that difficulties in border crossing help to affirm one’s masculinity by showing bravery in confronting risk, withstanding physical discomfort and fear.

Thus far, these bodies of literature provide a rich but incomplete understanding of migration for young men. I bring together these sets of literature to help further tease apart the dynamic process of masculinity, life process, and migration. I suggest that identity is limited by structural barriers and interwoven with the influences of poverty and violence; migration allows for individuals to overcome these barriers and become the types of men they desire to be. I bring a complex understanding to the conversation to show how young men engage in the dynamic process between their own development into adult men and the difficult realities of migration.

**Methods**

The findings in this research are drawn from sixteen qualitative interviews with immigrant men between the ages of seventeen and thirty-two who reflect on their experiences as youth. Table 1 provides a complete overview of the demographics of these participants. All of the men in this study arrived to the United States in the 1990s and 2000s under the age of eighteen and did not travel with parents or live with parents upon arrival. In all but two cases, no parents were present in the United States at all. The men ranged from age thirteen to seventeen at the age of migration, and their class backgrounds ranged from extreme poverty to middle class. Most of my participants were of Mexican origin, except for Edwin Castillo who was from Honduras. There were many significant differences in the story that Edwin relayed, and the dangers that he faced in the border crossing were much more extreme than most of the Mexican young men. Yet, I chose to include him in the final sample, as the manner in which he spoke of immigration and identity and the themes that appeared in his narrative were very similar to the other men. My inclusion of Edwin’s story in no way is meant to trivialize his journey or suggest that migration is the same in every country; however, the similarities he presents suggest that there are commonalities in the immigrant experience regarding the identities of men and youth.

Finally, it should be noted that these interviews were conducted in 2011 with research participants who had immigrated in the 1990s and 2000s. While this time frame presents some limitations in terms of the relevance of the data to current events, there are still important and applicable findings in this particular group of
men. First, these research participants provide an interesting frame of reference, as their migration had been relatively successful in terms of arriving safely to the United States and establishing themselves in this country; plus, many participants were able to speak reflectively of experiences about which they had been thinking for years. This distinguishes my participants from study participants of similar articles, such as Hernández Hernández’s (2012) study which looks at young men who were repatriated to Mexico and had more recent experiences but who had been unable to establish themselves in the United States. Second, this sample still provides important data and general understandings of the current migration of unaccompanied minors. While the men in this study are an older generation of migrants, their experiences are still reflected in youth migration today. Themes such as

Table 1. Profile of Research Participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date of Interview</th>
<th>Age at the Time of Interview</th>
<th>Age of Arrival in the United States</th>
<th>Place of Employment at the Time of Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alcón Díaz</td>
<td>October 13, 2011</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Cook at family-owned restaurant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andres Perez</td>
<td>August 8, 2011</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Busboy at country club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlos Gonzalez</td>
<td>August 18, 2011</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Cook at restaurant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edwin Castillo</td>
<td>October 21, 2011</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Student and country club busboy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fernando Herrera</td>
<td>May 25, 2011</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Cook at bowling alley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florencio Rios</td>
<td>August 16, 2011</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Worker in meat packing plant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geraldo Medina</td>
<td>September 8, 2011</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Cook at restaurant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gilberto Gonzalez</td>
<td>August 18, 2011</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Cook at restaurant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaiah Vazquez</td>
<td>August 11, 2011</td>
<td>Early 20s</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Waiter in two country clubs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus Espinoza</td>
<td>August 13, 2011</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Student and busboy at country club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juan Alvarez</td>
<td>October 15, 2011</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Landscaping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luis Valdez</td>
<td>March 12, 2011</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Small business owner, pastor, and bowling alley worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nacho Contreras</td>
<td>August 16, 2011</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Line manager in factory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pablo Ramirez</td>
<td>October 15, 2011</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salvador Lopez</td>
<td>August 8, 2011</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Busboy at country club</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All names are pseudonyms.
violence and poverty are reoccurring in the decades of research on unaccompanied migration, and this article remains relevant in this regard.

My sampling was largely derived from a chain-referral approach (Loftland et al. 2006). The original contact in these networks came through personal networks, a Latin Dance studio in a Puerto Rican neighborhood of Chicago, a Spanish-speaking church in a working-class suburb of Chicago, a worker dormitory in a country club of a wealthy suburb of Chicago, and a high school in that same suburb. The interviews lasted anywhere between twenty minutes to two hours, with the average meeting lasting forty-five to sixty minutes. I met with the men in their work places (a bowling alley, a mechanic shop, a restaurant, and a country club), apartments, churches, and schools. I introduced the study as an exploration of how adolescents made the decision to immigrate to the United States and how they were able to establish themselves in a new country. Following an interview script, I relied on open ended questions around several themes: personal history, crossing decisions and networks, US networks and support system, and daily life in the United States. The interviews were all conducted in Spanish, with the exception of Luis Valdez, who chose to speak primarily in English. Each interview was recorded and transcribed.

To analyze the interviews, I used grounded theory method (Charmaz 1983). The original intention of this research was to understand networks used by youth during migration and as such, data were collected using deductive reasoning. However, upon analyzing the data, theories of masculinity emerged that were outside of the original intentions of the project and as such I continued the analysis using a more flexible grounded theory approach. As data collection was done simultaneously with data interpretation, this allowed me to ask the final interview participants more direct questions about their feelings of masculinity and, as Charmaz states, I was able to “check . . . developing ideas with further specific observations, make systematic comparisons between observations, and, often, take . . . research beyond the confines of one topic, setting, or issue” (p. 111).

I also used the coding strategy outlined by Charmaz, deciding to “make the codes fit the data, rather than forcing the data into codes” (1983, 112). Masculinity became one of the major initial codes to fit into the data. During my later rounds of focused coding, I recoded the data around masculinity-related categories such as “independence,” “adventure,” and “hard work.” Finally, I created memos around each of these categories, ultimately sorting and merging these memos into a cohesive analysis.

**Masculinity and the Push to Immigrate**

The experience of young male immigrants differs in important ways from other immigrants. In my interviews, I identified three push factors for unaccompanied youth immigration that also correspond in dynamic ways to the development of a masculine, adult identity: the pursuit of adventure, upholding responsibilities for
parents, and exerting agency over identity in the face of local violence. In each section, I show how these push factors are related to becoming adults and men and how the realities of migration can also impede these same goals.

**Adventure: The Male Quest Story**

It is well established that crossing the border is a dangerous and even life-threatening experience (Morales and Bejarano 2009; Uehling 2008; UNHCR 2014). This is established in academic literature and is also common knowledge among potential immigrants throughout Latin America (Cornelius 2007). As a researcher, I expected that the conversation around the actual experience of crossing the border would be one of violence, tragedy, and sorrow; and, for some of my participants, these themes did arise. Yet, even the most tragic stories, much to my surprise, were framed by the idea of adventure.

Previous scholarship has already begun to theorize about the idea of adventure and migration. Border crossing as a rite of passage is discussed by Hernández Hernández (2012) as well as Huacuz Elías and Barragán Solís (2008). Indeed, Huacuz Elías (2007) suggests that smugglers and border control agents act as the sacerdotes (priests) of this ritual. For my participants, too, adventure was as a “male quest story”—what Rosaldo defines as a narrative in which “women and children are left behind while the men go off to test their mettle through a series of arduous trials” (1993, 82). According to Rosaldo, these are stories that fundamentally help defend patriarchy, as they affirm the strength and superiority of men. These stories of migration differs significantly from Ko and Perreira’s (2010) research of youth who migrate with family members. In their research, the stories told were ones of vulnerability: one immigrant boy spoke of clinging to his mother during their migration and a young girl spoke of her feelings of vulnerability while traveling with only women. In contrast, and based on the narratives of adventure provided by the men in my study, I argue that for young men who migrate alone, regardless of other push factors, the border crossing is framed as a male quest story—not as a ritual but as evidence upon which they can draw to assert their adulthood and masculinity and to create hierarchies between men and women and among men. What the young men in my study also show, however, is that difficulties in this crossing can prove devastating to one’s sense of self.

First, many of the young men with whom I spoke discussed their expectations of crossing the border in terms of adventure. Indeed, some young men emphasized that adventure itself was a strong push factor, even for those who also spoke of more pressing motivations to immigrate. Geraldo Medina explains:

> Everything was like an adventure. It wasn’t like an aspiration to have money or to get ahead or to improve. I don’t know. It was just like . . . for me it was like an adventure. Like something different, something dangerous, something fun. When I was young, I liked to do different things that made me feel alive.
Geraldo’s explanation for his migration evokes the idea of an odyssey—he wanted danger and he wanted to feel alive. Notably, Geraldo associates this desire with his youth, a period of time in his life where he sought experiences for the sake of experience itself.

The pursuit of adventure and fun seemed to transcend economic background. Fernando (from the opening vignette) had spoken of severe poverty in his childhood, yet minutes later in his narrative, he describes an entirely different motivation to immigrate. He describes the commentary he heard from a friend who had recently returned to Mexico from the United States:

[My friend] told me that he had had his first crazy party here. He arrived really happy because he said he had gone drinking here and there were a lot of parties—that’s what your friends say.

Throughout his narrative, Fernando’s motives for immigrating are equally concerned with poverty, as they are with the possibility of fun and freedom. He envisioned parties and friends in the United States, not just work and money. And, in this quote again, we see the relevance of his age, as he, at age fourteen, foresees the possibility of drinking in a new country.

The idea of adventure by itself does not necessarily evoke masculinity, but the descriptions young men presented about their crossing stories were uniquely gendered, articulated as male quest stories that “tested their mettle” (Rosaldo 1993, 82). Embedded in these narratives are competitive ideas of strength, particularly as the young men relate to women and other members of their crossing group. They would often tell me anecdotes—presented as comical—of other men in their crossing group who were not able to make the dangerous physical journey without struggle. Carlos Gonzalez explained:

I didn’t have many problems crossing. My friend had problems though. [Laughs.] Yeah. He couldn’t do it and his legs gave out on him. They couldn’t hold him up and he couldn’t walk. On the contrary, I helped other people, like with their backpacks, water bottles, because some of the women couldn’t do it. They would faint. One of them fainted.

Carlos presents his migration as a challenge which he conquered. By comparing his journey to his friend, he evokes a hegemonic masculinity in the crossing scenario: one of endurance and strength. Further, by indicating the women’s difficulty, he reconfirms the belief that migration is a male space. Women are often referred to in these stories as needing help and not having the fortitude to make the arduous journey without assistance, both emotional and physical.

As the only Central American participant in the study, Edwin Castillo’s story of crossing from Honduras to the United States varied in important ways from other participants. Immigrating at age thirteen, his journey was longer and notably more
dangerous. His narrative was easily the most harrowing, including physical suffering, attacks by thieves, and a kidnapping by a Mexican gang. Yet, while the events varied, his telling of the story remained consistent with that of other participants. He talked rapidly, using wild gestures, and loud noises to emphasize exciting moments. His story telling was reminiscent of an adventure narrative, spoken not as one who had suffered but one who had conquered. Like Carlos, Edwin also compares himself with others in the group, in one instance, showing how he could support one of the women:

[The immigration officials] tied me up with a woman. The woman was crying and I tell her, “Don’t cry anymore,” I tell her. “They already got you. They already got us. What are we going to do now?”

Edwin’s personal male quest story showed bravery and strength in extreme circumstances. Despite hardship, he could draw upon the story to affirm his own fortitude.

Of course, even when framing their experiences as male quest stories, these young men are not immune to the dangers of the border. Alcón Díaz is a prime example. Like other men, he described having expectations of adventure prior to crossing. He believed crossing would be like a hike through the mountains, something he had already done near his home. He explains:

I felt like I had a lot of energy, a lot of strength. [Friends] had told me that you have to run, jump over things, I don’t know. Of course all of that happened but it’s not . . . [Long pause.] It’s really difficult.

During our interview, Alcón expressed deep and lasting trauma from his experiences, weeping several times during the ninety minutes we talked. He was unable to locate this trauma in a specific event, but he referenced multiple times the disjuncture between his expectations of his own capabilities and the realities of his experience. He suffered during the crossing and spent emotionally and physically painful months after healing from a sickness which he says he got as a result of undernourishment in the desert. Over fifteen years after the crossing, Alcón reports that he still remains overly vigilant of his surroundings and his heart races every time he hears a helicopter.

Crossing the border provided young men in my study a way to develop a male quest story. Most had expectations that both crossing the border and living in the United States would be exciting and allow them access to adult vices, such as drinking. For many, the narrative about their successful border crossing became a legend of their own masculinity. These narratives emphasized the hierarchical differences between men and women and men and other men. Yet for others, their failure represented a profound pain in their own identities. Fundamentally, migration was a challenge, and arriving to the United States helped them prove that they had the fortitude, courage, and ultimately power of “real” men.
Taking Care of the Family: A Manhood Act

While the pursuit of adventure was a common theme among participants in this study, it was often tempered by much graver concerns around necessity. Participants who would talk of adventure in one breathe would refer to economic need and violence (which will be discussed later) in the next.

For the young men in this study, economic need was often framed as a family issue. The young men talked of witnessing the suffering of family members and using that suffering to inspire their decision to immigrate. For young men, taking care of their families—particularly their mothers—was a manhood act (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009) and an assertion of independence. Many of my participants expressed pride in their ability to send remittances to their families, and this sense of responsibility was rooted in their developing specific identities as men and adults. While many scholars have shown that sending remittances is an important part of the immigrant identity, this is typically framed in terms of adults supporting children and spouses (Dreby 2006; Hondagnue-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Pribilsky 2007). Because of their age, my participants have a unique perspective, as they often send remittances to parents and siblings.

The weight of family responsibility fell heavily on the shoulders of many of my participants. Some spoke of their families back home and the remittances that they had sent, stating that they were their family’s primary life line. Fernando explained:

[My parents] are in Mexico. They ask me when I’m going to go back and I tell them that I’m not going. What I tell them is that, well, the truth is that my brother and I are the strong ones. If someone got sick or if something bad happened, we are the ones that will look for money to send. If I wasn’t here, well, we wouldn’t have any. That’s what I tell them.

Fernando felt that in some sense he didn’t have a choice regarding his work in the United States. His family depended on him and while this might be a burden, it was also a source of pride. Despite previous expectations of parties in the United States, Fernando explained that he had done nothing in his fourteen years in Chicago except work to support his family.

This transition from adventure expectations to hardworking family provider was an important one for many of the young men and linked directly to their transition into adulthood. Several of the men spoke of consciously making a decision to take on an adult identity. Jesus Espinosa, who immigrated at age sixteen and started working and attending an American high school full time says:

I might look young physically, but in the way that I think, I think like an adult already. Rather, I realized that when I was 16, I could no longer act like a child, knowing that I was old enough to know what I needed to do. Sometimes when I’m at school I see how other people act. For example, my classmates, we are in class and they start to play and...
all that . . . . It’s what I don’t like about them. Or rather, I think more like an adult than a teenager.

Work ethic was important for Jesus, and despite his actual age and the behavior of his peers, he felt strongly that he needed to act like an adult. Yet, despite many of my participants’ beliefs about their adult identities, several found that their ages impeded them from obtaining work. Alcón Diaz explains:

No one wanted to give me work. I was really young. And, well, I used to cry because I couldn’t help [my brother to work]. We would find work but once they saw me, people would ask if we were playing around or who did we think we were. I was really young. I don’t know. Really undernourished. Skinny. A boy.

Much of Alcón’s struggles throughout the narrative are linked to his expectation of his own masculinity and adulthood and the reality of him as a young teenager. This particular quote parallels with the opening quote by Fernando, who uses his job to proclaim to his boss: “I am a man.” In both cases, we see that work is important for the adult and masculine identities, but it was not easy to obtain.

Claiming adult responsibility was an important part of an adult identity, but this was also shaped by beliefs about masculinity. Taking financial responsibility was a gendered concept meant for the men of the family. This was reflected in the way participants referred to their remittances, particularly in their emphasis on sending money and assistance to their mothers. Many participants took pride in the fact that within a short period of time they were able to save enough money to build their houses for their mothers. Although most stated that their fathers were also living in these remittance built houses, my participants often referred to the women in their family as the ones benefiting directly from their work. Furthermore, it was the mother’s situation that often fueled a desire to take responsibility of the family. Gilberto Gonzalez explains:

I want to help [my mom] as well because she worked. She worked in a store and I told her, “Well, I want to go [to the United States] because I want to give you a hand, to try something out and make you a house because she wanted a house. And that’s what I did. I built her a house. I built her a good house. And I bought a car for my dad.

Like others, Gilberto was inspired to take his mom out of the workforce and support her financially. In this quote, buying a car for his dad is an afterthought. Others, too, cite their mothers as their primary reasons to immigrate. Nacho Contreras says, “I came here to help my mom and nothing more, and that’s why I’m here.” And, when asked why he immigrated, Pablo Ramirez states, “My mom. Supposedly, also to help my mom. To build her a house so that she wouldn’t have to work anymore.” This continued emphasis on mothers is essential in understanding the uniquely gendered approach young men took to supporting their families.
Finally, many of my participants felt that the duty to immigrate was placed on their shoulders alone, as men. Alcóň Díaz explained that despite being younger it was he, instead of his sister, who decided to meet his eldest brother in the United States:

I was the one to get together with my brother because my sister, well, she’s a woman. She can’t. It’s different for a man to go than a woman. It’s more … it is more dangerous for a woman. So, I had to leave second.

Thus, Alcón believed that despite his age, immigration was his duty as a man. The strength of his masculinity trumped his older sister’s age. Interestingly, while young men talk about their own desires when framing their migration in terms of adventure, we see here that Alcón feels that he “had” to leave. In this sense, migration is not just a desire but an imperative.

Like many adults, teenage boys who immigrate by themselves build their identities through taking care of their families. However, young immigrant men reverse the script by taking responsibility for their parents, particularly their mothers. Furthermore, work becomes a way in which young men consciously shift their mentalities from children to adults and from boys to men.

**Agency over Identity: Challenging Violence**

A final theme that emerged throughout the interviews was a conscious decision to flee from local violence and the risk of being personally involved in that violence. Immigration not only provided relative safety to the young men but also allowed them to dictate the future terms of their lives and identities.

Restricted by class, many of my participants expressed their perceptions of their future options in black and white terms. Their first choice was to remain in their home towns, and they felt strongly that this would inevitably lead them to the wrong crowds, where they would end up becoming “maleantes,” or thugs. The second choice they saw was to immigrate, which would allow them to become a different, moral type of man. The dualism in my participants’ understanding of their options has been represented in other work as well. De Keijzer and Rodriguez (2003) suggest that two versions of successful masculinity are represented for men in rural Mexico: the successful migrant and the narco (drug trafficker). My participants see De Keijzer and Rodrigez’s “narco” as the hegemonic masculinity in their localities: the drug traffickers, the corrupt politicians, the thugs and killers, and the macho abusers became the images of men with power—but images that they didn’t want to become. A migrant identity was their only other option—hegemonic masculinity that involved greater honor and less risk in the long term. Fernando Herrera explains:

Well the political bosses or the ones in the mafia, you know, drugs and all of that—they are the only ones with money … . So, you start looking at what you are going to do.
Are you going to steal? Study? But to study you need a lot of money. And so, you can’t do anything and you choose to . . . they tell you about the U.S. and they say, well, let’s go.

For Fernando and others like him, migration was seen as the only option in which they could control the type of adult and man they would become. Immigrating was a way to seize their own destiny and control their own fate. Indeed, when talking about the possibility of staying in Mexico, several men used variations of the same phrase, evoking a lack of agency over their identity: “yo hubiera sido un maleante” (“I might have become a thug”). Pablo Ramirez reflected:

If I would have stayed in my home, I might have become a thug or a killer or something. I might have started stealing or something because when one is young, well, life seems easy. And all of my friends at that age did that. They stayed [in Mexico] to do that. To do drugs and all of that. And I didn’t like it. I never liked doing drugs and all of that. I fled from that.

Pablo consciously pursued an identity different than his friends, and migration afforded him the opportunity to become a different type of man.

Luis Valdez reflected the most on his choice to change his identity through migration. Discussing who he was in Mexico, Luis says:

I used to be an aggressive person, you know . . . . Somebody would look bad at me, and I would look for a fight right away . . . I grew up in a big city . . . Kind of like in the rough neighborhoods. I mean, at times I had street fights, two, three a day. That’s how it was. That’s how you would survive.

Later in that same interview, Luis explained that he made a conscious decision to become a new man. For Luis, this decision was spiritual, tied to his belief that God called him to be a better man, but it was also intertwined with a decision to immigrate. He says, after discussing an incident in which he observed his father assaulting his mother:

That was my fuel to say, “I don’t want to be like that. I want to do better.” But that, I mean, [coming to the U.S.] was all on my own. It wasn’t really on my own—God had a purpose, obviously. Because if I would have stayed there [in Mexico], I probably would have ended up, you know, I don’t know! Maybe I would be dead. Maybe I would have gone to jail.

Through migration, unaccompanied minors become self-made men. Carlos Gonzalez explains, “I have aspirations to do something in life. To work and to make something of myself, but on my own.” Immigrating to the United States gave these young men an alternative for their future, away from the dangerous, violent lives of the maleantes that they saw around them. They believed that they could immigrate,
work hard in the United States, and become financially successful adults that did not have to participate in criminal behavior to survive.

**Discussion of Findings**

The national conversation of unaccompanied immigrant minors has increased tremendously in the past year, shining an important light onto the plight of young men and women arriving to the border alone. Yet, the conversation has often understood this migration in terms of the victimhood of youth, failing to see the ways in which youth are agentic in their migration. This article helps to provide some nuanced understanding to this wave of migration by looking at the multiple factors that go into play when adolescent men migrate. This immigration is caused both by structural limitations in the lives of young men—such as economic hardship and violence—but it also intimately intertwined in their own sense of self.

Unaccompanied immigrant minors do not share a singular, monolithic identity, or experience; however, the commonalities of their experiences do create new understandings of migration, as it relates to young men. Specifically, my participants provide the unique opportunity to explore the intersectional identity formation of adolescent boys living in impoverished areas, as they navigate their own journeys in becoming men. Young men in Mexico and Central America are at an important life stage in which they must develop their own gendered adult identity. Their experience of masculinity cannot be separated from their age; their experience of the transition from youth to adulthood cannot be separated from their masculinity; and these experiences cannot be separated from the local culture and international migratory context.

Besides furthering the understanding unaccompanied minors and of intersectionality in relationship to the lived experience of young Mexican and Central American men, this research adds an important new dimension to current understandings of gender and migration. Scholars frequently show how transnational movement influences understandings about gender, but my research demonstrates a much more dynamic relationship between migration and identity. This is significant, as we continue to study changing gendered identities, as it no longer allows us to view these changes as solely a result of migration but rather as a dynamic and intentional process in which migration is also drawn upon as a tool for the construction of adult, gendered selves.

The unaccompanied migration of boys and young men is a unique and important area of study. While this research helps to provide a starting point for the discussion, there are several limitations that could be addressed by further research. First, further research could help tease apart the differences in migratory expectations and realities based on country of origin, looking specifically at the differences between Central American and Mexican youth. A focus on Central American youth, in particular, is lost in current literature and is essential as we address this rapidly increasing population. Second, this research was conducted with adult men
discussing their migration as youth. While this has the benefit of allowing men to reflect on their experiences after having time in the United States, further research might talk with youth who recently migrated and can provide their immediate perspective. This will also help researchers to understand how these narratives play out as retrospectives versus much more immediate reflections. Third, research with youth who immigrated in 2014 during the upswing in migration could help to untangle the differences between historic unaccompanied migration and the current wave. Finally, it is important for researchers to flesh out further understandings of gender in this immigrant population by focusing on girl migrants as well, to see how narratives of masculinity in young men migrants differ from the narratives presented by girls. As we delve further into the push factors—particularly violence and extreme economic hardship—that the individual youth face, we can work to inform the debate about the government’s responsibility and best course of action in responding to this growing immigrant population.

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Note
1. All names are pseudonyms.

References


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