Between Family and Aspiration: Emotional Burdens and the Pursuit of Upward Mobility for First-Generation Mexican Adults from the Mexico-U.S. Border

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On my honor

I have never given nor received

unauthorized aid on this thesis.

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Abstract

In the context of borderland cities, there is limited knowledge of how young people experience their socio-economic disadvantage and cultural lives while striving for upward mobility. In this paper, I draw on eight in-depth interviews with first-generation, low-income young Mexican adults from Brownsville, Texas to explore the dimensions of life that shape emotional health as connected to their personal development. The findings highlight multiple intersecting layers of influence that shape these young adults' aspirations, motivations, and pressures. Additionally, participants develop emotional coping strategies fostering both independence and emotional distance while relying on familial expectations to push forward. I argue that place, culture, and family play the most significant roles, along with enduring ties to the structural forces that drive their pursuit of a better future.

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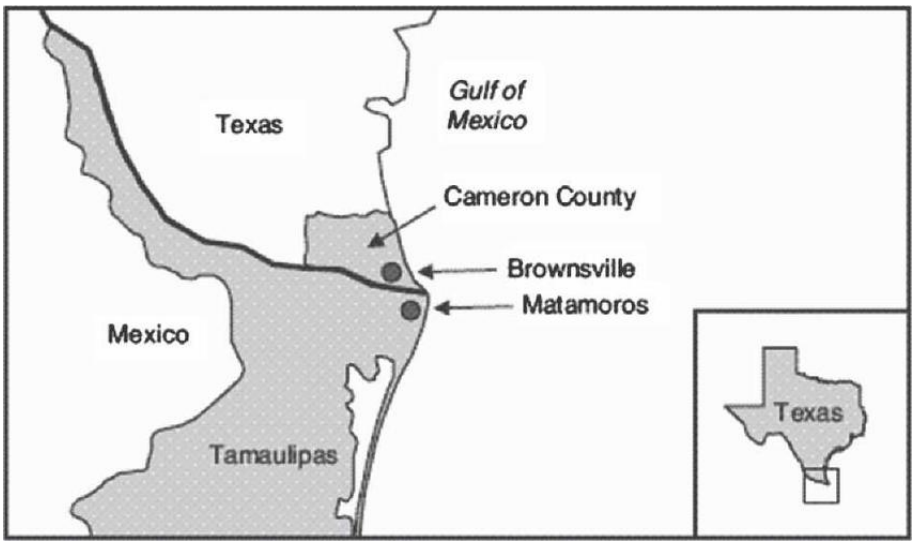
Introduction

Border cities often struggle with limited opportunity, historical disparities, and low levels of upward mobility. At the start of the 19th century, the United States occupied and infringed on land to set the boundary between South Texas and Mexico. As the United States expanded its territory, the emergence of the border wall became more than a tool of enforcement; it symbolized the separation between politically acceptable behavior and perceived threat (Aguirre and Simmers 2008). Beyond drawing national boundaries, the Mexico-U.S. border continues to shape the sense of belonging, emotional health, and personal development of those who grew up near it. This study focuses on participants born and raised in Brownsville, Texas, a border city once known as the poorest in the United States.



Throughout the construction and deployment of the Mexico- U.S. border, individuals of Mexican descent remained deeply loyal to their mother country, culture, and core responsibilities

(Garcia 1985). The border served as a crossroads marking the dutiful transition between a day of labor in the United States and fulfilling family obligations (Marisco 2016). For many, the daily effort was to achieve the Mexican Dream, accommodating to life in the United States in efforts to create a better future and way of living for themselves and their family back home, all with the full intention of returning to Mexico (Garcia 1985). Much of the past discourse heavily discusses the role of the Mexico-U. S border as a physical and symbolic divide; however, this perspective reflects the experiences of previous generations. The experiences and struggles of the young Mexican adults in this study are not about crossing the border but lie in the realities of growing up in its shadow.

Among these realities of growing up in a border city is the underdeveloped understanding of young people's emotional health alongside their drive to achieve upward mobility. These young adults face immense pressure as first-generation students to build a successful future yet securing that "success" remains unfamiliar, both to them and their families. Further, within the Hispanic population, disparities in seeking attention for mental and emotional health symptoms persist due to fears of ridicule, cultural beliefs, and generational stigma (Ochoa-Perez 2016). These barriers to achieving success are well-documented in scholarship on poverty. Both theorists and researchers suggest the challenges of unfamiliarity, limited mental health care, and cultural constraints impede the efforts of many to achieve their dreams and goals. Yet, there is limited knowledge about how young people experience their socio-economic and cultural lives, how they make sense of their stories, and how they cope, aspire, and persevere.

This study focused on the untold stories of young Mexican adults raised along the Mexico-U.S. border, examining how their lived experiences shape their identity, emotional well-being, paths toward upward mobility, and learning how they navigate meeting high expectations

while overcoming generational barriers. With the Mexico-U.S. border tied to poverty and marginalization, Bell Hook argues that oppression and living with inequality strengthen one's identity and resilience in overcoming hardships compared to oppressors who do not face systemic adversity (Hooks 2000).

In this paper, I draw from 8 in-depth interviews with low-income young Mexican adults who grew up along the Mexico-U. S border, arguing that their understanding of emotional health, aspirations, and efforts toward upward mobility is deeply intertwined with place, culture, and family. This sample consists of low-income Mexican students who are currently seniors in college and will be the first in their families to graduate college. I find that place, culture, and family shape their emotional health journeys while simultaneously fueling their motivations for success. A culturally immersed upbringing provides a strong foundation of identity even as these individuals grapple with socio-economic disadvantages. Due to generational stigma, emotional health is navigated outside the family, leading to a narrative of independence and an emotional distance between youth and their home. Despite this, these young adults continue to rely on familial expectations and leverage their parents' "soft-hand approach" to leap toward social mobility. By doing so, they seek to achieve upward mobility, fulfill familial aspirations, and rewrite their disadvantaged narrative of poverty.

Literature Review

Mexican Emotional Well-Being

It is important to understand theories and research on the relationship between poverty and emotional well-being to contextualize the lives of young people who live in Brownsville and cities with similar characteristics. Chambers (1989) argues that measures of poverty overlook vulnerability despite its intertwined nature with people of low socioeconomic status. He explains that a disproportionate and narrow focus on poverty reinforces stereotypes of the poor without distinguishing between different experiences and asserts that poverty indicates what is lacking materially, while vulnerability encompasses the accumulated defenseless experiences of risk, stress, and insecurity. As such, scholars argue that Latino immigrants in the U.S experience structural vulnerability, a position of continuous disadvantage and inequity shaped by economic exploitation, discrimination, and legal persecution that lead to psychological and emotional vulnerabilities (Quesada, Hart, Bourgois 2011; Dreby 2012).

Treanor (2016) further develops this particular concept of vulnerability using a longitudinal birth cohort study of 5,217 children born in 2004-2005, children ages four to seventeen years old, to explore the effects of financial vulnerability on their social, emotional, and behavioral well-being. He highlights that financial vulnerability unfavorably affects older children and young people through negative social comparisons with peers and that the experiences of financial vulnerability correspond to higher levels of stress and anxiety compared to income in adults. This research suggests that identifying poverty simply through income levels does not fully incorporate what it means to be structurally vulnerable without studying subjective experiences like emotional and psychological burdens.

Dreby (2012) and Suarez-Orozco et al. (2011) further support this argument by illustrating how these vulnerabilities are heightened for individuals of unauthorized status. In this case, Latino immigrants often endure oppressive working conditions and impoverished environments amplifying vulnerabilities like economic hardship and emotional distress. These accumulated risks like exploitative labor practices and structural inequality intensify the defenseless experiences of stress and insecurity which Chambers (1989) states increase vulnerability. This process emphasizes how structural factors compound personal experiences, leading to a decline in the emotional well-being of disadvantaged groups. Together, these scholars call for greater attention to the vulnerabilities tied to systemic inequities that harm the emotional health of minorities.

Moreover, studies on young Mexican youth, particularly those with undocumented status, provide further insight into how structural vulnerability impacts emotional well-being. Suarez-Orozco et al. (2011) specifically explores the implications and indirect risks of living with family members of undocumented status, finding that undocumented status indirectly harms the development of individuals from a young age into young adulthood. He states that conditions such as compromised parenting abilities due to the constant worry about family safety and risk of detainment have led to a high number of reports of depression and anxiety in children of different ages. Furthermore, the constraints of undocumented status can lead to a disassociation between young children and their place of residence complicating their sense of belonging (Garcia 1985).

Other scholars identify sources of both stress and support related to ethnic cultures. Mirowsky and Ross (1984) focus on emotional complexity within Mexican communities by emphasizing the impact of cultural expectations on mental and emotional health outcomes. Yet,

paradoxically, life in these communities can create pressures but also provide coping mechanisms. While conducting a comparison study of depression and anxiety between persons of Mexican heritage and their white counterparts, researchers note an inverse relationship. The Mexican group reported increased levels of depression and lower levels of anxiety. The authors argue that this finding arises from strong familial responsibility. On one hand, individuals may experience increased depression as they do not feel in control of their own lives yet simultaneously feel a sense of relief and reduced anxiety because of the strong support network provided by their family (Mirowsky and Ross 1984; Marisco 2016). Furthermore, Dreby's (2012) insights add depth to this finding, by ranking family dissolution and emotional distress as two of the highest burdens for developing children to endure. Overall, these scholars illuminate the complex dynamic between cultural expectations and emotional well-being highlighting the depth of vulnerabilities shaped by structural inequities and illegality.

Personal Development: Emotional Health and Navigating Upward Mobility

Although Suarez-Orozco et al. (2011) frames undocumented status, stigma, and vulnerability as indirect stressors, these stressors heavily influence the emotional health of young adults. Various scholars firmly establish that vulnerability and marginalization are major disruptors in young adulthood's normative development (Suarez Orozco et al. 2011; Garcia 1985; Dreby 2012). During transitions into adulthood, identity formation is complicated for young immigrants who face systemic barriers to traditional milestones like obtaining a driver's license or applying for higher education (Garcia 1985).

Further burdens are identified in the literature on rural and borderland youth such as the complex decisions and emotions involved in the process of upward mobility. Farrugia (2016) argues that rural youth are often compelled to seek opportunities elsewhere, while (Silva et al.

2021) finds that young adults in borderland regions share a similar imperative but carry a strong sense of belonging to their local communities. This attachment to home then cultivates aspirations for the possibility of returning home in the future (Silva et al. 2021). However, a significant binary of success and failure exists. Vallejo (2012) notes that the individuals who leave for better opportunities are often celebrated and admired while those who remain face stigma. Silva et al. (2021) expands on this argument highlighting the emotional burdens associated with mobility. These feelings of guilt, responsibility, and belonging in the context of Mexican American culture complicate the transition into the middle class and reveal the emotional vulnerabilities of mobility (Silva et al. 2021).

Numerous scholars have also sought to learn more about diverse experiences among groups categorized as poor. Vallejo (2012) critiques the dominant narrative, stating that scholarly research is partial to the disadvantaged narratives tied to the Mexican population, which often neglects young adults striving for upward mobility. Similarly, Appelhans et al. (2023), argues that educational contexts serve both as a barrier and a catalyst for social and economic mobility. This observation challenges the assumption of a singular trajectory tied to ethnicity, demonstrating that minority households possess distinctive experiences and thus various types of social and educational aspirations and outcomes.

A further study by Durst and Beremenvi (2021) reveals that despite the presence of socially mobile Mexican Americans, they are perceived as outsiders within middle-class spaces (Vallejo 2012). These findings emphasize the role of class identity in shaping perceptions of success and belonging and add to the tension between place, belonging, and mobility. For Mexican Americans in particular, local ties stem from the familiarity with past economic and structural disadvantages and reinforces a class-based minority identity that shapes their

trajectories. Vallejo (2012) argues that their familiarity with poverty keeps them tied to their economically disadvantaged communities and sets them apart from middle-class whites.

All in all, different studies bring to light the need to move beyond binary identities and explore the complexities that shape youth trajectories into adulthood. These complexities require not only knowing more about how identity impacts mobility, but also examining the expectations, motivators, and vulnerabilities experienced in the process. Thus, by focusing on the personal development of young Mexican American adults, this study seeks to illuminate the emotional realities of living alongside the Mexico-U.S. border and their impact on development.

Methodology

To examine how experiences along the Mexico-U.S. border impact young Mexican individuals' emotional health and personal development, I conducted 8 semi-structured interviews. Participants were selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. The initial interviews were with individuals who met the study's criteria. The remaining interviews expanded the sample through informal referrals and recommendations. This snowball method allowed for a wider range of border perspectives and a collection of diverse personal trajectories and aspirations. All the participants interviewed met the following criteria: identified as Mexican, Mexican American, or of Mexican descent, are between 18-25 years old, and spent the majority of their childhood and adolescence in a border city within the Rio Grande Valley, the southernmost tip of Texas. Meeting this criterion was important to yield the most relevant and rich experiences that capture the intersecting factors and unique realities among young Mexican American adults in a critical stage of their lives (Warren, 2011).

Martinez (2024), a Chicano social scientist, argues that there is a significant need for narratives and social contexts when analyzing structural inequalities as they reveal the fluid and complex nature of lived experiences. Following this framework, this study draws on the everyday realities and narratives of young Mexican adults raised along the U.S.-Mexico border, ensuring that emotional health, identity, and personal development are deeply examined (Martinez 2024). With this in mind, it is important to note that the key term "emotional health" does not consistently come up in the interview questions posed in the interview guide. Instead, participants reflected on their upbringing, sense of belonging, emotional awareness, and decision-making. This approach facilitates a reflective experience for the participant and guides them through a process of placing meaning and recognition in their descriptions of home.

The process of analysis of data included coding with Nvivo. While generalizable results are generally the primary goal of quantitative research, this qualitative study follows grounded theory to systematically gain insights into how and why individuals construct meaning (Ambert et al. 1995). Interviews were transcribed to identify initial themes and establish relationships between core concepts in the transcripts, open and axial coding were employed. As the sole coder of the qualitative data, I ensured a consistent application of the coding framework. However, one coder also poses a limitation of intercoder reliability in data interpretation. To mitigate this problem, I employed what qualitative scholars recommend, maintaining a record of analytical decisions and perspectives throughout the process to have an insight into how results develop (Heyink and Tymstra 1993). Further, this study employed a semi-structured interview design, which allowed for a gradual procedure where additional questions or conversations not formally outlined in the interview guide could emerge naturally. The interviews were conducted and recorded in a local public library, ranging from 30-45 minutes, and each participant was

given a $15 gift card as a token of gratitude. Despite the small N, qualitative scholars encourage depth over breadth and value the processes of meaning-making (Heyink and Tymstra 1993).

As both an eligible interviewee and primary investigator, one of the goals of this study is to explore further my thinking regarding how my upbringing along the Mexico-U.S. border shaped my personal development, decisions, and emotional health. Thus, this semi-structured interview allows me to navigate these highly personal conversations while remaining aware of potential interviewer bias (Atkinson 2017). While such bias can influence the direction of the discussion, Heyink and Tymstra (1993) argue that qualitative research is appropriate and well-suited to study the motives, emotions, and experiences of participants.

Author Positionality

As a young adult who grew up along the Mexico-U.S. border, I navigated a complex combination of pressure, guilt, and doubt while striving to climb the social ladder and escape the poverty that weighs heavily on my Mexican community. I acknowledge that my standpoint influenced the direction of this project and shaped my perspective. My personal experience with familial responsibility and pressure from community expectations led me to focus on the emotional health and personal development of other young Mexican adults. As I navigate my last year of college, my own experiences have created an assumption that all Mexican individuals raised on the border experience emotional health challenges. Additionally, my personal experiences give me an insider perspective into the cultural nuances I am trying to understand and may also lead me to unconsciously prioritize themes that align with my own experiences and questions.

At the same time, the qualitative nature of my research allowed the study participants to feel comfortable sharing their lived experiences with someone who could likely resonate. I am months away from becoming the first in my family to graduate from college, an achievement many before me were not afforded. This study serves as a reflective pause, not only for myself but for the participants, creating an empowering space for deep contemplation amidst overwhelming burdens. Collectively, these experiences highlight how my border community background shaped how I conceptualize key concepts such as emotional health, success, and personal development. For instance, emotional health is often framed as an individual's well-being, but my understanding incorporates cultural values and family responsibility. Meanwhile, personal development is not solely about growth but the broader expectations of upward mobility and family expectations. To address this personal bias in my research, I remained reflexive and actively asked clarifying questions to ensure that the participants' narratives, rather than my pre-existing notions, shaped the overall themes in our conversations.

Findings

At the beginning of this study, it was assumed that the physical presence of the border directly elicited emotions and cognitive responses from young Mexican adults. However, the findings indicate this is not necessarily the case. The following results describe how young Mexican adults experience and understand their border city, Brownsville, Texas, through several layers of influence. This breakdown provides insight into the factors shaping their emotional health and its impact on their personal development. Personal development encompasses the aspirations these young adults strive for, including higher education, aspirations, and the pursuit of upward mobility. Emotional health refers to the interplay of cultural values, familial

expectations, and community pressures deeply ingrained in these young adults but are also the largest source of motivation.

Amidst socio-economic disadvantage, the foundation of these young Mexican adults lies in their dual sense of belonging to both the U.S. and Mexico, as opposed to literature that claims struggles in belonging (Marisco 2016). This strong identity and sense of belonging are integral to combating low socioeconomic status, the presence of law enforcement, and overcoming the imposed separation that connects them to family, culture, and a strong sense of pride.

Further, the cultural values and stigma surrounding emotional vulnerability shape coping strategies and lead to the navigation of emotions outside of familial circles. Despite emotional growth, when returning home, the overwhelming presence of traditional cultural values leads participants to return to old habits of suppressing feelings. However, the outstanding emotional pressure of fulfilling familial aspirations remains compounded by the practice of giving back or validating parents' sacrifices leading to the decision to leave home. I argue this difficult decision is fostered by a "soft hand approach"[1], where parents do not restrict their children's decisions and softly support them.

These first-generation students strive to fulfill personal and familial aspirations that align with mainstream expectations- such as pursuing higher education, employment, and social mobility linearly; however, their vulnerability lies in the unfamiliarity of this path. This result reaffirms the literature's emphasis on a class-based identity that shapes their mobility trajectory

[1] "Soft hand approach" refers to the subtle parenting style of these young Mexican adults' parents. When reaching a certain point in their life, Hispanic parents do not explicitly state their preferences restricting their child's decisions leading to a sense of autonomy.

and reveals the interconnectedness of emotional well-being and community struggles, highlighting the burden of escaping poverty and redefining their future (Vallejo 2012).

Navigating Identity in Place and Culture

Mexican youth associate home and their identity with cultural pride and economic struggle. After 18 years of living along the border, college seniors reminisce on border upbringing and their relationship with home. As Alexandra and Maria Martinez, 21-year-old college seniors point out:

> Growing up on the border was interesting, it felt very normal growing up and I loved the Mexican culture I was surrounded with. It always felt so easy, and I would find myself having interesting conversations when others not from a border town would say “Wow” when I mentioned my friends cross the border every day just to come to school. I could just walk over to Matamoros and then be back in Brownsville for lunch, it made it a unique place to be.
>
> I felt like it was very, very stereotypical, it was very dangerous. I would say a lot of people, like by where I live, they're like, “No, it's very dangerous where you live.” But also, I feel like living by the border means I get to experience two sides of my culture, in the sense that I can go to Mexico and eat delicious food and have family time.

Most of the participants described home as intertwined with low socio-economic status, culture immersion, and the associated dangers of living along the border. A few drew from their experiences outside the Rio Grande Valley to compare, recognizing the state of their community that felt both alarming and motivating but did not cause distress. Gabriel Anguiano, a 22-year-old aspiring software engineer comments on his relationship with home and lack of opportunities in tech:

> I used to have a love-hate relationship with living here as a kid. Well, being a border town, like I said, a lot of people struggle and that's sort of reflected within the city itself. You know, there's not a whole lot to do here and I know sometimes there are a lot of businesses that may pop up but may not make it due to the people living here not having the financial ability to support local businesses and whatnot. I'd say I wouldn't know how to compare Brownsville or what to say about it if I hadn't gone off to college somewhere else, experiencing different cities, like Boston, and Dallas. So now that I have that sort of

> experience and perspective, I see how bad some people have it here. You know, I know the average income here in Brownsville is like 30-something thousand.

Despite learning early on that they were at a disadvantage with employment and education and that their home was considered dangerous, participants were eager to share their growing pride in their hometown. For one participant, her sense of pride became notable when interacting with other students of color who sought out their cultural immersion in college. Adriana Zapata, a 21-year-old college senior, was shocked that not all students she met grew up immersed in their ethnic culture as she did and with pride explains:

> They go to college seeking to find that culture, and they join the culture clubs, because they're like, “Oh, like, I didn't grow up with this”. And I thought “What? How do you grow up not knowing your culture?” Interacting with them kind of made me realize, dang, like I am Mexican American. I grew up in America, but I am super proud to be from a border city and growing up with my Mexican American culture because you share two different cultures.

Border culture research suggests that Mexicans often have strong ties and pride toward their mother country. Thus, in a borderland landscape, young adults may feel out of place, not truly belonging to either their country of birth or their ancestral homeland (Marisco 2016). However, the participants recognize the imposed border, but rather than feeling disconnected, they experience a deep sense of pride. Instead of feeling demoralized by the separation, most participants embrace a dual sense of belonging:

> It doesn’t feel like such a division. I didn't go to Matamoros that often, even though it was right there, it just kind of felt like, oh, you know, like, that's part of home. I feel like Brownsville's is an extension of Matamoros (Adriana Zapata).

> I take my mom to the dentist, and we cross the border often. We also have family over there in Mexico. So, you know, I don't see it as a border as other people may see it or those who don't live next to it. I think of it as a gateway to pass through (Gabriel Anguiano).

Some participants described crossing the border with their parents to visit family, obtain cheaper healthcare services, and to simply enjoy the food. Whether they crossed the border every weekend or only a few times in their life, all participants felt that they belong to both sides of the border wall. In the case of these young adults, pride and a sense of belonging in culture and place blur the imposed divide. Their pride is rooted in the privilege of being able to access both kinds of cultural heritage and their sense of belonging is unaffected by the physical border and their community's low socioeconomic status.

When describing their memories, most participants alluded to the struggle and hardship that presses upon the sister cities. The constant presence of law enforcement, particularly Border Patrol and helicopters searching for immigrants was an emotional reality participants witnessed and speaks to how these young adults were socialized to persevere when faced with adversity. Kimberly Hernandez and Alexandra Martinez, 21-year-old college seniors attending college at home describe their experiences:

> I have never felt unsafe even when I would go to Lincoln Park and immigrants were hiding under the slide. I saw border patrol cars and helicopters looking for people, but it saddened me, it didn't make me feel intimidated (Alexandra M.).
>
> One time I was playing in my backyard and then all of a sudden there were like two guys running in the backyard and my mom's like, "Come inside, come inside." I didn't know what was happening and then I saw the border patrol trucks, but as a kid, I didn't understand. I like living near the border. Well, that's because I'm used to having family over there. If I didn't have family over there, then I think I'd feel different (Kimberly H.).

While these events might be labeled as dangerous by outsiders, these young adults do not recall fearing for their safety nor were they intimidated. Instead, they experienced sadness, resonating with the hardship unfolding in front of them and reminding them of their family on the other side of the border. Participants expressed a feeling of normalcy when recalling these

instances stating, “It felt very normal, I don’t think growing up I thought much of it” (Adriana Z.). This reference to normalcy can be attributed to a survival mechanism, when things are difficult or uncertain the expectation is to bear it and move forth. This forms part of a normalized reality in which these young adults cannot escape but navigate through their identity, the interplay of pride, hardship, and a sense of belonging tied to their upbringing in a border city.

Taking a Step Toward Upward Mobility

Leaving the Rio Grande Valley challenged participants’ normalized reality while cultivating their pride and aspirations. Attending college out of state, enlisting in the military, or traveling outside the Rio Grande Valley served as significant moments, forcing these individuals to question what they believed were inherent parts of life. Although these experiences may have been daunting when exposed to other perspectives and in the face of hardship, these participants felt a push to “strive for bigger things” (Maria Martinez). Other participants encourage leaving Brownsville, even if it is just for a short time:

> I thought, oh, I'm not going to have a good life. I'm not going to make enough money. But then we don't realize the number of opportunities we have outside of Brownsville (Ivan Quiroga).
>
> I feel like, at least, you should experience that once in your life, like moving away from home. I feel like it's important to leave the Valley once, one time for like at least a semester (Kimberly Hernandez).

Along with this impulse to strive for more, most participants described a deepened sense of pride when pursuing a path of higher education outside their hometown. Leaving Brownsville became more than an aspiration, it was a step toward independence and upward mobility and a way to recognize where they came from. Adriana Zapata captures this by imagining being asked about the roots of her success, “I love that I come from Brownsville, it's just like such a motivator. If I'm ever asked, like, “Oh my gosh, you're so successful, where did you come from?

Where'd you grow up?" I can proudly respond with "I grew up in Brownsville." Despite the hardships and imposed border associated with the participants' hometown, these young adults have both pride and aspiration in their roots. Their strong connection with cultural immersion, resilience, and belonging has shaped their identity and relationship with home, revealing a refreshing perspective between culture, place, and belonging

Family, Emotion, and Coping Strategies

As strong as the pride of these young adults is, so are the cultural values and expectations that discouraged vulnerability and led to the development of coping strategies outside family circles. One of these is a strong and resilient appearance. Several participants shared the cost of this belief:

> Mexican culture, as a man, I'm expected to have a certain standard so whenever I was going through some difficult emotions or whatnot, I never really expressed them to anyone. I would just deal with it myself. I know until this day, it's the same, like, I guess not being emotionally vulnerable. I think that's something that's just not that's not even on the individual but more in the culture (Gabriel Anguiano).
>
> I was told "Don't do this and crying isn't good for anybody. You have to be strong, so on and so on." I think that it takes a toll on your mental health (Ivan Quiroga).
>
> I feel like I didn't handle my emotions very well in the sense that I would bottle things up and then at some point I would explode and sometimes take out my emotions on people who had nothing to do with it (Maria Martinez).

As a consequence, when speaking about their household dynamics, both male and female participants expressed how emotional vulnerability was discouraged within their households. As Adriana Zapata and Alexandra Martinez put it:

> Growing up I didn't see my parents show emotion, but I think if there were problems, whether financial or work-related they wouldn't discuss it in front of me (A.Z)
>
> I don't know if it was only how I was raised but I was just taught to be quiet and respectful and so that doesn't include being vulnerable and sharing my problems (A.M).

Home was not an open space to address their emotional health, as such they described a lack of emotional vulnerability growing up. This was a normalized reality at a family and community level until some participants recalled a vulnerable moment. Both Christian Lopez and Maria Martinez describe the state of their households after the death of a loved one:

> After he passed away, I noticed the energy in our house just started to deplete because I would say my mom is the one who's always the happiest in the house (C.L).
>
> In high school when my grandfather died, I felt like that...it really impacted my life in the sense that my family went through a devastation period. They didn't know how to handle it (M.M).

Each participant experienced a significant emotional turning point, often tied to family hardships such as the death of a loved one or navigating a parent's PTSD. They recall how these experiences left their household unprotected from the display of emotion. These hardships were the first time they saw their parents lose composure and the dynamics of the household dramatically shifted. Participants also recall not handling this situation well, they felt lost without their parents' self-control and encouragement. It was in these moments that these young adults witnessed the burden of the generational stigma, a cultural expectation that discourages emotional vulnerability, as their families struggled to manage their emotions.

Consequently, these young adults were forced to learn how to navigate their emotions outside their family circle, through roommates, friendships, and romantic relationships. Maria Martinez explains her difficult experience with a roommate and Kimberly Hernandez describes her newfound comfort of emotional expression with her boyfriend:

> We are both the eldest daughters of our family. So, communicating, since we live together right now, over problems and situations was very difficult because we both tend to bottle things in. At some point, we were like "Okay we can't be doing this, it's harming our friendship and how we view each other." So I feel like those first two years were very difficult. We would have a lot of fights but now I feel like we both learned that communicating is the best way to do things. My friends, I feel like they helped me

> understand that emotional health is very important. You should be able to talk about these things or be able to do activities that will help you manage your emotional health (M.M).
>
> I'm also trying to be more expressive. That's what I was trying to, I guess, tell my future self, my now self to try to be more expressive if I'm struggling to reach out. Now I have my boyfriend who I feel very comfortable sharing things with (K.H).

After a few years, the participants felt that they had made progress in coping with their emotional well-being. However, employing these strategies is not necessarily a smooth process. When returning to the world of home life, these same participants who expressed emotional growth also noticed they began to feel stagnant and returned to old patterns. Maria Martinez, who returned home during college break, and Ivan Quiroga who returned from the army explain:

> I do like to come back home but I feel like I'll feel stagnant if I'm with my family. So, I'm hoping to stay over there. I also feel like I grew a lot being over there. Whenever I'm home, I can't be my full self since they expect me to be more of the eldest daughter than a college student (M.M).
>
> The army made me a better person ultimately. I grew a lot. I matured a lot. I felt stuck coming back. I felt like I had things rolling then I got stuck again because I got comfortable (I.Q).

This reference to being "stuck" or "stagnant" could be attributed to the mismatch of their emotional growth and their family's lack of recognition of this change, all while holding them accountable for their duties as older siblings. While away, some of these young adults were introduced to addressing their emotional well-being in the traditional sense of mitigating stress, and symptoms, and creating a routine with activities of enjoyment. Yet when returning home, old patterns of emotional suppression returned and created a notable gap between their growth, family responsibility, and understanding. Further, the participants who did not express the forced growth outside their family circle feel that there is a certain standard they are required to meet. Adriana Zapata and Gabriel Anguiano, college seniors, describe how they cope with emotions:

> I have responsibilities, I need to do. I don't have time to feel sad and stuff. I have things to do at my house, I need to help my parents, got to do schoolwork, and sports. I think I distract myself by doing all these other things (A.Z).
>
> We have some land, and I had to do all the work that needed to be done basically. My dad wasn't around, so I had to take charge of helping my parents or helping my mom whenever she needed. If I had to deal with emotion, I'd deal with it myself, you know? I don't, I guess, overthink it anymore (G.A).

In their experiences, they created their own coping strategy where external obligations are above their emotions. When faced with certain feelings, they pushed them aside and focused on what they thought to be more important including schoolwork, extracurriculars, chores, and helping their parents in manual labor jobs.

The Pressure of Fulfilling Familial Aspirations

Both groups, whether they expressed forced growth or not, share a burden of responsibility for their family and chose to leave their hometown to pursue opportunities in hopes of giving back. When it comes to choosing educational paths like going to college or taking a job away from home, participants often feel burdened with worries as their parents age when they are away. Several participants feel responsible for taking care of them and granting them the commodities they cannot afford. For instance, Christian Lopez shared:

> Yeah, for my parents, I feel like I do have a sense of responsibility just to come back to my parents because I know one thing that my mom wants to do is get her master's. So, I want to come back and just be able to work and give her that break to go to school (Christian Lopez).

Similarly, Adriana Z. reflects on her desire to fulfill her mom's dream:

> Oh, my mom's like, oh, my gosh, like, she always wanted a truck. I was like, "Mom, give me a couple of years, and we'll try to make it happen." It's something that will make me so proud if I'm able to achieve it in the future. That's the least that they deserve, they deserve so much more (Adriana Z.).

Thus, participants make the challenging decision to move elsewhere in hopes of fulfilling their aspirations and reaching their goal of giving back to their families. A reoccurring question in this study is: With family at the core of these young Mexican adults, what drives them to make such a significant decision? Many participants speak about this, describing their relationship with their family and their reach for success.

Kimberly Hernandez, an aspiring nurse, shares her contemplation in leaving Brownsville:

> My parents say "No Mija, like you can go" but I feel like deep down they want me to stay here. I feel like they'll just say you could go you can leave, but that's not what they mean, that's not the truth (Kimberly Hernandez).

Adriana Zapata describes how she always felt supported by her parents:

> I guess just, they've never told me no, like when I told them about my decision to leave. I think my dad was more of the one, like, "Why do you want to go so far away and one thing he would use is the food, like the food's not going to be good" (Adriana Zapata).

Leila Esquivel expresses her guilt and worries in moving so far from home:

> Getting a job in New York is great, I think, from the outside perspective, but internally, I feel guilty leaving my parents (Leila Esquivel).

While there is pressure to remain close to home, Hispanic parents lead with a "soft hand approach." [2]Once their children reach high school, they wish for them not to leave but will rarely say it directly. Instead, they provide a list of options that could keep these young adults closer to home and remind them of things they might miss but do not explicitly say "no" to any decisions. I argue that this "soft hand approach" does not diminish pressure but allows these young adults

[2] "Soft hand approach" refers to the subtle parenting style of these young Mexican adults' parents. When reaching a certain point in their life, Hispanic parents do not explicitly state their preferences restricting their child's decisions leading to a sense of autonomy.

just enough space and peace of mind to make their own choices while carrying their unspoken worries and the need to fulfill familial desires. The sense of responsibility, however, is experienced as both pressure to fulfill aspirations and give back

Moreover, participants, as they grew older, realized that their parents had done an excellent job of not exposing them to the financial struggle and limited employment opportunities they faced. At some point in that realization, it became an ingrained desire to lessen the struggle as much and as soon as possible. Adriana Zapata mentioned the conversations she has with her brother discussing how they can "give back to our parents and figuring out ways on how to do so" as she refers to the desire to repay her parents for their sacrifices and support. Most wish they could make a large-scale impact to heal and alleviate the experiences their community and their families unbeknownst to them must face. However, they begin and focus on those who matter the most, those who they see most deserving of a break, family. Gabriel Anguiano explains, "I'm like, dang, like, I wish I could help out Brownsville, but I just wouldn't know how to do that. So, I think at the end of the day, I'm going to focus on my family and if my family's doing good, then that's what matters to me."

With this emergent theme of responsibility, its reoccurring and strong presence in the priorities of young Mexican adults led to many guiding questions. What makes this responsibility so strong and necessary? Does it feel like an obligation? Does it stem from the desire to receive approval and show off what can be done? Do these young adults want to counteract the looming negative associations and stereotypes that most people outside the Rio Grande Valley believe about their homes and places of upbringing? The findings indicate that this strong sense of responsibility is an emotional one but at some level an obligation tied to place and culture.

Mexican culture has that value or moral that you should stay with family (A.M).

The Mexican culture's love language is one of acts of service and giving gifts. Due to the lack of emotional vulnerability within Mexican households, the same way negative emotions bottle up and eventually explode, the moments of joy, support, sacrifice, and pride gather into one immense sense of responsibility that these young adults hope to unleash on their families one day with their success. Gabriel Anguiano summarizes this point by saying "You can always come back home and visit your parents and let them enjoy your success." Meanwhile, Alexandra Martinez, who has aspirations to travel the world, expressed her guilt when studying abroad:

> I feel a great deal of responsibility for my family to help them financially and take care of them in the future when I can. I cried before I went to London. *cries* My parents have not been outside of North America and here I am going to a whole other continent. I wanted them to come with me and see the world with me and travel together. That's something that motivates me; I want to see the world and do as much as I possibly can (Alexandra Martinez).

This familial influence is an added layer of complexity that defines young adults' relationship with their homes and shapes their understanding of emotional health. In their childhood, these struggles, values, and responsibilities were obscure parts of their daily life, however, now as young adults, they feel the weight on their shoulders to contribute to familial capital and assets. This weight has a dual aspect, a profound pressure to fulfill their parents' unmet aspirations and a strong motivator to make their family proud of their success.

The Role of Family and Community on the Path to Upward Mobility

Young Mexican adults navigating higher education feel that they are under immense pressure to succeed and meet familial and community expectations. Maria Martinez, as she looks into medical school, explains that her family is eagerly and consistently asking, "What are you going to do? Are you going to take a gap year? Are you going to go straight into school?" I'm

usually stressed in those ways and then I have other family members apart from my immediate family asking "So, what are you doing?" However, as these first-generation students go through higher education, they realize there are many avenues to take and not just a single trajectory. As they feel bombarded by these questions, their first-generation status begins to pressure them to do better. Gabriel Anguiano captures this pressure by explaining:

> There's the pressure of wanting to succeed and being one of the first people in your family to graduate. Not only graduate high school but then move on to college and be one of the first people in your family to graduate from college/university. Being from a border city next to the border where a lot of people fail to pursue higher education, I think I did feel that pressure all through my school career (G.A).

These young adults as well as their families are unfamiliar with how to achieve success or upward mobility. Participants recall it was a constant motto in high school "100% of students go to and through college", parents' reassurance that education was the best choice and the place where they should put the most effort, yet the steps toward that success are unclear as family expectations are in sync with mainstream values. Kimberly Hernandez, looking to go to medical school states, "This is very normal to potentially take a gap year, but my family doesn't see those things since they're not accustomed. They think it's college then work, and that's what you're supposed to do, but no, there are different paths for everybody."

In the face of ambiguity, all participants acknowledged that the greatest driving factor motivating them is to "salir de la pobreza" escape or get out of poverty (Gabriel Anguiano). It is the largest burden that weighs on their family and one they feel responsible for carrying, as Kimerbly Hernandez states, "I'm first-generation and I'm alone on this." After all their parents and community must have gone through crossing the border and making a life for themselves, participants feel it is their task. One participant in particular describes her excitement in being accepted into a nursing program but recalls when she was told, "Oh well you should have gone

upstate, like, who's going to want someone from the Valley compared to someone from Dallas or someone from out of state" (Kimberly Hernandez). It would be their greatest accomplishment to overcome generational barriers and defy the negative associations pinned on their hometown. Alexandra Martinez and Gabriel Anguiano describe their family as motivation:

> My grandparents and mom are from Mexico, so I am motivated because they crossed for a better life and better opportunities. I've been given a lot, so I am motivated to try hard in school, get good grades, and make something of myself. My parents have created a standard of living that I should be able to achieve and surpass so that inspires and motivates me (A.M).
>
> I've achieved something that not many in my family thought would be possible. And I know they're proud of it and I'm proud of it. And from here on out, I mean, I hope to change my future lineage (G.A).

Most participants described this ultimate goal with a sense of hope and a collective understanding of the struggle their community must have and continue to face. Education and hard work are the only ways participants know how to succeed, and their hope relies on those elements they saw and were told so frequently growing up along the Mexico-U.S. border. Ivan Quiroga and Gabriel Anguiano reflect on the patterns they observed and pressure they felt:

> All we know is hard work. You just see your parents working hard all the time and with very little pay (I.A).
>
> It was sort of the only way that I knew to ultimately become successful. So, I think to an extent, it felt like going to university was like an obligation (G.A).

Ultimately, the emotional health of these young Mexican adults is not an isolated experience. Rather as these young adults strive for upward mobility, their emotional health as they understand it is shaped and compounded by layers of influence. Their border community encapsulates all the hardship and struggle they have witnessed and endured, leaving a lasting imprint. As such, their ability to persevere beyond Brownsville will forever serve as a reference point for their personal growth.

Discussion

The results strongly demonstrate that place, culture, and family significantly influence the participants' understanding of their emotional health and inform their priorities, aspirations, and efforts toward upward mobility, also referred to as personal development. This aligns with the literature where the presence of vulnerabilities like economic hardship contributes to higher levels of stress and impacts the emotional health of minorities (Dreby 2012). However, the results challenge the Relative Deprivation Theory which states that social comparisons reduce emotional well-being (Trenor 2016). Rather, the findings indicate that instead of leading to negative emotions in the face of societal expectations and stereotypes, participants exhibit motivation and resilience, using these stressors to defy hardship for their families and communities.

Further, a poverty and rural development scholar differentiates the measure of poverty as material lack and vulnerability as defenseless experiences (Chambers 1989). In this study, participants acknowledge their disadvantages in poverty or material lack, but their vulnerability comes from their unfamiliarity with upward mobility as first-generation students. This vulnerability shapes their emotional health by introducing stressors, pressure, and guilt as they navigate expectations. This alignment with literature is of note because it reveals a pathway beyond poverty. An income increase or poverty reduction will not suffice, these first-generation students define their emotional health and personal development through stereotypes placed on their home, cultural, and familial expectations. Holistically, this framework emphasizes the need to look beyond poverty levels and address the vulnerabilities and burdens that these young Mexican adults from border cities face.

These results also strongly demonstrate that participants exhibit a strong sense of belonging and pride in their hometown despite finding it necessary to leave their hometown to explore opportunities elsewhere. This resonates with the concept of the mobility imperative, where scholars argue that rural borderland young adults must strive for mobility outside their hometowns for access to resources while carrying emotional ties to their hometown (Farrugia 2016; Silva et al. 2021). The results reveal a uniquely strong connection between a sense of belonging and pride, as these young adults derive both pride and aspiration from their roots. Their pride is tied to the success they aim to achieve in spite of the challenges and disadvantages they grew up with. This sentiment is further amplified by the strong sense of responsibility toward their family that participants aspire to fulfill with their future success.

Moreover, previous research suggests that middle-class Mexican Americans face unique challenges that lead to a distinct minority pathway, separate from the white middle class, because of a perpetual familiarity with poverty that fosters a social practice of giving back (Vallejo 2012). While this research reflects a later stage of life compared to this study, it echoes similar themes and highlights the unique challenges that shape the emotional health and upward mobility of young Mexican adults. This study extends the minority pathway by highlighting how this study's participants who have yet to achieve middle-class status share similar responsibilities and practices. This suggests that the distinctive path toward upward mobility may begin much earlier, and these overlapping challenges reinforce the disadvantages minorities face and overcome on their path toward upward mobility.

Conclusion

To conclude, the implications of these findings are relevant to academia and policy. This study adds to the field of sociology and border studies, highlighting the vulnerabilities and burdens that young Mexican adults from border cities face, beyond poverty. It also emphasizes the need for future research on other minority groups that face socio-economic disadvantages. This study calls for greater insight into the socio-emotional development across various age groups to better capture the distinct stages of life in the context of mobility and ties to home. Lastly, given that rural border regions often lack opportunities, this study advocates for an investment in local policy aimed at motivating young people to stay or return to their home region, creating a new narrative in which staying or returning is not seen as a failure (Silva et al. 2021).

All in all, this study began to create an empowering space for deep thought and meaning-making, for myself and those who share my background in Brownsville, Texas. Following grounded theory and drawing on the emotional realities of young Mexican adults growing up along the Mexico-U.S. border, this study concludes that young Mexican adults experience socioeconomic disadvantage, familial pressures, generational stigma, and unfamiliarity with upward mobility. However, instead of feeling discouraged, embrace the challenges with a beaming sense of pride and use them as motivation toward future success.

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