Latino youth have had the lowest academic achievement levels by ethnic/racial group in the United States since at least the 1960s (Anderson & Johnson 1971, Heller 1966). Because higher levels of formal schooling are associated with higher salaries, more prestigious jobs, better health care, and more active participation in civic life, the lack of educational achievement among Hispanics causes concern among social scientists and policy makers who worry that low graduation rates will consign the growing Hispanic population within the United States to perpetual poverty as a kind of permanent underclass (Mehan, et al., 1994). Despite such concerns, there has been little success in improving national educational attainment for Latinos (Secada et al., 1998, Perreira, et al., 2006, Schick & Schick, 1991).

The explanations for low achievement among Hispanics/Latinos have become much more sophisticated than the openly racist explanations of the 1950s and the more covertly racist explanations offered by culture of poverty theorists in the 1960s and 1970s. Whereas in 1966 Gordon and Wilkerson could suggest that Mexicans do not value education because they are unable to plan for the future, recent years have seen the publication of nuanced arguments of the complex interplay of culture and structure, positioning, marginality, subtractive pedagogies, and institutionalized discrimination (Ainslie, 2002, Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Orellana, et al., 2002, Valenzuela, 1999). Much of the work on Hispanic dropout and low educational achievement, including my own (White, 2009), has detailed a large number of economic, psychological, familial, social structural, and political factors that intertwine to affect school attendance and performance. Teenaged Latinos are embedded in a plurality of complex and politicized systems.

* My thanks to Rachel Reynolds and an anonymous reviewer for their suggestions in how to sharpen my thesis. All remaining errors and faults in logic are entirely my own.
This paper will argue that in addition to the many structural impediments to obtaining a formal education in the United States, Latino adolescents are caught between the ways in which life phases are constructed across multiple cultures in the United States. Very little attention has been given to how diverse groups of Latinos conceptualize the life course and how developmental ethnotheories (see Harkness & Super, 1983 for discussion of parental ethnotheories) may affect the choices youth and their parents make about schooling. When is one considered to be an adult? Does one’s family and local society recognize and allow for the transitional phase of adolescence? How does one negotiate a developmental pathway through multiple cultures’ definitions of adulthood and childhood? And further, what role should scholars and activists play in the theoretical construction of each of these life phases and the assignation of an individual to one or the other?

School-age youth who do not attend school are still often pathologized in the professional literature that professes to understand them (e.g. Honawar, 2004). By this I mean it is suggested that it is the students’ own deficiencies of character that cause them to drop out or fail at school. Or they are ignored completely, as when only those attending school are surveyed about the reasons youth drop out (Steinberg, 1994). At times non-attendees are summarized and dismissed from further analysis with statements such as, “they have to work.” But in mainstream American culture, people who “have to work” are, almost by definition, adults. As adults, people who work are assumed to be able to take care of themselves. They are not expected to be in need of special services and outreach simply by the designation of their life stage. An agreement that youth aged twelve to seventeen are adults is one that suits the purposes of budget-strapped school districts, employers who hire young Mexicans (often “under the table” for substandard wages), and the young people themselves, who would prefer to see themselves as independent and invulnerable or as responsible contributors to their families and society. However, it is a conclusion we must question in a society that simultaneously argues for the reduced culpability and responsibility of “children” who are seventeen to 25-years old . . . if they are upper-middle-class, and are ethnically white (Davis, 2009; Seate, 2009; Ungar, 2007).

In my fieldwork I sought to understand what prevented new immigrant youth from attending school in a city in the southeastern United States. I found the answers to be complex; each person had his or her own set of intricately woven structural, cultural, and psychological factors. In this paper I want to draw attention to the practices used by these youth to construct and perform their own identities, and to the discursive practices used by others to create a developmental schema in which 13 to 17 year olds are constructed as adults.

I found that the identity of “adult” played a significant role in the decision not to attend school for many of the participants in my research. They associated working and putting others’ needs first with being adults, and going to school with being children. Going to work gave them a sense of value that school was unable to provide; for many of them, the ability to earn wages that they could contribute to their families was such a strong incentive and such a notable source of pride that it was difficult for them to imagine trading it for what they perceived as the small rewards of schooling. However, their participation in the world of work and their assumption of adult status made them more vulnerable to numerous types of abuse and exploitation.

THE STUDY

This paper grew out of data I collected in 2001-2002 as part of an ethnographic study in the Central Southern U.S. which examined the lives of teenagers of Mexican origin. The research consisted of participant-observation in many different contexts, teaching ESL classes, interviews with over 120 adults, focus groups with middle and high school students, teaching ESL classes, interviews with over 120 adults, focus groups with middle and high school students,
and informal interviews with about thirty teens in the community, some of whom did attend school. I was able to develop deeper relationships with fourteen teens who did not attend school, and it is on those fourteen that the study is focused. The study was designed to understand why these youth were not attending school, what they were doing instead, and what, if anything, might make formal schooling a desirable or possible option for them.

**Providing for the Family**

Nearly all of the participants had strong identities in their families, and most of the young men subscribed to a cultural ideology of *machismo* which they defined as a man’s duty to provide for, protect, and defend his family. In the past, machismo has been constructed primarily as male privilege and power (Browner, 1986; Escandon, 1987; Lewis 1959; Pesquera, 1993). As such, it has been given as an explanation for why Mexican and Mexican-origin girls were prevented from attending school and why their brothers received more support for academic endeavors (Heller, 1966; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1996; Segura, 1993). However, the males and females I spoke to seemed to have adopted a definition of machismo more in keeping with Guttman’s (2006) findings in Mexico City where the focus has shifted away from male “rights” and toward male “responsibilities.” It has therefore lost some of its power to discriminate based on gender. For example, all but one of the teen participants of both genders indicated when interviewed that it was “equally important” for girls and boys to receive an education.

This change in the definition or emphasis of *machismo* is yet another indicator of the importance of the progression through the life course to these young people. Rather than highlighting the difference between men and women, these teens are using the concept to focus on the difference between men and boys. Each of them was eager to establish their identification with the former by demonstrating that they were no longer *niños* (boys). In many cases that included leaving the world of school (associated with children and childhood) in order to enter the world of work (associated not only with adults but with the benefits of being able to contribute funds to the family—another marker of adulthood).

Seventeen-year-old Ricardo told me that if he had remained in Mexico, he would have tried to enroll in university. When asked how he felt about having to abandon those plans, he explained that he was doing what was best for the family. Ricardo was working as a custodian in one of the local factories. He had made friends there with some men in their twenties and thirties, and they had a lot of fun working together, listening to music and joking around. His pay was almost eight dollars an hour (in 2001), which seemed a fortune to him.

He turned over all of his pay to his parents, but looked forward to being able to buy music CDs, and even a car when the family was more economically secure. One afternoon he candidly told me that one of the reasons he was glad he was no longer in school was that his parents treated him like an adult. He no longer had a curfew, and was allowed to go out on the street after dark. He had even gone dancing a couple of times with his friends from work. When his family first arrived in the United States, all of the teenage children shared the household chores, but since he and his fifteen-year-old brother began working for wages, they no longer had to do any cooking or cleaning. When the two brothers went to work, it had the effect of creating a traditional division of labor in their household; their single sister did nearly all of the housework, laundry and cooking while the men of the family and their mother worked outside the home for wages. Nevertheless, all members of the family professed to believe that men and women were equal and should have equal opportunities to work and to earn an education, even if this did not translate into practice. Additional evidence that the transition to full gender equality had not been made can be seen in younger brother Eduardo’s willingness to think of his older sister as a “girl.”

As an adult, Ricardo was consulted about the family’s future, and he agreed that it would be best for him to give up school and go to work. His identity within the family, as eldest brother and trusted son, requires him to make—and repays him for making
—personal sacrifice for the good of the whole. His current reward is being treated with respect and appreciation by the other members of the family. This adult-like status made up, in his eyes, for having to let go of his dreams of university.

Ricardo’s thirteen-year-old brother, Eduardo, was similarly influenced. Eduardo stopped attending school before the family left Mexico, when he was eleven years old, and he never enrolled in school in the United States. Shortly after the family arrived in the U.S., he worked first on a farm and then was hired to work on the production line at a factory, work which he professed to love. The English lessons I gave the family in their home provide a telling example of Eduardo’s identity as an adult: whenever we were reviewing the terms for girl/boy, man/woman, Eduardo refused to apply the term “boy” to himself. Although he willingly applied the word “girl” to his fourteen-year-old sister, he adamantly clung to the label “man” for himself and his brother.

Another interviewee, Manuel, came to the U.S. with his uncle and a group of four of his friends when he was fourteen. Their shared goal was to earn money to send back home, since employment was difficult to find in the Southern Mexico region near the Guatemalan border where he was born. His uncle helped them find their first agricultural jobs in Texas, Tennessee, and Kentucky. After they had been in the South for a couple of months, his uncle left town one day and Manuel had not seen him again. About a year after his uncle’s disappearance, the rest of his group of friends who had emigrated together all left to return home. He has lived with varying groups of older men in a number of apartments over the last four years, holding many different kinds of jobs, such as a laborer on vegetable and tobacco farms and on the line at three different factories. He currently works seventy hours a week at two low-paying jobs: as a prep-cook in an Italian restaurant, and as a housekeeper at a hotel.

Since migrating, Manuel had been sending money home for his mother to save for three years, with the thought that they thought that they might be able to open a family business in Mexico. Tragically, the early death of his sixteen-year-old sister altered those plans. The family decided together to put all of their savings toward her funeral.

At the time of the study, Manuel did not see what good schooling would do for him, beyond increasing his English fluency. When he was younger, school was so far removed from his perceived possibilities that he never even thought of attending. Manuel was very much thinking of himself as an adult already. When I asked him to describe all he knew about the school system in the United States, he said he had sometimes seen school buses full of children, an indication of the great chasm he perceived between himself and the institution of public schooling. He was on his way to one of his two jobs, while cute little children were on their way to school. When I asked him if he might have gone to school had someone informed him of the possibilities, especially that he could learn English there for free, he said, “Yes! Of course [I would have gone had I known]. Well, maybe. If someone else could pay the rent, I would have.” Even in his retrospective fantasies, Manuel realized that the practical realities of paying the rent would have precluded his attendance at school.

In each of the cases so far, a male youth and his family were in agreement that childhood, as a life phase, was over for that individual. These youth had moved into the beginning of their adult lives with the support of their family members by entering the labor force, contributing wages to the support and maintenance of the family, and exercising some of the rights or privileges granted to adults. The construction of human development from childhood to adult—with no or little adolescence—as seen in the cases of Ricardo, Eduardo, and Manuel is typical of working class families in Mexico and among working-class Mexican immigrants to the United States (Bulcroft, et al., 1996). These young men were not conflicted in any way about their choices; they and their parents were in complete agreement that what mattered were a son’s obedience, respect, and love for his family. All of them also believed that education is extremely valuable. In each case, these young men believed it was their duty to make sacrifices so that their own sons and daughters or brothers and sisters would have opportunities to pursue advanced
educational pathways. These families were making plans for multiple generations of their families as they unfolded. They were operating from a model in which it was taken for granted that the family would work together all their lives, that children would continue to owe obedience and respect to their parents well into their own adulthood, and that the family was and should be the arbiter of its own fate. This is a model that is clearly in conflict with the models held by school administrators, truant officers, and even some other immigrant families.

Fifteen-year-old Berto, for example, immigrated with his parents and a large extended family and was immediately enrolled in elementary school. By the time I met him, he had been attending school in the United States for ten years. His parents were concerned about the kind of man their son would become, and when. Although both parents valued the skills schooling might bring, his mother worried those skills might come at the expense of Berto’s *Mexicanidad* (Mexican-ness) and his Christianity. Berto’s father preferred he quit school and get started at a job so that he could begin to contribute to the family’s financial well being, and so that he would begin to learn the lessons that would make him successful as a man.

His father told me, “What Berto needs to learn is how to take care of a family. He needs to learn how to go to work even when he doesn’t want to, how to treat a boss well even when he hates him. He must learn to budget his money, to save. These are things that are important for a man.” I saw this father push his son to “be a man” on several occasions, which created tension between the parents. Berto’s father ordered him to drive the family car to pick up the younger children from school, even though Berto was only fifteen and not permitted to drive under state law. “In Mexico he would have been driving everywhere by now. You can’t keep them children forever,” he said to his wife when she protested.

The conflict between going to school and being a man is hinted at here, but Berto was still going to school at the time of the study. He later dropped out. His dropping out was preceded by weeks of stomach aches in the morning before school. He said these had nothing to do with his classwork or his peers. After some probing, he revealed that his main preoccupation was his inability to compete with the other young people at his predominantly white, upper-middle-class high school. His family could not consume conspicuously; they could not afford to keep him in the brand name jeans, sneakers and T-shirts his peers were updating regularly. Berto felt he could not be a “good teenager.” Another participant who started out well in school but ended up leaving is Marta.

Marta was thirteen, almost fourteen, when I met her. Marta presents another case where an identity within the world of school had been established, but was then overcome by a stronger identity within her family which pushed her toward adulthood. Marta came to the United States two years before I met her. Her father had been promised a job by his brother, who had settled in the area with his family two years earlier. In Mexico, Marta had been living with her father and stepmother, who had been having a number of marital and financial problems. Marta herself did not get along with her stepmother, and so they decided to send her north with her father. Upon their arrival in the United States, her father’s job fell through. He turned to doing day labor, and occasionally traveling out of state to work on various construction and agricultural projects. In the meantime, Marta was left behind to live with her uncle and to attend school.

Marta, in her own words, was a “so-so” student, but she had always enjoyed school. She was very personable, and had many friends at school of many types. She had developed plans of going to college to become a teacher herself. When I asked why she thought education was so important, she said, “To be someone. To get a good job, not in the fields or cleaning something. Like a lawyer or a teacher or a secretary, maybe. To wear nice clothes and go to an office . . .” She said that she hates working outside, but her worst fear was that she would end up cleaning hotels for a living.

And indeed, that is what her father arranged for her to do. He did not want her to return to school after the summer, when she turned fourteen. He felt
that fourteen was old enough to be working, and he wanted Marta to begin to contribute to the family income. After some initial resistance and attempts to have others intercede for her, Marta went to work cleaning hotel rooms full-time after her fourteenth birthday. After several months she seemed not only resolved but content and pleased at the money she was making and the way she was now treated by her father and the rest of her family. She reveled in the freedoms she was granted along with the responsibilities.

Her need to appear “adult-like” at work convinced her father to allow her to wear cosmetics and “revealing” clothing that he otherwise would not have permitted. Living at her uncle’s house with her father often away meant that Marta was frequently left alone in the apartment. She also had the excuse of walking to and from work at varying hours of the day and night. These circumstances together gave Marta many opportunities to meet with boys, of which she took full advantage. Marta’s life changed a great deal during my fieldwork. At thirteen she had no interest in “boys”; by the end of her fourteenth year, she was adeptly sneaking several older men in and out of her uncle’s apartment and was no longer interested in being interviewed about her thoughts and feelings.

TO WORK IS TO BE OF VALUE

This handful of examples is representative, not only of the other youth I got to know well, but also of the larger community of Mexican-origin teens and adults in the city where I did my research. The most common refrain I heard from migrants of all ages was, “We came here to work.” The strong work ethic of Mexican migrants was mentioned to me over and over again by people in the social services, schools, and clinics, as well as employers and the migrants themselves. Most of my adult ESL students worked at least two jobs, and a few had three. Being someone who works was almost equivalent to being a person with value. For example, when I asked a student of mine if his roommates were nice people, he said, “Oh yes, they all work.” Women who praised their husbands sometimes did so simply by saying, “He is a good husband. He always works.”

During the focus group discussions I had with mostly Mexican ESL students in middle and high school, the majority of them said they would be leaving school when they completed middle school, rather than going on to high school or would “sign themselves out” when they turned sixteen. When I asked them why, the main reason they gave was their desire to go to work. When I continued to probe, some said, “To help my family.” Others explained, “To get respect.” “To be someone.” These answers indicate that working, for many of these youth, is not so much about earning money as it is about becoming a person of value. The role of worker is a role to which many young people aspire, and they often do not see values transferring from school to work. School is not preparing them for the jobs they believe they are going to have, and that is particularly true if they leave school before they earn a diploma.

Becoming a person of value, therefore, provides one very strong motivation to young people to claim adult status and reject the label of “child” or even “teenager” or “adolescent.” Being an adult, as we have seen in the above vignettes, is a kind of passport, not only to work, but to the freedoms, respect, dignity and appreciation that come with being an economic contributor to the family.

The decisions we make, as researchers and writers, about how to refer to the people we study have ramifications in the real world. My first inclination was to respond to the maturity of the young people with whom I worked by not referring to them as children or teenagers. Many of them practiced adult identities; in some cases, they truly shouldered adult responsibilities and did not have the option of claiming “childhood” as a reason to not fulfill those responsibilities. Why not refer to them as young adults, I thought to myself? More recently I wondered why it is that governmental and corporate agencies are allowing individuals in their teens to claim this kind of independence. Moreover, by identifying teens—some as young as thirteen—as adults in my work, was I being complicit in the exploitation of extremely vulnerable populations? What responsibility do we
have, as scholars and activists, to ensure that our own discursive practices do no harm to the young people with whom we do research?

I have highlighted here the way that the transition to adulthood is constructed in some Mexican immigrant families. This includes an emphasis on obedience, respect, and duty to the family, the lack of a transitional adolescent phase for most, and the association of work with value. I have also shown that the families in this study were willing to confer adult status on those who met the requirements of their ethnotheory of development regardless of the child’s chronological age. But this construction of the life course is not widely shared or even understood by the majority of politicians, teachers, principals, employers, or others in “mainstream” American culture. American school systems use a construction of childhood/adolescence/adulthood that sees children as innocent, vulnerable and in need of the state’s protection. The world of education and human development, from which school systems take their cues, has increasingly extended childhood such that it has now added a life phase called “emerging adulthood” to encompass the period of attendance at college in the early twenties when youth are not expected to be fully responsible or fully adult (Arnett, 2006; Henig, 2010).

The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) restricts the kind of work that juveniles (defined as those under the age of 18 by federal law) can do. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, “Child labor provisions under FLSA are designed to protect the educational opportunities of youth and prohibit their employment in jobs that are detrimental to their health and safety. FLSA restricts the hours that youth under 16 years of age can work and lists hazardous occupations too dangerous for young workers to perform” (http://www.dol.gov/dol/topic/youthlabor/index.htm). Most states further regulate juvenile labor. These laws are a clear recognition that in our culture, children are vulnerable and in need of the protective gaze of their elders. We must ask ourselves therefore, why have so many diverse groups decided that it is acceptable for Mexican-origin children to engage in full time work, even though that means they will be out of school, and in many cases, will be engaged in labor that will have negative effects on their long-term health?

**WHAT KIND OF WORK?**

Part of the answer must lie in an examination of the labor in which these youth and their parents are engaged (see also White, 2009). There are no sectors of the American economy that do not contain a significant number of Mexican immigrants, but nearly all of those immigrants fill the bottom half of the pay scales (Borjas, 1995; Zuñiga, 2001). While employers are almost unanimous in their praise of Mexican-origin workers and their preference for hiring them, their motivations for doing so are not always straightforward. Many have told reporters and researchers that they prefer to hire Mexicans because of their work ethic, honesty, and loyalty. But it also seems that some are hiring immigrants because they are more easily exploitable; that is particularly true for those who hire undocumented workers, and triply true of those who hire undocumented minors.

Reports of the exploitation and mistreatment of workers, particularly those without documentation, routinely appear in regional newspapers (Associated Press, 1994; Benson, 2008; Carter, 2002; Honeycutt, 1998; Honeycutt, 2000; Tagami, 2001). These stories tell of unsafe working conditions, safety gear not provided, workers paid less than half the minimum wage, and the provision of mandatory housing that would not be judged fit for animals to live in. The leader of one Hispanic assistance program told me that, while many organizations are focused on helping migrants find jobs, the biggest problem is helping people who are already employed protect themselves from exploitation. He recounted several stories in which undocumented Mexicans were hired for an agreed-upon wage, worked the contract period, and then were not paid. Unscrupulous employers know that those without documentation have no legal recourse; all they can do is spread the word and warn others not to work for that employer. Those who are newly arrived in the country or newly arrived at a point in the life course where they are able to earn
wages for the family may be especially vulnerable to the unprincipled. Empirical data could be collected in the future to explore the degrees to which inexperience, willingness to obey those who are older, propensity for risk taking and other potentially development-related behaviors contribute to higher rates of injury in children and teens.

The head nurse at the community health clinic spoke to me about teens she had treated who had lost fingers while working on local factory lines, whose lungs were damaged from breathing chemicals that should have been filtered with safety masks, and many other health problems that resulted from the work in which Mexican-origin youth were engaged. Since most of these young people were employed unlawfully, they felt unable to seek legal redress for damages done to them on the job. Most felt too shy or troubled even to ask their employers to pay for a visit to a doctor or emergency room for work related injuries.

The unavoidable conclusion is that it makes good economic sense for local industries to take advantage of the large, inexpensive labor pool the teens of Mexican-origin create. It is not only the employers who benefit, however.

**CONSTRUCTED FOR WHOM?**

Since Ariès (1962) landmark book, it has become de rigueur to say that childhood is constructed, and constructed variously. In the United States, there are no clear, mutually agreed upon definitions for various life phases. While multiple legal systems (federal, state, and local) make distinctions between minors and those who have achieved the age of majority for purposes of regulating some behaviors (such as the purchase of tobacco and alcohol products), and the determination of guilt and sentencing, childhood, adulthood and adolescence are being constructed in multiple ways by different groups.

In addition to employers, it is also much more convenient for the government if youth of Mexican origin are treated discursively as adults. This is so because, unlike undocumented children, whose deportation or jailing is complex and involves juvenile detention centers, adults require no special treatment from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. If these youth are categorized as adults, they can be jailed and deported rather than provided with free lunches, health care and educations. Moreover, adults are not required by federal law to be immunized or educated. For example, over the course of my research I watched as the funding for the outreach arm of the federally funded Migrant Education Project in my research area shriveled to nothing. Where there were once two full-time staff persons searching out Mexican adolescents not attending school to inform them of their rights and offer them assistance, now there are none.

It is also easier to use inflammatory rhetoric against Hispanic migrants. For example, a state legislator said that Mexicans “carried disease into” the state and referred to Mexican children as “disease-ridden pests,” as part of his argument that immigrant children should not be educated at the state’s expense. Although this is not the same as calling children adults, it is part of shifting the weight toward the “risk” side of the compassion/threat balance, between which our public discourse on immigration always hangs.

Moreover, those working in the schools and those educational researchers concerned about why they are not attracting or retaining Hispanic/Latino youth may unwittingly be contributing to the problem by adhering too rigidly to a construction of childhood that does not allow for the maturity, responsibility and the familial duties of their Mexican-origin students. By expecting them to behave like children, those associated with schools may end up pushing youth into the very arena of adulthood they were hoping to help them forestall.

I believe it is extremely important that we avoid language that pathologizes young people for making the choices they make regarding education, and that we must simultaneously avoid language that portrays them as pinballs batted around by structures and processes over which they have no control. However, the easy answer—allowing youth the agency to identify themselves as adults—proves problematic also. I have argued here that we cannot uncritically
adopt the habit of referring to Mexican immigrant youth as adults even if they themselves would prefer it, and even if they are indeed taking on—and handling well—the responsibilities of adulthood. We cannot because as scholars and as activists who are concerned about the long term well-being of these young people, the political, economic, social and discursive stakes are too high. Each needs to be better understood, and it is my hope that others will join in the effort of deciphering them.

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