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Ethnic identity maintenance within the Latino-American church: a structuration perspective

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ABSTRACT

The Latino ethnic/immigrant church plays a significant role in maintaining the ethnic identity of its congregants. Through the perspective of structuration theory, this qualitative analysis investigates how the activities of the church impact its members and how an individual might contribute to the cultural structure of the Latino church (i.e., duality of structure). Interviews of 25 pastors from Spanish-speaking congregations in both urban and rural settings in Oregon resulted in several themes including the initial planting of the church, the denominational structure, the emergence of a new multi-ethnic cultural identity, generational differences, and the influence of Spanish.

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Introduction

A major function of a church community is to provide for the religious or spiritual needs of its members. There is an added dimension in the ethnic church context where its members' ethnic identity can also be maintained by the church and its activities. In other words, the heritage of an ethnic minority or immigrant can lead an individual to join a particular church, and the structure of the church has the ability to affect the ongoing maintenance of one's ethnic identity.

Of particular interest in this study are the cultural needs that are met through the Latino¹ ethnic church in Oregon. While the Latino population is growing rapidly throughout the U.S., the state of Oregon is a unique context because of the fewer numbers of this particular ethnic group in comparison with other states (U.S. Census, 2010). Consequently, the role of the Latino church can be perceived as more impactful in Oregon than other states with larger Latino populations. The ethnic experience, brought into and maintained by the ethnic church, is a significant factor for membership and involvement. In this study, the Latino church organization is analyzed using the lens of structuration theory (ST) (Giddens, 1984; Scott, Corman, & Cheney, 1998). Specifically addressed will be the way in which Latino members are influenced by and contribute to the church. Latino church members draw

upon the institution for practices that legitimize their particular ethnic experience, but the members' practices and behaviors also then create the unique nature of this institution.

Structuration theory

Giddens (1984) offers insight to the forces at play in a given social structure. In the development of ST, Giddens addresses the creation and reproduction of social systems and describes the unique interaction between a social structure and the individual agency that creates a relationship of mutual influence. Scott et al. (1998) extend ST to apply to organizational contexts and describe how members draw upon rules and resources as they act within the system of practices. An organization is made up of its structure and the actions of the individuals or agents who are active members within the structure. While the structure itself can be defined as a set of rules and resources, it is the actors within the organization who act within the system (Poole & McPhee, 2005). According to ST, structures are defined as properties of systems, formal and informal rules, symbolic resources, and sets of transformational relations (Scott & Myers, 2010).

The rules refer to procedures of social interaction that occur within the organizations. Resources can be defined as either allocative or authoritative. Allocative resources are the physical outputs of an organization or the means in which to produce such products, and authoritative resources are more abstract and refer to those systems of an organization that allow an individual to obtain and maintain power. Giddens (1984) describes the authoritative resources as the organization of social time-space, the production and reproduction of the whole system, and the organization of power opportunities within the system.

This structure has the ability to influence individuals in the organization and can be both constraining and enabling. These rules and resources can constrain an individual from behaving independently, and they can also allow for varying levels of freedom. Within an organization, a reciprocal effect occurs where the organization itself contributes to the identity of the individual and the individual members also add value to the organization. In the actions displayed within an organization, members not only maintain and reproduce the system and structure but they also transform them. Duality of structure is a concept that emerges from ST to describe this mutually implicative relationship between agency and structure. It is a process by which human action both produces and is mediated by structure. Poole and McPhee (2005) explain that "every action, every episode of interaction, has two aspects: It 'produces' the practices of which it is part, and it 'reproduces' the system and its structure, usually in a small way, as changed or stable" (p. 175).

A key component of a structure is the member behavior within the organization. Individuals are knowledgeable agents who are participating in the activity of an organization. Membership negotiations (McPhee & Zaugg, 2000) occur as individuals are incorporated into a given social structure (e.g. organizations), and the behaviors of each member are a set of ongoing processes (intentional and unintentional) that influence the intended meaning of participation in a given organizational function. Organizational communication research (Scott & Myers, 2010) highlights the role communication plays between social structure and agency as individuals negotiate organizational membership. Applied to the present context, members of the ethnic church act consciously and are able to reflexively

monitor their behavior (Poole & McPhee, 2005). By way of agency, Latino church members go through an individualized process in maintaining their ethnic identity and this activity has a significant impact on the structure of the church.

Ethnic identity

Ethnic identity refers to “a commitment and sense of belonging to one’s ethnic group, positive evaluation of the group, interest in and knowledge about the group, and involvement in activities and traditions of the group” (Phinney, 1996, p. 145). The amount in which an individual is committed to an ethnic background is an important predictor variable that influences numerous communicative and intergroup issues.

Phinney and Ong (2007) describe two components in the personal concept of ethnic identity: the first being the cognitive *commitment* to one’s own ethnic group, and the second component of *exploration* describes the willingness to seek out more information regarding the ethnicity. The combination of one’s commitment to a group and the pursuit of exploring the intricacies of one’s add up to the degree of ethnic identity that an individual possesses. The level of ethnic identity can be measured on a continuum, with some highly committed to the values and culture of an ethnic group, and others who may not be as frequently exposed to their ethnicity (Phinney, 1990). Ethnic identity changes over time and is activated differently in various contexts (Phinney, 1990; Phinney & Ong, 2007). Just as a person formulates a self-concept through adolescence and adulthood, the development of one’s ethnic identity grows in a similar path.

Similarly, Keefe and Padilla (1987) present a typology of different Mexican American identities. The researchers describe two major constructs to ethnic identity—cultural awareness and ethnic loyalty. Cultural awareness refers to the knowledge that individuals possess of their own ethnic culture (e.g. history, behaviors, language, and values), while ethnic loyalty refers to their commitment to the activities and members of the ethnic in-group. The latter part of the process highlights the interactive and communicative efforts made to maintain one’s commitment to the ethnic identity. These aspects of identity are related yet also distinct from one another, and those with relatively low knowledge (i.e., second- or third-generation immigrants) can still maintain high commitment to the ethnic identity.

The level of one’s ethnic identity is recognizable by members within the ethnicity and by those outside of the ethnic group. The behaviors of an individual can demonstrate the overall commitment one has to the ethnic identity development process. For example, certain cultures use language as a criterion for group membership (Giles & Johnson, 1981). Only those that are familiar with the language are granted access to information pertaining to the ethnic group, while the individuals that struggle with the language can be seen as outcasts by the ethnicity.

Role of ethnic churches

The ethnic church is a unique community that provides for an immigrant group in various capacities. Minority group members have specific cultural needs that are not met through the more dominant host culture, and ethnic churches can be better suited to meet the needs for fellowship and community, social status, social service, ethnic identity, and religious and spiritual development (Chong, 1998; Greeley, 1972; Smith, 1978). Interpersonal

relationships, entertainment, transference of information, and communal ties are also some of the relational goals that are fulfilled in the ethnic church (Min, 1992).

Researchers have posited multiple ways the church may serve its members, including the maintenance of group identity and culture (Chong, 1998). For example, studies have shown that older European immigrant groups depended on the church to maintain the cultural traditions of their country of origin. Both older and other more recent immigrant groups have also utilized their ethnic church community for emotional and social support (Greeley, 1972). Another example is the manner in which the synagogue played an essential role in preserving both Jewish ethnicity and identity throughout a long history of Jewish Diaspora (Min, 1992). Contrary to these studies, Smith's (1978) influential article on immigrant churches in the U.S. suggests that these churches were a means of assimilation or upward mobility, thus diminishing minority ethnic identity and increasing identification with the majority group. Even so, the social hierarchical context between ethnic groups contributes significantly to the function and use of the ethnic church.

The ethnic church plays a central role in providing the language education. Mohl and Betten (1991) observed that some European immigrant churches had language classes for the second generation and that "the various church language programs served to lessen the communication gap between generations" (p. 279). However, the researchers also describe how other European immigrant churches in the early twentieth century often embraced American culture in order to retain the interest and eventual support of parish children growing up in an American environment. The emerging strategy and characteristics of the U.S. Latino church are described further in the following section.

The Latino church

The Latino population in the U.S. is growing rapidly and Oregon is no exception. According to census data, persons describing themselves as Latino or Hispanic now make up nearly 12% of the state's population, a 300% increase over the past twenty years (U.S. Census, 2010). In Oregon, most Latinos are Mexican or of Mexican descent, followed by people from Guatemala. The Latino residents of Oregon are relative newcomers—most of the population growth has occurred since the late 1980s in response to legal changes. Currently, many of the first-generation immigrants from Mexico are in their mid-forties. They are more comfortable in Spanish than in English, and their English-dominant children are now coming of age and attending college or entering the work force.

Latino immigrant groups are able to find a unique community in the ethnic church, and for some immigrants, the church is the center of social life. Because some social needs are not fulfilled in other communities, the members of a Latino church rely on one another and the structure of the church. Regarding the ethnic identity maintenance of the congregants in a Latino church, the governing structure, inter- and intra-ethnic dynamics, and the language practices within this context seem to be prevalent themes within the Latino church community.

Much of the scholarship specific to U.S. Latino congregations (Barton, 1999; Machado, 1999) indicate the conflict between Anglo and Latino congregations stems from denominational issues or because the two groups are sharing a building. There are, however, some Latino congregations that work entirely independent of established Anglo church

organizations. For example, the Apostolic Assembly, a Latino denomination that has its roots in the Azusa revivals in the early twentieth century (Martin del Campo, 2004), is such a system. In other cases, evangelical groups native to the global south are actively sending missionaries to the U.S. to minister to expatriates and working with no formal ties to any U.S.-based church (Martin, 2004).

Multiple studies emphasize that immigrant congregations are not as homogeneous as they might appear to the outside observer (Aponete, 1998; Smith, 1978); this point about intra-ethnic difference (i.e., church members with various nationalities throughout Latin America) has also been made specifically about Latino churches in the U.S. (Orozco-Hawkins, 1994). Nevertheless, González (1996) states that there are common threads discernible in Latino worship services in the U.S.: “As one travels throughout the nation and worships ... in a wide variety of Latino contexts, one senses a commonality that somehow holds these various strands together” (p. 19). A commonality observed includes the participation of many churchgoers, and not just a pastor and a few leaders (Soliván, 1996). In addition, the pastor and sermon have central roles in worship services in Latin America and in Latino churches in the U.S. (Costas, 1974; Vasquez, 1999).

Some researchers have described immigrant churches as places of linguistic and cultural preservation. Ebaugh and Chafetz (2000) have explored the role of Spanish as a core ethnic identity marker in the Latino church, and Chavez (1996) concurs:

What Hispanic congregations want to pass on to their children is both their religious tradition and their cultural identity. Thus, worshiping in Spanish is as important for the children, for whom Spanish is a second language, as it is for the grandparents, for whom Spanish is their primary language. (p. 93)

This comment indicates how important language is in cultural identity. Indeed, the Latino church may be the only place where younger generations read a written text in Spanish and receive this type of cultural training.

Method

This study describes and develops an understanding of the cultural experience within the Latino ethnic church. Through the perspective of ST (Giddens, 1984), this qualitative analysis investigates how the activities of the church impact its members and how an individual might contribute to the cultural structure of the Latino church (i.e. duality of structure). Using an abductive approach to analyze the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994), the actual voices of the participants are framed within a theoretical construct and existing research (in this case, ST). Hence, the study emphasizes new empirical findings and contributes to new theoretical insights that complement, modify, refine, and/or develop the existing theory (Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

Participants

In attempt to identify all of the Protestant Latino congregations of Oregon, researchers made a listing from personal knowledge, phone books, the state business name registry, and the Internet. A purposive sampling process (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was used to select the churches in both the Portland metropolitan area and rural areas of the state based on their location, size, age, and type (independent or denominational affiliation). Some very young

churches, including little groups not yet officially organized as fully functioning churches—as well as long-established bodies were also chosen for study. All interviews were conducted with pastors ($N = 25$). It is important to note that this analysis offers pastors' opinions of how church members are influenced and contribute to the church. Consequently, the leaders' perspectives may be different than the church members' perspectives. After these interviews were conducted, the researchers decided that they had reached saturation, and no new categories or subcategories were uncovered with continued data collections. The pastors ranged from Anglos who spoke very little Spanish, to Central and South Americans holding advanced degrees, to a third-generation Mexican American for whom English was the preferred language. All participants gave their permission to be identified by name and affiliation in this manuscript.

Data collection and analysis

The principal researcher speaks Spanish at the superior level as determined by the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages, she is a non-Hispanic Anglo, and her presence in worship services never went unnoticed. The researcher is a practicing non-Pentecostal Protestant rooted in an evangelical denominational tradition. The researcher visited a regular worship service at each of the churches in the sample, collected any literature that was available, and followed up with interviews of their pastors. The questions used in the pastoral interviews are found in [Appendix](#). The pastoral interviews were conducted in English or Spanish, as the pastor preferred.

Interviews are a useful methodological tool for gathering specific, descriptive data that explore the everyday life worlds of participants (Kvale, 1996). Interviews have been successfully used to gather insights into the process of identity development (Cheney, 1983; DiSanza & Bullis, 1999), and during the course of an interview conversation, the participants can discursively construct understanding (Christensen & Cheney, 1994). These narratives of church life offer clues as to how people manage identity in this organization (Larkey & Morrill, 1995).

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted in order to collect data about the participants' experience within the ethnic church. Participants were encouraged to respond to the interviewer in dynamic conversations that unfolded naturally and extended beyond direct prompts. They also answered follow-up questions intended for clarification or elaboration. Each session lasted approximately two hours, and with participant permission, the researcher conducted, audiotaped, and transcribed verbatim all interviews.

A three-part thematic analysis was utilized to identify and narrow down the concepts under analysis. A thematic analysis is "the process of recovering the theme or themes that are embodied and dramatized in the evolving meanings and imagery of the work" (van Manen, 1990, p. 78). At the completion of the transcription process, the first stage of the analysis consisted of an initial reading of the interviews, allowing for a thoughtful re-acquaintance of each one. Notes for each interview were made as initial themes emerged. Once each interview was read in its entirety, the researchers selectively returned to the data in the second stage to extrapolate essential or revealing aspects of the phenomenon. In the final stage of analysis, the data were approached with particular consideration for the dominant themes and the elimination of less dominant themes.

Results

This analysis attempts to capture some of the emerging themes within the 25 interviews with the pastors of Latino churches in Oregon. Those themes include the way in which a Latino congregation is started and how the particular needs of a congregation are addressed in the initial planting of the church; the denominational structure of each church and how governance relates to the organization of the church; the various ethnicities represented in the Latino church and the way in which a different kind of community identity emerges; the generational differences within a Latino congregation; and the influence of Spanish on the cultural and ethnic dynamic of the congregation.

The role of agency on the Latino church structure

Initial formation of the church

The members' needs and individual contributions found within the church dictate the overall use and function of the community. The initial formation of a Latino church is dependent on the particular needs of the individuals in the community, and many of the churches in the analysis had similar accounts of how the needs of a community dictated the planting of their Latino church.

God had placed in the senior pastor's heart a ministry for Latinos, so he and other brothers and sisters in the missions group saw the need, that the population was growing here in Newport, it started there, and this missionary was contacted and they made arrangements to start the Bible studies. (Pastor Jiroo Kuroda, Newport Conservative Baptist Northwest New Hope)

Additionally, two other churches, Iglesia de Restauración Misión ELIM Internacional and Casa del Padre, began when people who had been attending services at the large southern California congregations moved to Oregon for work reasons. They missed the worship style and teachings of their home churches and requested that pastors be sent to Oregon to minister there. The role of agency is apparent in the initial formation of the ethnic church. The needs of the potential members (e.g. ethnic identity maintenance and language) are communicated to those initiating the church plant, and at its onset, the structure of the church is determined by the members. Individuals are able to reflexively monitor their behavior and strategically implement a social structure that addresses their individual needs (Poole & McPhee, 2005).

Latino church structure and its impact on identity

Denominational governance

The denominational affiliations of a Latino church can determine the structure of governance within the congregation, the amount of resources being sent to the Latino congregation, and the level of autonomy a church may be given to meet the cultural needs of its congregants. These aspects of church structure can contribute significantly to the cultural characteristics of a congregation and how the ethnic needs are addressed.

Some Latino churches affiliate strongly with predominantly Anglo denominations that provide organizational structure for Spanish-speaking congregations and provide resources for these churches. Several studies observe that while these Latino churches are given an official position, the denominational structure provides less actual voice or agency (Machado, 1999). Some congregations express the feeling of "Us versus Them" with respect to their Anglo counterparts (Armendariz, 1999). Aponte (1998) described Latino churches as being

voiceless guests that are formally included, but functionally marginalized. These Latino churches often feel like less than full partners in ministry.

In response to having a minimal voice in the denominational structure, some Latino churches have separated themselves from Anglo denominations. The Methodist Mexican churches in the southwest formed a separate structure in the 1930s that continues to this day. Barton (1999) observes:

The formation of an indigenous church is emblematic of the desire of Mexicans and Mexican Americans to determine the policy and direction of their church without the constraints of an Anglo-dominant denominational bureaucracy. This was a case of Mexicans using a separatist strategy to achieve political autonomy and cultural preservation. The establishment of an indigenous Protestant movement demonstrates the willingness of some Mexicans and Mexican Americans to enhance their self-determination when they felt constrained by existing denominational structures and practices. (p. 78)

The findings of this study indicate a wide range of affiliations with denominational governance. Some congregations do not entirely separate, but seek to place space between the denomination and the local body:

Village is part of the CB [Conservative Baptist] Northwest but walks distantly from the denomination. Village does not depend on anything from CB Northwest, really. Here today I realized that the church is really independent. Only by name is it of CB Northwest. (Pastor Mauricio Rivas, Village Baptist)

Many other congregations have a more closely connected experience with the denomination. Several pastors reported that they were quite happy with the structure and support provided by their governing body:

Yes, we have the participation of our council integrated in the structure of the Anglos, like a department. Then in the annual conferences we are given membership, voice, and vote and they hear our agenda and in the last 5 years they have provided all the documents bilingually in our denomination. There is participation at the national level. (Pastor Ulysses Vela, of Monmouth Christian)

When asked if Spanish-speaking congregations had a voice in the denominational structure, Pastor Rose Medina, of Iglesia del Pueblo AOG, said, "I think they do because one of the fastest growing churches in our movement has been the Spanish speaking churches. They're the ones that are growing, so I would say yeah that they do."

Finally, some Latino churches are not in any way related to an Anglo denomination or congregation. Pastor Nelson Reyes, of Manantiales de Vida, emphatically stated, "No! We're independent." Several evangelical groups native to the global South and unaffiliated with any Anglo denomination are actively sending missionaries to the U.S. (Jenkins, 2011; Martin, 2004). As an example, the Apostolic Assembly is a homegrown Latino denomination that has its roots in the Azusa revivals (Martin del Campo, 2004).

There are a variety of ways in which a Latino church can interact with its given denominational governing body. As evidenced, the given structure of the denomination has a significant impact on the way a Latino church is perceived and the resources it receives to accommodate for its ethnic congregation. Relatedly, ST highlights the authoritative resources of a structure, referring to those systems of an organization that allow an individual to obtain and maintain power (Giddens, 1984). The dynamics of this particular relationship between denomination and congregation then determines the limits of a church's autonomy and its flexibility to be responsive to the needs of its congregants.

A new identity beyond inter-ethnic differences

Regarding Latino immigrants specifically, García-Treto (1999) asserted that a pan-Latino identity is emerging in the U.S.—a form that includes traits from all Latino subgroups. The diversity in Latino churches can be traced to different countries of origin, regional differences within countries, urban vs. rural backgrounds, and educational and socioeconomic differences. Also adding to the diversity, members of a Latino congregation may also vary in legal status in the U.S., and fluency in either English, Spanish, or indigenous dialect. Immigrants of various backgrounds seem to band together after immigration and create something new—a new community, a new sense of identity and purpose. Vasquez (1999) describes similarly that at least one Latino Pentecostal church “define[s] their collective identity as membership in a ‘multi-national’ community of the saved, a community that cuts across narrow notions of national identity” (p. 624). Calvillo and Bailey (2015) also highlight the religious identity that deepens the connections in this pan-Latino context:

Protestants often elevate religious affiliation to the rank of master identity over and above ethnicity... Latino Protestant churches, then, may more often convey to their members a transformed individual identity characterized by a broader Christian association, rather than one tied to homelands and, thus, past particularities. (p. 63)

Several pastors in this study describe the various ethnicities that worship in the congregations and a new identity that is forged beyond nationality. The Latino churches investigated here include churchgoers from Mexico, Costa Rica, Guatemala, El Salvador, and a number of other Latin American countries. Yet, these individuals come together to worship and to meet a cultural need that is satisfied in this type of community.

We don't look at as ourselves as Guatemalan or Mexicans, we look at ourselves as the body of Christ... and I teach them that, yeah, that we are the body of Christ, if someone should ask you what religion are you, say we are not a religion, we are a living organism, the body of Christ. (Pastor Luis Ramírez, Iglesia de Jesucristo, Forest Grove)

The Hood River Christian and Missionary Alliance Church was the most diverse of the rural Latino congregations. Hood River County has one of the highest percentages of Hispanic residents, according to the 2010 U.S. Census, at 29.5%. The approximately 150 regular attendees are primarily from Mexico, but there are also individuals from Argentina, Chile, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and the Portuguese-speaking nation of Brazil. Including the U.S.-born Anglo pastor, there are eight nationalities represented in this congregation. Regarding diversity, Pastor Estey indicated that “this dynamic socially and spiritually enriches the congregation” and that during social events, all the congregants mingle. He noted that among the immature, some from one group might look down on those of another nationality, but that “as they grow spiritually the old patterns disintegrate.”

Researchers have long observed that immigrant groups are more heterogeneous than they may appear. In the U.S., they may live in an enclave with others of similar backgrounds or be one of few Latinos of their particular demographic (e.g. country of origin, preferred language, generation of immigration, etc.) living among other Latinos or people of other ethnicities. The structure of the immigrant Latino church allows for a unique mix, and it is this ethnic variety that plays a significant role in the development of a new identity within a Latino congregation. The members of the church demonstrate an active development of this new pan-Latino/religious identity (Phinney & Ong, 2007).

Transference of culture and language

Multigenerational Latino churches

The demographic characteristics of a congregation can determine the activities and structure of the organization. Specifically, a Latino church congregation can be comprised of multiple generations, and the cultural differences between these groups result in a variety of needs that must be addressed. The Latino churches of Oregon are just beginning to face the challenges brought by multiple generations. The majority of the Latino population is first-generation immigrants, but their children are now young adults, seeking their own identities and agency. These families and churches must face decisions about language, work ethic, and cultural assimilation. The impact of multiple generations worshipping together in an immigrant church is complex and result in several opportunities for conflict.

[Having both first- and second- and maybe third-generation immigrants] affects it a lot. First, it affects spiritually [development] because the children are more comfortable in English. And the parents, since they don't have communication in English, there arises the problems. Another thing that it affects is, they don't like to work, they are more comfortable. They want to move into a church building that has all kinds of ministries set up . . . they've lost the vision of starting from the ground up. I'd say 90% of them, not all of them. [Finally] it affects things economically, in the sense that since the young people are bilingual, they get good jobs. And they contribute to the American churches, instead of contributing to the churches that need them, the Hispanic churches. (Pastor José González Iglesia Luz del Pueblo, Southern Baptist)

Interestingly, the interviews also suggest that some of the Latino churches in Oregon see their role as a place where those born as second-generation members can learn about their parents' culture. The members still seem to benefit a great deal with regard to cultural development, even in such a heterogeneous environment. The first-generation immigrants are able to preserve aspects of their own heritage, and the influence of this social structure still remains important for younger members who may not have as much exposure to their own particular ethnic culture.

So, [the second generation] like to seek their identity with the Hispanics even though they are also in groups in relationship with Anglos and other Anglo churches, but they see this church as their home. Even though they are born here . . . they appreciate their roots. (Pastor Vargas, Woodburn Mennonite)

The impact of language structure

The use of language within the Latino church has a significant impact on whether or not younger generations will stay in these Latino churches. Second- and third-generation immigrants, who are mostly youth, often speak little Spanish, and, as these individuals grow up speaking English well, many leave the monolingual Spanish-speaking church for bilingual or English-only churches. Choosing a language for worship services and Christian education is an ongoing issue (Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000; González, 1996) and the linguistic characteristic of a Latino church impacts the members of a congregation.

What I am saying is that if we do not attend to [the second generation], giving them something in their primary language, which is English, they are going to leave. (Pastor Mauricio Rivas, Village Baptist)

Some from the second or third generation find the use of Spanish to be challenging, so churches are pushed to accommodate the linguistic structure by providing some or all of their activities in English or in both languages. All of the pastors indicated that they and

their leadership have wrestled with this issue. For example, over 50% of current attendees at Hood River Christian and Missionary Alliance church are first-generation immigrants who speak Spanish fluently. However, the church has made the decision to become fully bilingual. Pastor Estey indicated that this decision was made “for the sake of the second generation.” During the site visit, the researcher observed that many of the songs had English translation projected along with the Spanish lyrics, that scripture reading was done in both languages, and that the Sunday school classes, worship services, and informal activities were all bilingual in Spanish and English.

The decision to make the children and youth classes bilingual was out of need, because many of the youth, the second generation, they speak ... not very well ... they speak Spanish but they don't get it very well. And in English ... they connect. (Pastor Mauricio Rivas, Village Baptist)

The duality of structure within an organization describes a reciprocal effect where human action both produces and is mediated by structure (Poole & McPhee, 2005). The rules and resources of the organization shape the experience for its members, and the members simultaneously produce and maintain the system and structure. The Latino church acts as a vehicle to transfer cultural qualities from one generation to another. There seems to be a unifying understanding throughout most congregations that celebrates the ethnic heritage of the community, and a structure that helps to develop this identity is welcomed. However, the congregants also exhibit resistance regarding how the transference of culture should take place. The leadership of the Latino church is tasked with making these evolving adjustments in order to stay relevant. Here, the influence of agency is seen as the varying needs of each represented generation in the church pull the social structure into different directions.

Discussion

For the ethnic immigrant group, church life is more than just religious practice. Church provides its members community, social status, social services, ethnic identity, and religious development. In this analysis, ST was used to investigate the membership experience within the Latino church in regard to ethnic identity maintenance. The structure of the church itself has the ability to impact the experiences of its members, and simultaneously, the members of this institution contribute and change the structure of this community to fulfill certain needs. Specifically, then, the behavior of a member not only reproduces the system and structure but it also transforms them through the small and large changes that are made. The concept of duality of structure brings together and addresses the tension between individual action and structure-based influence on the identification process in an organization (Giddens, 1984).

Scott and Myers (2010) pay special attention to the communicative elements of this interplay between structure and agency. They argue that both organizations and members are mutually adaptive throughout membership negotiation. Although organizational practices may appear stable, they are constantly in flux, changing through interaction that produces and reproduces various aspects of their membership. Membership is accomplished through communication, and it is within communicative contexts (e.g. interpersonal, group, and organizational) that the organizational structure is maintained. Therefore, members draw upon institutions for practices, but the practices of members in fact create institutions (Poole & McPhee, 2005). The findings in this study offer insight into the communicative processes that allow for ethnic identity maintenance.

Our understanding of ethnic identity of Latinos in the U.S. is slowly becoming more nuanced. Phinney and Ong (2007) explain that the personal concept of ethnic identity is made up of an individual's commitment to the identity and then its exploration. It is imperative, at times, that certain ethnic minorities maintain and strengthen ethnic identity because their group generally holds a lower status and both stereotypes and racism occur regularly in an ethnic social hierarchy. The Latino church provides this important space where individuals can demonstrate their commitment to their ethnicity and also participate in its exploration.

The churches in this study were founded on the initial needs of the ethnic community. The pastors emphasized the importance of the congregation's participation in church life and how the needs of the members manifested into the beginnings of the church. The testimonies describing the formation of these Latino churches demonstrated how the particular needs of a congregation were addressed in the initial planting of the church. As the community of Latinos grew in a specific area, pastors were recruited and called to plant these Latino churches. The needs of the congregation continue to be communicated to leadership and still seem to drive the direction and function of these churches.

Regarding church structure, there are a variety of formal and informal systems that contribute to the culture of a Latino church congregation. Denominational oversight by external organizations impacts church governance, and the communication between entities affects the overall culture. While some Latino churches are included intentionally into predominantly Anglo denominational bodies, other Latino congregations seem to feel excluded and are not given a needed voice (Machado, 1999). In the latter relationship, congregations feel more isolated and set apart in comparison with their Anglo counterparts. The pastors in this study describe how this impacts the political hierarchy found within the denomination as well as the overall leadership in their own church.

The various ethnicities represented in the Latino church and community add to the unique nature of this context. As an example of structure impacting agency, Calvillo and Bailey (2015) found that "the religious orientations of evangelical and even many mainline Latino Protestant churches may more frequently lead to the shedding of ethnic markers" (p. 75). The Latino church functions as a common space for a wide variety of Spanish-speaking Latinos, and the commonality found between the various ethnicities in this organization allows for the formation of a different kind of cultural identity (García-Treto, 1999). Demographic diversity was found throughout most of the congregations of this analysis (e.g. countries of origin, regional differences within countries, urban vs. rural backgrounds, educational and socioeconomic differences), yet the activities of the Latino church seemed to prompt a commitment to this group of fellow Latinos.

Further evidence of member influence could also be seen in the intergenerational nature of these congregations. Latino churches are unique in that there are several generations that have distinct goals that need to be met. Often due to both language and cultural differences, an unmanageable gap exists between generations. The Latino church is able to adapt its structure to satisfy the needs of its members and function as a bridge between the generations.

Finally, the use of language was a significant theme that demonstrated the ethnic loyalty of the Latino congregation and the exploration of identity maintenance in the behavior of Latino church congregants. A commitment to the language, values, and ethnic identity exists throughout several generations. Keefe and Padilla (1987) found that while cultural

awareness declined from first-generation immigrants to subsequent generations, the ethnic loyalty to the ethnic culture of origin remained high. The younger generations in the Latino church may demonstrate a diminished knowledge of the culture (e.g. a decline in language acquisition) but there still seems to be strong evidence of loyalty to the ethnic church and its identity building activities (e.g. a commitment to stay connected to this group in spite of difficulty with the dominant language).

Further evidence of the duality of structure emerged within the testimony of the interviewed pastors, as the church members were seen responding to the given linguistic standards of the church (i.e., Spanish) and concurrently voicing a need for bilingualism in the growing congregations with multiple generations. In an article focused on Latino Presbyterian churches, Chavez (1996) commented:

The conflict around language is a product of the congregation's commitment to be fully inclusive, to enable each and every member of the family to participate in worship. As the dialogue about language continues, it has raised important questions about identity and mission for Hispanic congregations. (p. 93)

While there seems to exist a commitment to hold onto the Spanish language, many Latino church pastors exclaimed that they have difficulty with this decision. The language that is used has the potential of disenfranchising the younger members of the congregation (González, 1996), and this continues to be a concern for Latino churches. As a result, churches seem satisfied with the preservation of the ethnic cultural characteristics in the Latino congregation and are more willing to accommodate the linguistic structure by providing some or all of their activities in English or in both languages.

Limitations

This study is limited in the representation of the immigrant experience. It portrays the perspective of twenty-five purposefully selected Latino church pastors within the state of Oregon. While the material presented draws from both the author's observations during a worship service and pastoral interviews, the views of the congregation are not necessarily represented. As Luebke (1991) warns:

Indeed, one of the most serious hazards connected with research in immigration history is to attribute evidence drawn from the leaders of a group to the rank and file members of that group. Excessive reliance on such elite-type evidence may easily distort perceptions of group attitudes and behavior. (p. 210)

Future research should represent a broader spectrum of church participant responses and this may lead to the emergence of uniquely different themes pertaining to ethnic identity maintenance.

Conclusion

The organizational aspects of the ethnic church allow members to maintain patterns of ethnic identity. For ethnic minorities in the U.S., actively participating in ethnic congregations can legitimize the various aspects of the immigrant/ethnic-shared culture, thereby solidifying an individual's commitment to a particular ethnic group. As this ethnic church structure interrelates with the Latino value system, a powerful sense of group consciousness and identity is created. Simultaneously, the participants in this

community make deliberate efforts to enhance the ethnic influence within the structure of the church. The ethnic church continues to play a powerful role in the maintenance of ethnic identity, and this is particularly crucial in a social context where diversity is encouraged and celebrated.

Note

1. “Latinos” or “Hispanics,” while lumped together as a minority group in the U.S., are really quite diverse. They have different countries of origin, speak myriad variations of Spanish, English, and indigenous dialects, represent different educational, class, and racial groups, and may be second- or third-generation immigrants who do not speak Spanish at all. While these two terms have differing nuances of meaning, for this study, they will be used interchangeably. Not all U.S. Latinos are Roman Catholic. A growing number, perhaps one-third, are Protestant (Maldonado, 1999).

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Appendix

Interview questions

Language

- Which language does the church use for these events: Sunday school, worship service, informal activities?
- How did you arrive at the decision to have your services in English or Spanish?

Origin of church and denominational ties

- Please describe your denomination's administrative structure for Latino churches.
- Please describe your interaction as pastor with your church's administrative structure whether it is a formal denomination or not? How frequent? In what language? Who initiates?
- Do you see a struggle for Latino churches/pastors to be included in your denomination?

Demographics

- Briefly describe the age breakdown of those who attend.
- Tell me about the church attendance or participation of the adolescents in your church?— Do they stay actively involved here, attend a different church, or drop out altogether?
- *What percent of the active church-goers are first-generation immigrants?*
- *What countries are they from?*
- *Of your immigrant population, what percentage of your congregation would you say attend an evangelical church before immigrating?*

- *If your church has people from different Latin American countries of origin, how does this affect the church body?*
- *Do people from different countries mingle socially or stay separate?*
- *Do you observe a sense that one group of origin looks down on another?*
- *Do you think the pastor's country of origin impacts whether people from other countries also come here or don't come?*
- *If your church has both recent immigrants and second- or third-generation immigrants, how does this affect the church body?*
- *Please describe the country of origin and educational achievement of your board members.*

Interactions/community

- *Does your church interact with other congregations?*
- *Which ones?*
- *Why these particular churches?*
- *How often and for what reasons?*
- *Describe your church's activities regarding missions.*
- *What kinds of ministries does your congregation have? Do these ministries serve only Latinos? If not, tell me about those who participate.*
- *Do you or other church members participate actively in the community in non-church related activities?*
- *What needs would you say the greater Latino population in this area has that are not being met by existing organizations or programs?*
- *Do you see a struggle for Latino churches/pastors to be included in the Christian community of Oregon?*