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William G. Tierney¹

Abstract

This article focuses on Danny, a low-income, first-generation college student living in Los Angeles, California, and the challenges he has faced in preparing for college. The author describes how Danny's identity and "cultural flexibility" have aided him as he applied to college. Four themes dominate Danny's life: his neighborhood, his father and family, school, and boxing and college. The author argues that better understanding such students might enable researchers and policymakers to create ideas for educational reform in a more cautious and meaningful manner. Life history is one way to gain a better understanding.

Keywords

cultural flexibility, cultural heterogeneity, identity, life history, qualitative methods

Danny looks down as he talks, speaking in a whisper. He clenches his hands. I do not realize it just yet, but I will learn to look at the muscles in his arms that tense when he speaks like this to me. We have known one another for about a month and on this quiet Sunday afternoon in September he is taking—what for him I will learn—is a major risk. He is telling me about his home life and his father:

We have always had a lot of yelling, shouting, in my house. My father gets very angry. He takes it out on my mother, my sisters, and me. Especially me. I'm the youngest. The only boy. I have never lived up to his expectations. I have failed and because I have failed he has punched me, beat me, yelled. Yelled to tell me to become a man, not to disappoint him. I have disappointed him a lot.

Danny turns 18 over the course of the year that I work with him in applying to college. He comes from a low-income Latino family in Los Angeles where he has lived all of his young life. The family owns their house, but it is in a poor neighborhood where crime is common. He dresses as any young Latino teenager might—sneakers, jeans, and a nondescript T-shirt. If the weather is cold, he might wear a brown zip-up hoodie and a green or gray long-sleeved thermal shirt. He might have a blue knit cap pulled low when he is outside, but takes it off as soon as he comes inside. He has no tattoos and never wears baggy pants—people who dress like that are "lowlives," he says. He is light-skinned, which has caused him to be ridiculed among other Latino teenagers, especially when he blushes and his face flushes red. He has the thinnest of beards, which seems to be perpetually a

day old. He has dark black hair and intense brown eyes that dart from side to side when he speaks. I tell him at one point to look at me when he speaks and he looks away saying, "I'm not very good at that. Looking at people." A majority of the pictures of him on Facebook are of him gazing straight at the camera, but of the 109 photographs, he smiles in none of them. He looks into the camera intently and seriously without the hint of a laugh, grin, or even a frown. He is emotionless. He is a serious, good-looking young man who very few people know; his Facebook friends are fewer than 150. When I ask others at the school if they know Danny most do not, although a few say they think they know who he is.

He gasps for air as he speaks and his head sways back and forth:

I don't know why. I don't know why. Your father is supposed to protect you, love you. From as long as I can remember I have tried to figure that out. What did I do to this man? What have I done that has made him act this way? I used to think that I was no good, that it was my fault. I still might. I don't know why he did those things.

In some respects, this is a story without an ending. I have worked with Danny for 2 years as he applied to, got accepted

¹University of Southern California, Los Angeles, USA

Corresponding Author:

William G. Tierney, Pullias Center for Higher Education, Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California, Waite Phillips Hall, Room 701, 3470 Trousdale Parkway, Los Angeles, CA 90089-4037, USA. Email:wgtiern@usc.edu

in, and started university. My purpose here is to highlight how what I shall call “cultural flexibility” has aided Danny as he applied to college. One’s identity changes not only by the movement from high school to college, but also in the processes involved in applying to college. Although those who are privileged inevitably go through any number of personality shifts due to adolescence, my focus has more to do with what we expect of the poor when they apply to institutions that are vastly different from what they know. Danny’s struggles are emblematic not only of a young man who has suffered abuse at the hands of his father, but also of an individual who comes from an impoverished neighborhood and sees a college education, however dimly understood, as a way out of that environment. At the same time, as we shall see, he wants to preserve some of his life, not simply erase the slate clean and start over. He is culturally nimble while at the same time he expresses firm, some may say rigid, definitions of right and wrong, good and bad. I shall suggest that such a portrait is different from those who define individuals such as Danny embedded in a culture of poverty that is so overwhelming that little opportunity exists for change, or that one’s culture inevitably leads to one or another route.

Accordingly, how he navigates these waters, and my role in helping him, is what I explore here. I use the theoretical notions of cultural heterogeneity and cultural flexibility to highlight how Danny has come to terms with his life. I use life history as a way to explore these issues.

Cultural Flexibility and Reframing Identity

As Danny heads off to the university we meet one last time. “I want you to remember that you can always tell me things,” I say yet again. Talking about his past has conjured up at times painful memories and also raised questions about his identity that have not always been comfortable. He nods “yes” and I continue: “I also want to see you when you come home on the weekends every now and then. But I hope you stay there for the first month, that you don’t come home.”

He looks past me and silence envelopes us. Finally, he says, “I’m not doing that. I’d miss my family too much. I’m coming home on Friday. I want to watch the fight Saturday night. I’m not staying at school on the weekends.” I laugh that at least he is comfortable enough to tell me the truth; what I had wanted to hear was that he would be more willing to stay at school. It turns out that during his freshman year he comes home every weekend.

How to study the experiences of low-income youth has been of theoretical and methodological concern for quite some time (Deyhle, 1995; O’Connor, Lewis, & Mueller, 2007). One of the key aspects that has come under investigation is the impact of one’s culture on educational success

and failure (Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005), but it also has been used as a way to consider its utility for low-income ethnic minorities (e.g., Moll, 1992; O’Connor, Mueller, Lewis, Rivas-Drake, & Rosenberg, 2011; Tierney & Jun, 2001). The position I take here is that either dichotomy—culture as a disabler or enabler—tends to essentialize culture and the responsiveness of those under investigation. Rather than adopt a stance that assumes a “culture of poverty” exists as some maintain, or that such a position is entirely unwarranted, misses the heterogeneous responses of individuals to the forces at work in their neighborhoods and assumes a univocal interpretation of the realities that youth confront and enact. Youth such as Danny have a much more heterogeneous response to their life circumstances than research generally provides.

Indeed, Small, Harding, and Lamont (2010) point out that all too often researchers have defined the identities of youth in neighborhoods as if they are all similar when in fact cultural heterogeneity is what actually exists. That is, a diversity of cultures exists in neighborhoods rather than a uniform one. They note, “Although youth may live in the same neighborhood, they may experience it in quite different ways depending on how they spend their time, whom they spend their time with, and where they spend their time” (p. 6). Although I entirely agree with such a presupposition, I wish to extend the idea of cultural heterogeneity a step further: Youth not only have different experiences in the same neighborhoods, but they also interpret similar experiences in those neighborhoods in different manners. To reduce Danny as a quasi low-income “everyman” both misses the interplay of identity and culture at work in a community and shortchanges his life as if it is only important if it speaks to larger issues.

Small and his colleagues (2010) maintain that a great many different cultural forces are at work in low-income neighborhoods, but previous portraits all too often have been singular in their analyses. Thus, low-income neighborhoods have been seen to have gangs, crime, poverty, and little more. Proponents of cultural heterogeneity acknowledge that gangs exist, but also highlight students who are determined to succeed; whereas a unitary portrait only highlights dropouts, others now point out that many students are also university-bound. Although abandoned houses may dot the landscape, urban gardens also exist, and so on.

My point here, however, is that heterogeneity is more than a random assortment of cultural artifacts (houses, peer groups, and the like). How individuals interpret their environments and cultures is also heterogeneous. As we shall see, many might predict that Danny has had such a difficult life that anyone in his situation would likely drop out of school and succumb to any other number of life’s tragedies. The social consequences of growing up in a poor neighborhood have been well documented (Jencks & Mayer, 1990).

Indeed, men of color in general, and Latino males in particular, lag significantly in participation rates in higher education and especially in 4-year institutions (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2011). The events of Danny's life may well have stymied some and pushed others into drugs or gangs, but the challenges he faced made him more determined and focused. Cultural heterogeneity, then, is not simply a framework for understanding human actions, but an interpretive schema that seeks to come to terms with how individuals make sense of their worlds.

Some (Wang & Gordon, 1994; Waxman, Gray, & Padron, 2003; Wolin & Wolin, 1993) will argue that sense-making of this kind is an individualist framework whose scaffolding is resilience. Schools and other social organizations may be able to promote resilience, but the unit of analysis is the individual and his or her response to negative (or positive) stimuli. From this perspective, Danny and others like him are resilient. Where others flounder, they succeed. I do not quarrel with the assumption that individuals have agency and, to a certain extent, are able to shape their lives. But I want to move beyond the assumption that we are all atomized beings capable of whatever actions we desire, as if by simple sheer determination one individual will succeed and another will not. Instead, individual agency exists within a culturally heterogeneous framework that makes academic success possible for some and not for others. The challenge is to understand this cultural framework, how individuals make sense of it, and given that sense-making develop suggestions that enable them to succeed.

Lamont and Small (2008) and others (Small & Newman, 2001) have made useful progress in categorizing a taxonomy of neighborhood effects that may or may not impact a child growing up. From this perspective, peers, families, social institutions, and the like fall into discrete categories that shape and inform how students respond to their environments. What we need to do with such a taxonomy, however, is not to use it as a checklist, as if all youth encounter static social actors and organizations. Rather, we need to employ it to see how students interpret their environment. I am putting forth the proposition that networks are not social facts that exist awaiting for individuals to make use of them. Rather, social capital is something created within neighborhoods and employed differently by different social actors.

The idea of agency and its interaction with culture meshes with Prudence Carter's (2010) suggestion of cultural flexibility. She writes, "Cultural flexibility. . . constitutes the behavioral or human practices embraced by an individual with a flexible mind—his or her cross-cultural participation" (p. 1533). Such a framework moves away from the assumption that one is either firmly embedded in a rigid cultural frame or a homogeneous one where everyone is similar. Cultural flexibility focuses on local social and cultural practices and struggles to come to terms with how individuals make sense of their world. Of necessity,

an understanding of the changing nature of an individual's identity is paramount, but those changes can only be understood within local cultural contexts such as a neighborhood (or village). Sussman (2000) has pointed out that students who are culturally flexible are able to interact in multiple cultural settings. Such flexibility, however, necessitates code-switching and an understanding of different cultural and social contexts. As I discuss below, in some respects Danny has a rigid definition of "right" and "wrong" and "good" and "bad" based upon the environment in which he has been raised. However, one's values need not suggest that the individual is inflexible. Rather, the potential exists that one may participate in multiple narrative scripts in large part because of an understanding of who he or she is. My point here is that cultural flexibility ought not to imply that an individual is a cultural chameleon who blends in wherever he or she is. Carter (2010) points out how culturally flexible individuals, "may maintain strong levels of individualism or self-views since they participate in and move across diverse social and cultural environments" (p. 1536). In this light, Danny does not reject who he is but uses it to frame how he will function on the streets of his local neighborhood or on a university campus where a majority of people have lived dramatically different lives.

The theoretical propositions of cultural heterogeneity move away from notions of culture as either determinative or merely the composite of a society's beliefs, norms, values, and attitudes (Lamont & Small, 2010). Although Clifford Geertz's notion of culture as interpreted is certainly in line with what I am suggesting, his work never looked at how primarily urban populations in modern societies in poor neighborhoods made sense of their lives. Lamont and Small (2010) make the useful point that rather than assume that one's culture causes poverty, what investigators need to come to grips with is how poverty impacts culture—"how the lack of resources affects the way in which people perceive their social circumstances" (p. 170). That is, rather than assume that the poor simply need to adapt their ways to the mores of the dominant class to escape poverty scholars ought to understand better the microprocesses at work in culturally heterogeneous neighborhoods.

I take such a notion one step further and suggest that of paramount importance is to come to terms with how individuals make sense of their worlds. To be sure, individuals interpret actions as members of a group or groups, but they do so not in a rigid fashion as if all people think and act alike. Instead, rather than understanding individuals as purveyors of self-perpetuating ideas that do not change, I am putting forth the notion that individuals have the potential to be culturally flexible. In order to understand cultural flexibility I have focused on one individual over time and accordingly called upon the life history method to help me make sense of Danny's young life.

The Utility of an N of 1: Life History Research and Methods

"I've had a different sort of life," he says early on in our conversations. He continues, "I went to school and everything, but I was alone at school, especially middle school. If what you want is a typical kid, that wasn't me."

Danny's life history is a singular version of reality. Although some have argued that life histories can be a "portal" through which one gains understanding of how a culture functions, I reject such a notion. Linde (1993) has described the portal approach in the following way: "The portal approach attempts to use the life history to learn about some reality external to the story, which the life history is presumed to mirror" (p. 48). Such a methodology is an entryway into, and representation of, a culture as if an "n" of 1 is descriptive of larger realities. Although I understand such a perspective and do not necessarily reject it for all projects, I have worked from a different perspective with Danny.

I have tried to understand the narrative processes Danny utilized during his senior year in high school and prior to entering college. A focus on process is similar to what Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot (2004) has called "portraiture." She has written,

In trying to create "life drawings" and trace the connections between individual personality and organizational culture, I felt the echoes of being on the other side of the artists' palette. I wanted to develop a document, a text that came as close as possible to painting with words . . . I wanted to merge the systematic and careful description of good ethnography with the evocative resonance of fine literature. (p. 6)

What I have tried to do, then, is to provide the thick description of Danny's life with the poetry of his language about growing up in difficult circumstances.

Inevitably, the role of the life historian comes into play in a way that frequently does not enter into more positivist methodologies. Danny, for example, was at first hesitant to meet with me outside of the high school's college center or at his home. Eventually, I finally met him at my office, but only after I had met his mother. After several months, and after I proposed more formal interviews for this life history, we met at my house, usually in the early afternoon. Our conversations ranged over many topics and my ability to relate to him certainly framed what he said. I am suggesting, for example, that because I am a White man who was considerably older than he, that our relationship was different from Victor Rios (2011) who interviewed young Black and Latino boys. Rios was closer in age, background, and ethnicity with his interviewees than I was with Danny. I am not suggesting that my data were better or worse than that of Rios, but rather, one's subject position frames the context of the interactions (Deyhle, 2009).

In addition to 40 hours of interviews, I also had a number of casual and informal meetings with Danny as well as numerous e-mail and phone exchanges. I followed his use of social media such as Facebook, and I also helped him with his college application. In addition to listening to the recordings numerous times, I transcribed the interviews I wished to use for quotes.

However, I also interviewed an adolescent. Sometimes he spoke with certainty about a particular topic only to reverse himself several months later. A strength of this kind of research is that it stretches out over a long time horizon, but what is one to make of narrative contradictions? Throughout most of the interviews Danny was very bitter about how his father had treated him. As he headed off to university, however, Danny was more accepting, if not forgiving. "I guess I've resolved it," he said in one of our last interviews. Perhaps, in some way, our work together enabled him to get to that point, but such a statement highlights the narrative arc that existed in our interactions. Again, I am not so much interested in portraying Danny as someone with a rigid identity fixed in time and space, but the flexibility of his young life creates a challenge in constructing an analysis that presumably should be a formative summation. The result is that this text is more a work in progress, or a trial of ideas, rather than a traditional argument that one might see in positivist texts.

Our interactions were first formal and focused on filling in a college application in the college counseling office and they eventually evolved to more personal issues of his life. "I think about these things all the time," he says one day, "but I just don't talk about them." The manner in which Danny talks about his life, however, is neither linear nor consistent. People do not recall their lives as a trajectory from birth to the present. In Danny's case, as we shall see, sometimes a recent event in high school made him recall something that happened years ago. I also needed to ask him about what I heard as inconsistencies but he did not, such as how he defines masculinity, proper behavior, or even his own identity. Because he has been a voracious reader, and he has a desire, as I discuss below, to "act properly," his language is sometimes formal, even stilted.

In subsequent conversations with his counselor, teachers, mother, a sister, and his friends, they confirm what Danny says. His friends, for example, laugh at his language, but also respect that he never swears. His teachers speak of him as quiet and reserved. His mother acknowledges that he "has had a difficult life" and wishes that it could have been different. Everyone speaks of him as shy, and hesitant to participate in group activities or go out on dates with girls. Indeed, what is consistent in Danny's life is when I have triangulated what he has said with interviews with other individuals, or what he has written to me in an e-mail or on Facebook, or what I have observed him do in public and private situations.

Identity and Danny's Fight for Life

After Danny has applied to college and we begin working our way through financial aid applications, I ask him what he thinks about me interviewing him for a study. I will interview him and write up this article; he will have control over what I write and eventually have to agree that I can submit the article for publication. "What do you think?" I ask, and he looks straight ahead and nods, "That would be cool."

Beginning in March and proceeding until he begins college in September, we meet about once a week; we continue to meet and interact with one another during his 1st year at university by way of additional meetings and interviews as well as phone calls and e-mails. During that 1st year, he comes to my house and I record the sessions. No one can present the entirety of one's life and collapse it into a manageable text. I ask him how he and I might make sense of these various conversations in which we have engaged. Although the interviews proceed chronologically from his initial years, we agree at one point that four major themes have dominated his life: (a) his neighborhood, (b) his father and family, (c) school, and (d) boxing and college.

The Neighborhood

In one of his essays when he applies for college, Danny writes,

I live in a part of Los Angeles run by the Temple Street Gang. My house is located in an area surrounded by houses with unfinished paint jobs, broken windows covered by plastic, and tagging on walls that reads "TST13" to point out who runs the neighborhood. Homeless men sleep on the street and the area suffers heavily from drugs and gang members that constantly terrorize the community as if they were some sort of an infectious disease.

As a kid, I fell asleep hearing gunshots, people shouting either in fear or anger, and the distant sound of police cars responding to yet another call for help. Hearing gunshots at night and being surrounded by the constant fear of death never gave me the incentive to go outside and interact with the rest of my community. I stayed home watching cartoons and playing games in a sad attempt to escape the reality that was my life.

When he speaks of the neighborhood he usually speaks in negative terms. His house is a stone's throw from a freeway and the rumble of cars passing by is constant. In the other direction is a busy street with stores and a hamburger joint that many people frequent, but not Danny. "It's not safe walking around," he tells me. Until a year or so ago when he got his own car sometimes his mother or father took him to school and picked him up, but usually he walked to and from school alone.

"When I was 12 that got me into trouble," he recalls.

I ended up behind two guys who looked like colossal figures dressed in baggy clothing. They turned around, shoved me against a chain link fence, and yelled, "Dame tu pinche dinero!" (Give me your fucking money!). I froze; I didn't know what was happening. They were irritated that I wasn't complying with them and began to pound away at my stomach. I fell on the ground and curled up into a fetal position. They had cracked my ribs on my left side.

All this occurred in a busy intersection in the middle of the afternoon. No one helped Danny and he ended up calling his family. "We even reported it to the police," he says, "but in neighborhoods like mine these sorts of incidents are common and the cops couldn't be bothered."

Another time a friend and he were walking home from school and a man came up behind them. "He was a gangster, really," says Danny and summarizes, "He demanded our money." His friend gave him the little money that he had but Danny recalls, "I was oblivious about what to do, how to react. Ricardo told the guy to leave me alone." The robber left Danny and his friend and they never saw him again but Danny remembers that day over half a decade ago and says, "It was right near the park in daylight. It scared me—freaked me out."

The result is that he spends a great deal of time by himself in his house. He recognizes that he is an outlier. He tells me one day, "Some of my friends have died just living around here and others have joined gangs; none of my friends are applying to a good college." Danny attends a school with a dropout rate of upward of 50%. The college-going rate of graduating seniors is less than 30% and most will go to a community college. Only three of his friends are applying to the sort of institution Danny will eventually attend.

The school is emblematic of low-income urban schools during a time of fiscal constraint. There are fewer Advanced Placement (AP) courses than in better schools, and students such as Danny usually do not take the AP exam; if they do, their scores are akin to what Danny has gotten—all 1s and 2s with one 3 in his favorite subject—English. SAT preparation is nonexistent. There is one college counselor in the entire school. Because of budget cutbacks there are no summer classes, and teacher furloughs have resulted in 1 week less of school during the year. Danny and his fellow students will graduate from high school without ever having written a five-page paper. One result is that over 93% of the students are told in their senior year that they are not ready for college-level writing and/or math.

Twice as many households in Danny's neighborhood earn less than US\$15,000 per year compared with other neighborhoods in the state. The total crime index for his neighborhood is almost twice the national average, while

the murder rate is almost three times the national average. The risk of robbery is three times the national average. Whereas 80% of adults have graduated from high school nationally, less than half the adults in Danny's neighborhood have a high school degree.

Unemployment is at 12% in the city but in Danny's immediate neighborhood the rate is even higher—approaching 20%. The educational attainment level of the neighborhood is among the lowest in the city, and the foreclosure and bankruptcy rates are among the highest. His house has a locked fence around it, and then there is a locked door in front of another double locked front door. The street is not busy, but there are frequently people on it, some with shopping carts that hold their belongings and others who simply seem like they have nowhere in particular to go. There is an underpass that has graffiti spray-painted on it and smells of urine. The sidewalk is cracked and uneven, but there are also homeowners up and down the street all of whom live inside a gated home.

Father and Family

Danny's father is 75 and his mom about a decade younger. He has four sisters, and the oldest is old enough to be his mother. Indeed, Danny's best friend is his nephew, Mike, who is less than a year younger than Danny. When we start talking about when Danny was a child he says,

One of my first memories was playing outside with Mike. He had chalk and we were drawing on the driveway. We were drawing how much we loved our mothers and I drew mine all the way to the street and my father saw the lines and got really mad. I was about four or five. He dragged us inside and hit us; he kept hitting us. Bam! Bam! Bam! He hit me on the face and pushed me to the floor. He was yelling and I got really scared. It was the first thing I remember and it made an impact on me. I guess you could say it made me the way I am because I'm cautious around adults. It's a Darwinian kind of thing. You know, once you put your hand in the fire, and get burned, you learn not to do it again. That was my childhood.

Although Danny has pleasant memories of his past, they are mostly clouded by those that are painful. "Sometimes I have a feeling of nostalgia—a good memory," he says in response to my question if there is anything pleasant he remembers. "But I'm not even sure if it happened. Sometimes I recall a sunny room and I have this feeling of joy that everything turned out okay. But I can't remember the room, really."

On some occasions the family had no money to celebrate holidays such as Thanksgiving or Christmas, so even family gatherings were largely absent and what he recalls are fights that happened.

The stories from Danny's childhood that are painful to remember are ever-present. They come up naturally and

easily, not because they are enjoyable to remember, but because he is constantly thinking about them. He tells me one day that he had to deal with the sounds of terror not only because of his neighborhood but also because of what went on inside his house. "When I was 7," Danny says one day,

My father arrived home from a bar and immediately began arguing with my mother. Trying to ignore yet another argument between my mother and father, I tried to lose myself in cartoons on television as a way to wall off the brewing conflict. Suddenly my father hit my mother and knocked her down. Her body lay on the floor as he lay atop of her. I was shocked. There was nothing but disturbing silence and the sound of my father's fist hitting my mom. I tugged at my father's arm to get him to stop. He responded by swinging wildly at my stomach. I began screaming for help, but no one heard me. My father threw me in the bedroom closet, where my shouts for help became muffled and distorted. I was trapped.

Danny spent the night in the closet. His comment about putting one's hand in the fire and getting burned is actually incorrect insofar as one time getting burned is enough and the injured party is not likely to do it again. The painful events of his childhood and adolescence were constant rather than singular largely because he was not the one causing the pain. Danny concludes, "I recognize that the fear my father instilled in me during my childhood has influenced almost every action I've ever taken." The problem for Danny is that the fear of his father was not only one of physical violence but also psychological. "My father often told me, 'you're no good,'" recalls Danny. "And you sort of pick that up and think you're no good or you try to do things so no problems happen." His father once picked him up from elementary school and on the way home Danny's car door fell ajar. His father grimaced and Danny became terrified at what awaited him once they got home. "I felt like I was never good enough," he says simply one day. "I never measured up."

Danny's inability to measure up in his father's eyes led to two significant events that changed his young life. On the day Danny was mugged as he returned from school, his father came to pick him up. His father felt ashamed yet again of his young son. Danny tells me,

When I tried explaining what happened I could tell that he was disappointed in me; once again I wasn't his ideal son, much to his chagrin. I felt the same way. My father decided I needed to learn how to box. I hated it. Boxing demanded more than I could give, but I persevered. I worked out every day after school.

Over time, Danny develops a remarkable physical routine for anyone, much less a teenager. He runs four miles every morning and he works out every afternoon. The structure that boxing has provided affords him an escape from

the uncertainty of his home life. Ironically, the man who has caused Danny so much pain is also the individual who provided the outlet that transformed, if not saved, Danny's life. And yet, even boxing created an opportunity for his father to be disappointed:

The day came for my first fight. I felt well prepared after months of training, but things couldn't have gone worse. I engaged in a brawl where I sustained the greatest beating imaginable. My opponent was 19 and 154 pounds; I was 14 and 145 pounds and totally inexperienced. I lost that fight and once again felt ashamed. My father was silent the whole day. I felt disgusted and sad. I trained even harder.

One might question the advisability of having an adolescent fight someone 5 years his senior and 10 pounds heavier, but the result of Danny's initial defeat led to increased training. He subsequently won the next 15 fights, but still never heard praise from his father's lips.

"As I got older," says Danny, "I saw him as less scary. I was growing up and he was an old man. I was a bit more courageous and I was in better shape because of boxing." To look at Danny, however, is not to see a Goliath. He is of average height and slender with an athletic build. The reticence he learned as a child has carried over into adolescence such that when he is in a room he frequently goes unnoticed. He is quiet, unassuming, and keeps his head down. What he learned as a child was to try to stay out of sight so that he did not provoke his father. The final provocation, however, has stayed with him. He thinks about the event constantly and when he tells me of it there is still a tremble in his voice and his eyes gloss over as he shakes his head:

One day he was yelling at my mom again and I knew something was going to happen and I finally had it and yelled at him in Spanish and English and told him shut the fuck up and go to hell.

Danny leans forward in the red chair and clasps his hands. His right foot starts shaking and he looks straight ahead as he continues:

He was making carne asada and had a knife on the kitchen table. He looked white. It was haunting. His skin turned luminous and then red. He came over to me with the knife and put the dull side against my neck. He said if I ever said that again he'd take the knife and kill me. And then he took the blade and slashed both my arms.

Danny stands up and lifts the brown jumper over his head. He is breathing heavily and sits down. He leans over to me and motions for me to look at his arms above the elbows. He has grown over the last 3 years, but the scars are still visible, thin white lines of about 3 inches each on the outside of his young arms. His muscles tense as he continues:

I fell on the floor in a fetal position. He was yelling. I was afraid. I thought I was going to die. I got up, locked myself in my room, and put bandages on. He had two guns. He was yelling. I didn't sleep all night.

Danny sits back down and slumps into the chair. He shakes his head saying, "But he never tried anything again. That was pretty much it. That event made me want to box even more."

When Danny speaks of the past he often switches between a telling of a story that is over yet remains current for him as if something happened yesterday. And yet some of his memories are not merely retelling of something that happened. He is trying to puzzle out why something happened, or what he could have done differently so that it didn't happen. In this light, Danny sees himself as an agent in his young life, someone able to control events. But if a person is able to control events then when something bad happens the responsibility falls on that individual's shoulders. The result is that Danny has a conflicted relationship with his father. On the one hand, in his college essay he writes, "A sadist of a father is an abusive tyrant. Alas, this is a universal truth. I recognize that the fear my father instilled in me during my childhood has influenced almost every action I've ever taken." On the other hand, on the day he tells me this story of the final fight with his father he concludes in a whisper, "Sometimes I wish I had been more courageous. That I hadn't let things happen, that I had been more responsible. I wish I could have done more. But I was little. A little kid. I don't know."

School

As for anyone, school provides a multitude of mixed opportunities. The student who comes from an abusive home may find the school a safe place. A school may be a haven of tranquility in an otherwise unsafe neighborhood. And yet, schools can be sites of bullying or havens for gang recruitment and violence. Danny's behavior in his school mirrors how he has learned to live his life. The institutions he has attended are underperforming and have the classic problems associated with low-income public schools such as gang violence, high dropout rates, and low college-going rates. Danny's life in school, however, has been relatively safe in large part because he has kept such a low profile. Most students do not know him. He has developed a small coterie of male friends who like to play computer games such as *Modern Warfare* or *Grand Theft Auto*; the vast majority of his comments on Facebook, for example, are notices about how many points he has earned on one or another game. He is very good at many online games and enjoys playing them in large part because they are solitary undertakings that mix fantasy, skill, and strategy.

When he moved from elementary to middle school he became very sad and withdrawn, but the cause had likely to do less with anything that happened at school and more to do with his home life. What precipitated the problem was that he went to a middle school where he did not know anyone. He speaks, again, as if these events are very raw and still alive in his memory:

I became afraid all the time and I cried all the time. I'd cry in the middle of class and kids would just stare. Nobody understood. The math teacher thought I was trying to avoid work. "You've got to do the work," she'd say. Kids pointed at me. I'd blush. They'd laugh. There was nothing worse. People thought I was stupid.

Danny has always felt different and that difference has caused him pain and embarrassment but also has been a shield and guide for him. "Middle school was interesting," he says one day, "because that's when sex started. People would say things about sex that was vulgar, that was not the way a gentleman was supposed to speak." One outcome of his life is that he has developed very clear ideas about how people should act, how men should act. He rarely swears, and always tries to speak clearly and in complete sentences. Danny disdains the typical language or verbal shorthand that teenagers employ. He also is hesitant to speak and act on sex. His reticence is typical of many young teenagers, but also reflects how he feels people "should" act as well as his desire to avoid taking a risk. He has learned that to the extent that he can control the conditions in his life, the less likely it is that something untoward will happen. The result is that throughout school he avoids socializing or joining groups.

He goes to the senior prom but he does so more because his sisters and mother want him to go, than any desire he has. He hates dancing. Standing in a room where people are making out and others are trying to sneak a drink is the opposite type of situation he wants for himself. He ends up going to the prom with a shy girl who has more interest in him than he shows in her and they part ways soon after prom night. Indeed, throughout school many girls are interested in Danny largely because he is a nice looking young man and has a pleasant demeanor, or at least is nonthreatening. But his awkward personality and his desire to be left alone have largely resulted in his getting his wish—he is largely unknown in his school.

He finds most of his friends and colleagues immature. Some are smart, but do not apply themselves. Others take drugs or alcohol, which he does not condone. Many use "bad language" and have sex that he thinks is "simply wrong." Although he once believed in God he has since given up on religion even though he lists on Facebook that his religion is Catholic.

My father never went to church, but my mom did, so I'd go. I'd pray and pray to make things better and it never happened. All the time I'd pray and even God wouldn't help me. If that was true, there had to be no god. What had I done? I was a little kid. Why should I suffer this way?

The result is that his beliefs about sex or drugs or vulgar language derive from his own attitudes about how people "should" act. His beliefs are often a mixture of attitudes that his father had and reactions against the behaviors of his father. His father cheated on his mother, for example, and that is not how a man, a husband, should act. At the same time, his father believes that Mexicans have a high moral code, and Danny believes that as well. "Mexicans never give up. A warrior culture. That's what I think a Mexican is. I learned that from my father, and I believe it," he says. At the same time he acknowledges one day, "I try to do the opposite of what he does. He'd lash out. I lose my patience sometimes and I am disgusted when I do. I don't want to be like him. I try to stay calm."

The result is that Danny's role models are largely of his own making. Student groups are either immature or danger zones. "A lot of things annoy me," he says one day. "Someone curses at the Museum of Tolerance. You shouldn't do that." He also knows how hard he has exercised and looks at the "jocks" in school and scorns their notoriety: "I think those people are dumb. They smoke weed and drink and swear, and they're not athletes." When a friend goes out for the football team Danny finds fault: "Freddy is smart but doesn't study. He's lazy. He was one of us, one of the unnoticed people, but then he went out for football. That's why I can't trust him. He succumbed to peer pressure."

When Danny was in elementary and middle school he also went to an after-school program that only exacerbated his loneliness. "I cried and cried there, too," he says one day. "Those type of things were worse than school because it was unstructured, with a lot of free time. They'd always call me things because of my skin, and I'd blush or they'd call me gay." The result was that Danny learned that although being by himself may not be the most fun time, it was safe. "When you're socially awkward you feel people don't like you," he summarizes. His strategy has been consistent and clear; whereas some individuals may try to change a particular behavior—shyness, social awkwardness—Danny's strategy has been, in effect, to accept who he is and to try and figure out how to ensure that he is safe.

At one point we speak about vulnerability, and Danny speaks only of the dangers associated with being vulnerable. "It's something bad," he says. "You're exposed to danger. Being hurt, humiliated, embarrassed. Being vulnerable is a bad thing. I avoid getting hurt. Relationships with people, with girls, can make you vulnerable. I cut things off

because I don't want that to happen." The result is that he sees no advantages to taking a risk or being vulnerable.

I eventually learn that working with me was a risk for him. When we first meet he has responded to an e-mail I have sent him. He writes, "Hello [Professor]. I think I'd definitely be available for period 6" and then goes on to give me his academic information. He is waiting for me when I arrive to the college center of the school. At one point I decide that he should meet me at my office at school so that we can have more time to work on his essay. He sends me an e-mail and says, "My mother says we can work at our house and that you would be welcome to my home." I go to the house and meet his mother. The next week I say that we should meet at my office; I want him to walk on a university campus. I meet him out in front of my building and he arrives with his mother. Eventually, he comes comfortably to my office. I subsequently find out that although his mother almost never invited strangers to her house, my work with Danny was important enough to her that she wanted to see what we were doing—and if I could be trusted. She then took him to campus to ensure that the location was not dangerous. Even though the university was less than three miles from their home, her visit was the first time she had ever set foot on a college campus.

When I suggest that we work on this life history I ask him to come to my house. We will be speaking about sensitive topics and I suspect he will be more comfortable and hopefully relaxed. I live less than two miles from his house and he has a car. He agrees, and we end up meeting in the same room for the better part of 5 months, he sitting in a faded red chair and I in another. Toward the end of our conversations we have been speaking about the need to be vulnerable, the need to take risks. He remains hesitant. I ask him if coming to my office that first time was a risk. Just the hint of a smile forms on his face, "Yes. And coming here. A big risk." He is unsure why he took that risk, but "I thought I should speak to someone, and you wanted to listen."

Danny feels that much of his past has been one painful moment after another and the way to stop the pain is to ensure that he is aware of what he is doing. As we are walking to a café, one day we are casually talking about groups he might join when he goes to college. "Why don't you take up swimming?" I ask. Swimming, I have thought, might be a good sport for him since it is a solitary activity. He shakes his head immediately no and explains,

When I went to that Boys Club I was supposed to learn how to swim. One day I went to the deep end and I was leaning over and looking at the water and someone pushed me in. It was one of those bullying things where an older boy did it. I never knew who. I panicked and it got worse and worse. I fell to the bottom and thought I'd drown. No one helped. I freaked out. I finally was able to climb out by myself. I stayed in the locker room crying and my dad came and got me.

Over the summer before college I suggest that he take some risks and one of them we agree to is that he will learn how to swim. He worries that someone will see that he does not know how to swim. We discuss a plan and he agrees to try. By the end of the summer, he still has not gone.

Boxing and College

As Danny improved at boxing he entertained notions of being the "next Oscar de la Hoya." The various trainers he had all gave him positive feedback and he received the sort of encouragement that he heard neither at home nor at school. Boxing also kept him in touch with his father. After the final violent confrontation the family got a restraining order and he had to move away; nevertheless, he met Danny every day after school and took him to the gym. Danny is conflicted about his time with his father at the gym. At one point he says, "He thought I was going to be his prize horse. I was going to be his ticket to wealth. I still hear his voice calling my name and sometimes I wake up with my heart pounding." But he also looks fondly on casual conversations he has with his father about boxing when they were driving to and from the gym: "We'd make things up. If Muhammad Ali fought Joe Louis who would win. I enjoyed that because it was something we could talk about together."

Boxing provided Danny more than physical training. "Boxing is not really a sport," he explains to me one day. "It's a lifestyle. When you train it affects your life." Indeed, in my time with Danny the only time he is truly animated is when he talks about a fight that has happened. Sometimes he will arrive for a meeting and begin by saying, "I saw a robbery this weekend," only to go on to tell me about a particular fight. When Floyd Mayweather beat Victor Ortiz in a controversial decision he writes to me, "I could talk forever about that one. Forever!" But boxing also provides Danny a way out of the pain and loneliness he experienced at home and at school. He explains about his philosophy of boxing:

Sometimes you might get agitated but you can't. If people annoy you it is best you back off. You have to know yourself; you have to be in control. If you get mad you'll lose a fight and that's the worst thing—to lose. You have to think, to focus, to make sure you never lose control. Boxing allowed me to visualize, to really think. Take aggression out, but in a disciplined way. You don't think about it, you feel it. It's my passion. It's you learning about yourself. There's no one else to count on.

The positive reinforcement he receives at the gym he had not found at school—until 11th grade. At the gyms where he trains the trainers like him: "Pedro said I was a kid who's very obedient and hardworking, that I could go all the way." Another trainer tells him that, "I was doing things that only

someone older than me could do, and that I was training harder than anyone." Boxing also provides him a solitary activity that not only structures his day, but also gives him a roadmap to how he should act. Not only, as he says above, does he need to remain calm, but temptations such as drugs or alcohol are easy to reject if boxing is paramount. "The jocks in school drink and do drugs," he says disgustedly. "They don't respect their bodies." Even sex is off-limits: "It's known that sex drains you of your energy," he tells me one day.

"I've always been discriminated against in school because I'm socially awkward. Kids got in the smart classes and I didn't, but they'd ask me for help. Now I'm with them and they aren't intellectual," Danny explains. I have asked if he is so good at boxing then why he asked me to help him apply to college. "I like to read," he says thoughtfully one day. "I like to write. I think I can make something of myself with my mind, not just my fists." Throughout middle school and high school he always has gotten good grades, but he has passed through school largely unnoticed. He acknowledges that he has largely been responsible for people not knowing him; yet he also resents that the students he knows do not work as hard or are as smart as he is and yet they have been put in better classes. Finally in 11th grade someone noticed him:

I finally had a good English teacher who had us read all sorts of thing. He expected more of us and expected more of me. He was like a friend. When my English teacher told me I was good at writing, that I was the best in the school, I realized that I could do something other than boxing. I wrote a short story about boxing for ESPN and no one else has done that.

My interactions with Danny reinforce his fledgling self-confidence. He is a very good writer, especially for someone who attends this school. Just as with boxing, whenever I ask him to do a task he does it well and is on time. He maintains his focus throughout senior year, and unlike his classmates, he still studies even after he has been admitted to college. I ask him if he skipped school on Senior Ditch Day and he looks at me as if I should know the answer, "No, of course not. I had physics and calculus classes and it was stupid to ditch. It's retarded, immature."

He comprehends material quicker than most students and every university he has applied to admits him. Over the course of his senior year he becomes minimally more popular in school, and he is no longer terrified or a complete wallflower. His confidence is partially due to students finding out that he is applying to "good" schools and that he is likely to be admitted. However, his past and the characteristics that have framed how he has coped continue to define him. He worries about the campus visits he has to make and true to form stays in his dorm room for the weekend rather than socializing with the other students. He frowns on

students who do drugs and sees many that he says "are not serious." During the months before college he also finds himself busy with multiple tasks such as choosing a dorm to live in, navigating the murky waters of financial aid, and completing final requirements in order to graduate, which have resulted in him training less. "I don't box as much now and I miss it," he laments one afternoon.

As he prepares to head to college we find that the university has a boxing club and that excites him. He says he will join as soon as he gets to school. As I noted earlier, he also has decided that he wants to come home on weekends not only to see his mother and sisters but also his father. "It's nice for him, it's the right thing to do," he says simply one day. "It's not like I'm in danger anymore. I guess I already kind of have moved away from the bad parts of my life and he's a lonely old man now."

Earlier in the year he tells me that he is uncomfortable with physical contact. "I did not grow up in a family of huggers," he says. After his high school graduation I ask him about the event and he says in a neutral voice, "It was boring. When we marched in my father was standing there and when I passed he hugged me. When I got to the seats I started crying."

Analysis: Rethinking Cultural Flexibility

A theoretical framework of cultural heterogeneity works from the assumption that a neighborhood produces different sorts of individuals, and Danny's life is one such example. One need not be trained in psychology or sociology to conclude that many others in Danny's situation may well have failed at school or adopted behaviors that would not lead to the doorstep of a university. Furthermore, although Danny certainly spoke clearly about the negative aspects of his home life and his neighborhood, his living situation also provided him comfort and strength. Indeed, rather than flee that neighborhood he returns to it every week. His training in boxing was not at an elite gym in an expensive part of town, and perhaps the best part of his day was early in the morning when he went for a run a few short miles from his house. Educational attainment, then, does not always look a certain way. Thus, we need to resist the impulse to ascribe generalized meanings to culturally specific acts and events.

One may easily point out the negative aspects of a neighborhood such as Danny's—the crime, the violence, the under-resourced schools; however, Danny also interpreted his neighborhood in a manner that underscores how cultural flexibility functions. Some of his home life he enjoyed such as playing games with his nephew or eating with his mother. He liked coming home on weekends and going to the movies with his friends on Saturday night. He liked watching the fights and running in the morning. As Carter (2010) notes,

“Social and symbolic boundaries that students create amongst themselves . . . vary depending on the explicit social, cultural and ideological setting” (p. 1536). But symbols are not predetermined markers waiting to be defined by individuals as if everyone interprets a symbol in the same manner. Danny acknowledged his “social awkwardness” but also looked on inappropriate behaviors of his peers in a manner that enabled him to focus on what he needed to do to go to college. Whereas some viewed drinking or doing drugs as a logical response to the environment, Danny’s interpretation differed. He maintained a curious mixture of what Sussman (2000) defines as an intercultural identity. Danny could switch fluently from English to Spanish. More importantly, he treated his mother in a manner that he thought of as respectful based on Mexican identity but also was explicit that he did not want to room on a Latino floor at college. When he briefly considered going to a university in another city he said what he would miss most was Mexican food, yet he also chose not to apply to a private university near his home because he wanted to get away from his neighborhood. At the same time, he chose not to go to the university in a different city—less than an hour’s plane ride from home—because he would be away from his family and neighborhood. A culturally flexible person not only has multiple cultural schemas from which he or she acts (Sewell, 1992), but as Carter (2010) observes, the individual “does not denigrate one culture in favor of another” (p. 1535). Danny may have had problems with some aspects of Mexican culture, but his concerns were balanced with pride.

I also suggested that how individuals interpret their culture leads to heterogeneous responses. Some teenagers, for example, may have looked on sexual relations in high school as “normal” but Danny had a different interpretation. His definition of what it means to be a man, scarred from his battles with his father, enabled him to think of women as something other than sexual objects. Although physical involvement with people was difficult, even to the point of disliking an embrace or a hug, he also believed that individuals should be treated with respect—and respect implied how one was to interact physically with others as well as how one was to speak about others. Sex, even physical involvement, then, did not derive from one singular cultural step stone, but many.

Thus, the paradox of Danny was his rigid moral interior that was nevertheless in formation. And at the same time, he was flexible enough to have a circle of friends who were not going to college and another group of individuals who he trained with at the gym, many of whom had not graduated from high school. However, Danny also was reserved, thoughtful, and able to go off to a large university with a minimal amount of angst for a Latino youth who grew up in a low-income neighborhood.

The need also exists to understand how those under investigation make sense of their worlds rather than ascribe

predetermined meanings to ideas and concepts. In some respects, for example, Danny took few risks in high school such as dating, staying out late, going to parties, or other typical adolescent behaviors. His initial time at college also might be seen as risk-avoidance: He comes home on weekends, has developed a rigid schedule, and largely avoids socializing with his peers. But from his perspective his involvement with me in this life history, and his willingness to verbalize and relive the challenges he has faced were significant risks. His willingness to go to college rather than stay in the boxing ring was also a risk. The indeterminacy of language underscores what I alluded to earlier: Cultural heterogeneity is not merely an assumption that different people function in different manners. Rather, individuals also interpret their worlds in fundamentally different ways; to understand these worlds one challenge is for us to understand how individuals such as Danny interpret them.

At times, he called upon some of the behaviors that some might think of as typical for a young Latino—a cap slung low over his head, for example—but any simple analysis of Danny that reduces him to a cultural stereotype will have missed the complex interplay of actions and language that I portrayed in the sections above. Thus, the challenge is less to interpret a neighborhood as a simple checklist of goods or bads, and more to come to terms with how individuals interpret those goods and bads. Reductionist frameworks reduce students such as Danny to caricatures when the daily struggles he has faced are much more complex. Danny’s life is particularly poignant in large part because of those struggles. While others may have reacted in ways that might lead to antisocial behavior, Danny set his sights on getting into college. The weakness of individualist studies is that they seem to overlook or deny a cultural framework in which students such as Danny have grown up. What I am suggesting here, however, is that the interplay of culture and identity is what has made Danny’s actions possible and understandable. The challenge, then, is first to be able to interpret lives such as Danny’s and then to consider ways that might make his educational path less difficult than what he has faced.

To interpret such lives, however, we need to employ Geertz’s well-worn notion of “thick description.” At times a random statement such as when Danny says that his father’s “skin turned luminous” or that he “wasn’t complying” with the men who beat him up might seem linguistically unbelievable, or too formal prose, for a poor teenager from a low-income school. The data offer a more complex portrait of someone who is a voluminous reader and has tried to figure out how to live his young life largely on his own. The portrait emerges of someone who constantly shifts back and forth between someone with a rigid framework and narrative to a teenager who is simply trying to graduate from high school and get to college.

Conclusion

Danny and I meet in the fall and I give him this article to read. He is having some trouble with his courses and explains to me his routine:

I'm up at 5:00 and go to the gym; then I come back to the dorm, shower, and eat alone in the dining hall. I'm back and forth to my dorm to get my books because I don't want to carry them around and I'll skip lunch. I study in the afternoon, or go to my work-study job and then eat alone at 5:00. I'm at the boxing club by 5:45 and we train until 9:00. I go back to the dorm, take a shower, and crash. I'm beat.

On the weekends I have lots to do—wash my clothes and stuff. I also go to the gym with my father in the afternoon and I run in the morning. I just seem so busy.

We talk about if he is meeting people and he acknowledges that he is not. The loud music, the noise, and the pranks in the dorm are all irrelevant or inane to him. He has met a girl he's interested in, but is too shy to approach her. The large class sizes also make it impossible for him to ask questions or get to know anyone. "You hesitate to ask a question because you're afraid you'll look like an idiot," he says. "And the professors really aren't very interested in you." We agree to talk again when he has read the article.

"I finished reading the paper," he e-mails me a few days later. "When should we meet?"

We agree to get together on a Friday and he arrives at 4:00 p.m., punctual as usual. Classes have ended for the term and he is worried; he will get two Bs but he thinks he has bombed his other class. I ask him about this article, what he thinks of my portrayal of him, and the point I am trying to make.

He has the hint of a smile and says, "You think I'm inflexible but culturally flexible, that a puzzle is why I've made it and others don't." Pointing out minor errors and typographical mistakes, he proceeds to go through each page. His major criticism has to do with my description of him as "slender." "That made me laugh," he says. "I don't think of myself as slender." We talk about how to change the description and agree that "slender, with an athletic build" is more appropriate.

"I guess I'm wondering what's next," I ask. "What do you think will happen?"

We have been sitting next to one another at the dining room table that looks out on the setting sun. He nods, looks straight ahead, and says, "I have to do better; I've worked too hard not to succeed. I like coming home. Things are easier now. But it's back and forth, trying to figure things out about my neighborhood and then about the university."

I ask him if it's possible to break out of his routine, to alter it a little.

"Maybe," he says. "We'll see."

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Author Biography

William G. Tierney is University Professor and Wilbur-Kieffer Professor of Higher Education and co-director of the Pullias Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis at the University of Southern California. He conducts research on college access for underrepresented youth and is committed to informing policies and practices related to educational equity. He is past-president of AERA.